Practicing Gender in Online Spaces

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Glossary

**AFAB:** Assigned Female at Birth.

**Androphilic:** Attraction to men and masculinity.

**Autogynephilic:** Attraction to oneself.

**Cispressed:** That cis people are more oppressed than trans or queer folk, or that trans and queer folks are oppressing them.

**Cotton Ceiling:** Concept that trans folks are not allowed into the gay and lesbian dating pool, even when they identify as gay or lesbian trans women/men.

**Gaslighting:** To make others question their own sanity.

**GNC:** Gender-Non-Conforming.

**LGBTQIA+:** Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans, Queer, Intersex, Asexual, Plus.

**MtT or FtT:** Male to Trans or Female to Trans.

**Non-Binary:** People who do not identify their gender within the binary of women and men.

**NSFW:** Not Safe for Work.

**Pansexual:** Sexual attraction that is not confined to one sex or gender.

**SRS:** Sexual Reassignment Surgery.

**Trans Trenders:** People who are not seen as ‘real’ trans folks. They are becoming trans to be ‘trendy’.

**Transmedicalists:** Those who believe that you must want SRS to be truly trans.

**TERF:** Trans Exclusionary Radical Feminist.

**Truscum:** Trans people who believe in binary essentialism and see dysphoria as a key part of being trans.
**Wombyn:** Is used to exclude men from all aspects of womanhood and uses biological essentialism to qualify women as women.
INTRODUCTION

Online spaces have given birth to a whole new age of identity creation and exploration. This study explores how people create queer identities through group creation in an online space. Online spaces have been analyzed in order to understand their structures and how those structures affect discourse. In this study, I want to understand how online spaces foster the ability to make groups and communities, who in turn, create queer gender identities.

To show how groups create gender, I use the materialist theoretical understanding of gender through practice. Material practice focuses on the actions and performances that construct gender (Goffman 1959; Butler 1990). I look at material practice to see how the features of society create identities, and how through performing gender one comes to understand themselves as this gender (Goffman 1959; Butler 1990). In this study, I extend understandings of material practice to a place that seems unmaterial: online spaces. I inspect how online spaces are shaped, and shape the kinds of discourse that can happen within them. I endeavor to understand how people use these spaces, and how these spaces inform what can be said about gender identity. I do not examine how people come to identify as a particular gender, but rather how these groups work within the online spaces to create their own idea of gender. The online world is part of our daily lives; to treat these spaces as neutral does them injustice. Online spaces are understood within Foucault’s (1978) field of power (93). The two most intimately prominent force relations within online spaces are the space itself and the discourse within. This study explores how and why the structures of these websites are not neutral and are structured to create different types of discourse and practice. These small spaces act as both sites of resistance and of hegemonic reproduction of gender. In this study, I show how people construct queer genders as a group on Tumblr and Reddit. I employ a comparative qualitative analysis methodology that
inspects what people say and how they say it in these spaces. I found that the structure of the website controlled what kinds of discourse took place. Due to the format, different forms of discourse were practiced. Tumblr allowed people to create the queer self in a personal blog, while Reddit fostered a community through making clear boundaries of in and out-groups. I found that discourse in these online communities was made special by anonymity. Each group explicitly or implicitly utilized anonymity to practice positive and negative constructions of queer genders.

**Power**

To understand how these structures work, and the idea that these structures are by no means neutral, the way in which power works in these spaces is examined. I use Foucault’s (1978) power framework to understand all of my work. Foucault conceives of power as something that exists as a field of relations. Thusly, power is network based in the relations inside particular contexts. He states, “power is not an institution, and not a structure; neither is it a certain strength we are endowed with; it is the name that one attributes to a complex strategical situation in a particular society” (Foucault 1983: 93). The online world exists within a field of power, and these websites become a ‘complex strategical situation’ that is both a site of hegemonic production and hegemonic deconstruction of queer genders. This study sees the structure of the website as a site of power. Foucault understands that power can be exercised through discourse, saying that “Power’s hold on sex is maintained through language, or rather through the act of discourse that creates, from the very fact that it is articulated, a rule of law” (Foucault 1978: 83). Discourse is the carrier of this power that allows the commenters and bloggers to reproduce and create power wherever they go. Therefore, power cannot be removed from these online spaces (Foucault 1978: 93).
As stated before, all practice happens in these online spaces via discourse. Discourse will be key in understanding the practice of queer gender since it is the only way one can practice and come to queer gender in an online space. Foucault (1978) formulates the idea of discourse, and what it means to speak. He says, “discourse can be both an instrument and an effect of power, but also a hindrance...a point of resistance...Discourse transmits and produces power...but also undermines and exposes it, render it fragile and makes it possible to thwart” (Foucault 1978: 101). I wish to understand what it means to speak, how discourse shapes what people think about, and how they conceive of self. Discourse acts as both a site of reproduction and deconstruction. While some people merely observe rather than speak in online spaces, I look at what it means to speak in these online spaces as a way to both create and practice gender as a group. The act of speaking is not always fairly distributed; what is allowed to be said in these spaces depends on the context and the intention of the space. People such as Reddit moderators, or the users of Tumblr, may control and omit that which crosses the boundaries of what is allowed on the websites. These means of control manage how discourse happens. The internet is not a free space in which people can do whatever they want. People still exist within society and lines are still drawn to define what is permissible. From the discourse in these spaces one learns what will be and what is permissible, what is allowed to be said, and how practice is formulated.

Finally, I examine the structures of the websites. I draw on Bourdieu’s idea of habitus to explore how these microstructures become embodied on Reddit. Habitus explains how structures shape how we interact with the world and how we create structures as much as structures create us (Bourdieu1992: 74). These online spaces are shaped by humans, and human discourse. I do not assume a complete determinist perspective in which these spaces produce exact carbon copies of each person. People have the agency to interpret and understand spaces
differently as they become embodied in Reddit. Bourdieu himself states, when speaking about habitus,

“One can even say that social agents are determined only to the extent that they determine themselves. But the categories of perception and the appreciation which provide the principle this (self-) determination are themselves largely determined by the social and economic condition of their constitution” (Bourdieu1992: 136).

People may not be free from these structures, but they do, as agentic human beings, have some control over how much they affect and control them. Groups still often shape our frame of reference, however, and this becomes particularly relevant to the trans exclusionary radical feminist group on Reddit. Eribon (2013) notes that often when the group is given room to practice such things as racism, or in this study transphobia, they create their own new form of hegemony in reference to their group (143-144). People are allowed to change their personal identities around these ideas. They are allowed to name, educate and express themselves, and in doing so, over time become what they practice. I will not deny that people do not have feelings or intentions before they enter into online spaces, but I will argue that these spaces allowed them to become trans exclusionary radical feminists. Brown-Saracino (2015) notes that identity is something that is not stagnant, that one does not carry oneself from one place to next, but rather one reformulates oneself over and over again in new spaces (54). Spaces, and the communities of those spaces, control how one practices self, and thusly how one can construct oneself. The radical feminist subreddit does just that, it allows people to reform themselves in a way that could not have been allowed if the space did not exist.

In all, power works within a field, and is based in relations of power. People construct gender through discourse. Those who speak control the discourse and what is said. These
structures are not neutral in their construction and create their own micro habitus. Within these structures, one learns the game of the subreddit, and the focus of the subreddit, so one knows how to practice or enter into discourse. Everyone in this study retains agency, which gives them a level of control over their destinies.

**Gender**

This study will be completely focusing on how groups create queer genders. Queer genders include all non cis-genders, such as agender, queer, trans, and nonbinary identified people. I inspect how people create positive and negative understandings of queer gender. I take a non-essentialist materialist perspective that gender is constructed and created through practice, that people only come to understand gender by *doing* (Root Aulette and Wittner 2015). I explore gender in a place where gender as a material practice does not exist, and in doing so, expand the materialist non-essentialist practices and understanding of gender to the space of the non-material. I draw on Judith Butler’s (1990) understanding of gender. She argues:

“That the gendered body is performative suggests that it has no ontological status apart from the various acts which constitutes its reality...creating the illusion of an interior and organizing gender core, an illusion discursively maintained for the purpose of regulation of sexuality within the obligatory frame of reproductive heterosexuality” (185-186).

Gender cannot be removed from sexuality. While she speaks to genders within the binary, due to the nature of the LGBTQAI+ community it is understood that one cannot fully remove oneself from the reproductive heterosexuality that forms the basis of material practice. Gender and sexuality still remain deeply connected, even in queer spaces. However, these online spaces
become more interesting because online identities have no body or sex. Gender becomes a completely discursive and trusted word. These words often sum up one’s identity. What these people are identifying as is viewed as true, for I don't have any other way to verify this identity. I understand these words as carrying an illocutionary force, or better yet, a narrative illocutionary force. Austin’s idea of illocutionary force is explained by Skinner (2002) as, “anyone issuing a serious utterance will always be doing something as well as saying something and doing it in virtue of saying what is said” (106). When one speaks, one is both saying and doing with their words, and the doing makes words powerful. A word cannot be understood at face value, but as something that is done as well. Skinner’s perspective allows me to understand what happens when someone identifies as queer and what that naming process creates within the context they are creating in. While naming can be understood as a dimension of practice, naming also helps people begin to understand their narratives. They name themselves, and that name does a narrative around an identity to which they speak. The act of speaking carries so much weight in these circumstances, because through naming, one comes to understand how groups come to identify genders for themselves. Discourse is practice, and naming becomes narrative.

These narratives often involve pathologizing queer people. This study will not only be looking at how people create positive ideas of queer genders, but also the insult of queer genders. Eribon (2004) notes that the gay self is first understood through the insult of it, and that gay folks first come to know themselves as an insult. I use Reddit to understand how gender can also be practiced in a negative light and explore how insult is just as much a part of the queer creation as positive creation. I would also like to look at the how people in these groups come to understand gender. I analyze from the materialist perspective, but I will also look at how each group created
the idea of gender for themselves, and how they came to practice it in these spaces. Gender will be analyzed through descriptive analysis of how each group constructs gender.

In all, I understand gender as something created through practice or the action of speaking in these spaces. Each group will be understood in the context of their construction of gender, but I will understand them through the lens of material practice, and how material practice shapes the way people enter into discourse around gender.

*Space*

Space becomes a complex idea to define within this study, and for that reason I discuss how I understand space in the analysis. Space is the place in which discourse happens. It is the place where people speak, but also the space in which they are allowed to speak, a function of the larger context of the website itself. I understand these spaces as spatial-contexts. In doing the analysis I found that one could not remove gender practice from the space of its creation. Using Skinner’s (2002) analysis, context discerns the meaning created in each post. I understand Tumblr and Reddit as a complex interconnection of contexts that links each post and reflects each website. Rather than ‘context’ acting as an umbrella term for the data, space can be understood as context. Three of these spaces/contexts that I will be calling ‘spatial-context,’ framed my study: a) The post, b) The interface of the website, and c) The function of power relations in these spaces. These can be thought of as micro, mezzo, and macro contexts/spaces.

I would also like to show how the larger spatial-contexts permeate the more local spatial-contexts. The space of the website and the larger power structures of society affect each post, and thus cannot be separated, just as a website cannot be removed from the context of the larger power relations as well. These levels of saturation create a layering effect: each level is
permeated by the next larger context. For this reason, I analyze these levels of collapse of contexts, which context is most salient in each of these posts, and which context is most activated when practicing gender.

**Significance of Study**

Much of the existing research on queer spaces online depends on interviews and qualitative surveys to study how online spaces create and allow queerness to exist or not exist (Bryson, Macintosh, Jodan, and Lin 2006; Fraser 2010; Mondin 2017; Rubin and McClelland 2015). Rather than looking at the space itself, researchers focused on how users thought and felt. My study focuses more clearly on what is explicitly said in Reddit and Tumblr, rather than what people think about these spaces. My study looks at the literal space, and how it supports, shapes and controls the type of discourse. Other studies also focused on how individuals came to understand themselves in-groups due to the more personal interview-based methodology (Bryson et al. 2006; Fraser 2010; Mondin 2017; Rubin and McClelland 2015). I look at the material space in which discourse happens without access to the feelings and how people felt. Rather than investigating personal identity creation, I show how groups construct gender around the way the discourse is shaped, narrated, and informed in these spaces.

Bryson et al. (2006) notes that people use online spaces to better understand themselves as queer by learning about what gender/sexuality means, finding communities, and blogging. These online spaces allow for creation of the queer self. Other studies note that online spaces, such as Tumblr, allow people to create different versions of self, and allow for exploration of queer identities and queer sexualities in safety (Bryson et al. 2006; Mondin 2017). These spaces remain mostly anonymous, allowing people to create in an online space disconnected from the real world. Anonymity helps people express minority sexuality and gender, providing a safe
place where one can explore the self free of the trappings of the real world. Anonymous spaces create places where one can create a queer self and come to understand others and oneself in a safe environment (Coon Sells 2013). The websites explored in this study have a built-in level of anonymity in that users do not have to give real names or share any personal information. Other studies note that in online spaces in which people are more connected to their real world selves, the same pressures of closeting and identity control remanifest in those spaces (Rubin and McClelland, 2015). Identity creation in online spaces mirrors real life because those who are queer must negotiate spaces based on perceptions of safety. Spaces more divorced from reality are more anonymous and allow more mobility for personal creation (Eribon and Lucy 2004).

People create the idea of gender through a multiplicity of ways, but gender is created in a fundamentally interactional way (Sweeting, Maycock, Walk, and Hunt 2017; Farber 2017; Brown-Saracino, 2015). Through discourse, people negotiate the groups conception of gender. The discursive practice in online spaces can lead to hegemonic reconstruction and queer deconstruction of the meaning around gender. The digital age demands that people understand how these new forms of media, and places of discourse, aid, change, or control how groups are created. This study will expand material practice to the non-material space, explore what it means to create as a group, inspect how these groups formulate gender together, and how the discourse is controlled by the spaces themselves around queer gender identities.

METHOD

I conducted a comparative qualitative content analysis of two websites: Tumblr and Reddit. I hope to understand how the material practice of gender functions in online spaces, focusing on queer genders (Bourdieu1992; Butler 1990; Eribon 2004). Scholars argue that
action and practice, whether performative (Goffman 1959), or structural (Butler 1990),
constructs gender. Through this perspective, people understand themselves as a gender not as
dependent on an internal feeling, but rather through practicing certain gender roles. I take a non-
essentialist perspective of gender and assume that gender is not based in biological differences,
but socially constructed through material social structures of practice (Bourdieu1992; Butler
1990). I argue that the websites themselves, and the way they order information, simulate the
same material constructs that exist in the real world. The literal structure of the website\(^1\) creates
an area in which discourse happens. Discourse refers to a Foucauldian power structure which
states that people enter into fields of power when they speak (Foucault 1978). People practice
gender when they speak in these spaces. When people enter into discourse on gender they both
practice and construct what gender means in these spaces; they define who has the power to
speak, and what is said, and the shape of gender. In all, this study explores how online discourse
is a material practice and spaces shape that practice.

Importance of Comparative Qualitative Content Analysis

I conducted a comparative qualitative content analysis, which:

(1) Allows for a great amount of breadth in what I was able to cover.
(2) Allows for aggregating this large breadth of data into themes via focused inductive
analysis of the data I collected, allowing themes to arise and change my focus.
(3) Allows me to examine the spaces where the discourse took place without interfering
or changing the data in anyway.

\(^1\) e.g. images, comments, themes, rules, and UI
I examined over 1,000 pages of comments, reblogs and posts. The comments, reblogs, and posts were coded and themed twice with the inductive lens. When collecting data, all information was downloaded in PDF format that kept the original discourse and structure.

Rather than explore the generalizability of my data, I show how spaces shape discourse; therefore, qualitative analysis lends itself to understanding content, as well as focusing on discourse and the action of speaking (Chambliss and Schutt 2016). In this study, I was interested in how groups, rather than just the individual, came to constitute themselves around gender through discourse. For this reason, I did not employ interviews or quantitative statistical analyses to answer my question.

Content analysis is limited by the lack of depth of data that resulted from me being unable to speak to or ask questions of my sample and the inability to know the intention of these people. For this reason, I analyzed the data using Skinner's (2002) method of looking at meaning. His work creates a matrix of understanding meaning through examining what is said and the context in which it is said. He argues that by connecting what is said with its context, one can find meaning. His method allows one to infer meaning from what can be pulled from the text itself without tying it to intention. The posts were seen as illocutionary actions by people with agency who wished to enter into conversation about the topic.

Sample

Tumblr and Reddit were picked for this study for four reasons. First, they are websites with a high number of visitors. Reddit is the fourth most visited website in the United States, and Tumblr is the twenty-fourth most visited (Alexa 2018). They both have a huge amount of daily traffic, which allows for a better understanding of how space controls what is said, as many
people interact in these spaces (Davidson, Santorelli, and Kamber 2012). Second, Tumblr and Reddit occupy two different cultural places on the internet and are on opposite ends of the discourse spectrum. I picked Tumblr because it is known for its large queer community, and is a place where people are expanding what gender is and can be. I chose Reddit because it is a place where people recreate hegemonic conceptions of gender. Reddit has posts that often mock the expansion of queer identities, via forms of invalidation of these identities by saying non-sense things such as ‘I identify as a refrigerator’. Tumblr acts as a space that creates and constructs queer gender, while Reddit acts as place to deconstruct queer gender. I am not looking at the top two most visited websites on the internet, but two most oppositional to each other in discourse about queer genders, but that still have a huge amount of daily traffic. Third, both websites have different formats in how the discourse appears on the page. As I explore in greater depth within the following sections, these spaces order, and express their user interfaces in contrasting ways. Lastly, these differences in space and cultural significance allow me to compare how material practice appears on different websites. I also wanted the two websites to differ in user interfaces and website structure to see how they compare in discourse. I intended to compare the two websites to see how materiality controls and shapes practice by comparing the discourse that happens in each website surrounding the ideas of queer gender identities.

Tumblr works as a microblogging social media site. Each user has their own blog, which they can customize to create a personalized web page. On their blogs, users can post new pieces of discourse, pictures, videos, gifs\(^2\), text, and hyperlinks. They can follow other blogs to interact via “liking” and reblogging posts. The like system adds a note\(^3\) to the post, and archives it for personal reflection which, if chosen, may also be seen by the public. Reblogging puts another

\(^2\) Looping animated images
\(^3\) A measure of interaction with the piece of information
user’s post on a user’s blog, where readers can add comments, pictures, videos, gifs, and links. A secondary comment section exists within the notes on each post. These comments do not appear as a part of the post on the blog, but rather within the notes section of the post. Users can archive their posts through a set of tags. Tags act as a secondary sorting or conversation method to organize posts or have them appear under keywords. Tumblr has a chronological format based on interaction. A reblog comment not rated by a system of likes follows each post. All of the reblog comments become part of the whole discourse of the post. The piece of discourse becomes more or less popular depending on liking or reblogging (with or without comments). The posts with the most notes (e.g. likes or reblogs) get pushed to the top of the search results. Tumblr’s format is far more open than the subreddits. Rather than moderators who control the conversation and have the powers to ban users and remove comments, all users can see everything. Anyone can like, reblog, and comment; however, if comments become highly reported, they are removed from the posts, otherwise their comments cannot be removed. The comment policy allows for a much larger perspective of opinions in a far less controlled space. This allows user perspectives to clash, as well as post non-hierarchical comments on each post, which directly contrasts with the subreddit’s format.

Reddit works as a news social media site based around discourse on recent events. One can, much like Tumblr, post about anything and enter into a discourse on the topic. Each user creates a username that links to a personal page in which users can view their Karma⁴, trophies⁵, what they have posted and commented on, and so on. The user page also shows if they are moderators⁶ on parts of Reddit, known as subreddits. Subreddits act as sub-communities with

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⁴ Karma is a rating system tallied by upvotes and downvotes to the information they post.
⁵ An achievement based on commenting, posting, and how many upvotes the user had reached.
⁶ A person who controls the rules bans other users, and deletes threads and keeps the ‘peace’.
their own main pages, rules and guidelines. They are smaller, focused groups about a topic of interest, (e.g. science, Game of Thrones, Harry Potter, etc.). Each front page has a set of threads\(^7\) that one can click on, with primary focus on links to other websites, pieces of news, interesting stories, videos, memes and gifs. Each post has a thread section in which the original poster (the OP) can comment on the link, and others can also comment on it to create a shared discourse.

Reddit works under a hierarchical system in which comments follow each post within the thread. Each post can be upvoted or downvoted, and as well as each comment. This website’s format is far more controlled than Tumblr, allowing this study to examine what may and may not be said within these groups, but not necessarily know what is removed by moderators. The clear guidelines allow people to have a far more focused community identity. In contrast to Tumblr, where anyone can interact with a given post and have their comments remain on the post, comments that do not fall within the rules of the subreddit are removed. This level of censorship, guidelines, and control creates a different format and community than Tumblr. This focus may give a clearer, more concise answer to my question, as it represents more of a ‘hivemind’ than Tumblr’s chaos.

I focused on two subreddits in this study: ‘Gender Critical’ and ‘Gender Cynical’\(^8\) The Gender Critical Subreddit defines itself as follows:

“Gender Critical is a radical feminist subreddit to discuss gender from a critical perspective. We are a woman-centered community. We do not believe ‘woman’ is a feeling. We do not condone the erasure of females and female-only spaces, the silencing of critical thinking, the denial of biological reality and of sex-based oppression. We

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\(^7\) a comment and discourse area.

\(^8\) These subreddits are often referred to as /r/gendercritical or /r/gendercynical. The /r/ expresses that it is a part of Reddit.
oppose the 'cotton ceiling' and the pressure on lesbians to have sex with men” (Reddit 2017a).

Gender Critical has a biological woman centric focus and which helps explain how they define ‘woman.’ Drawing definite lines, the discourse shows what they believe, what is allowed to be said, who is allowed to speak, and which people they allow within their community. They construct the queer self as insult, and they create a negative dehumanized version of queer folks within their forums (Eribon 2004). The subreddit becomes a place to practice hate, or extreme dislike in particular towards trans women. This is the reason they are often called trans exclusionary radical feminists (TERFs). They use the space to explore their hate of trans women and queer folk. Gender Critical creates a place that is fully focused around the idea of insult. They pathologize, ridicule and reduce trans women to cruel, simplistic ideas. They are creating the negative version of queer genders, the insult.

Gender Cynical defines itself as follows:

“/r/GenderCynical is a satire and mock-subreddit of /r/GenderCritical, /r/Gender_Critical, /r/GenderCritLesbians, and the farcical /r/GCdebatesQT. /r/GenderCritical and its affiliates are subreddits for trans-exclusionary radical feminists who disparage transgender individuals and discuss how they are being cispressed from a pseudo-ideological perspective. Similar to /r/thebluepill in its take on /r/theredpill”. (Reddit 2017b)

This group represents a reactionary subreddit to Gender Critical, calling itself satire, but with strong rules against hate speech and transphobia. It mocks the discourse used in places like Gender Critical and provides a level of meta-discourse on how the queer folks come to understand themselves by reclaiming this insult and dehumanization.
Gender Critical and Gender Cynical exist on opposing ends of belief. Gender Critical creates the negative ideas of queer genders, while Gender Cynical invalidates this negativity through mocking Gender Critical in order to view themselves more positively. These two groups are utilized in this study to see how the subreddit’s spaces compare on Reddit.

Data Collection

Seventy-five posts were analyzed, twenty-five from each site. For the two subreddits, the top twenty-five posts of all time from each forum were collected. The tag ‘gender’ was used to filter the Tumblr content, and from there the top twenty-five posts were pulled. PDF snapshots were taken of each of these threads so as to freeze them in time.

On Reddit all interactions with each post (excluding no form of media that appears on that page) were analyzed. Data collection occurred on October 12, 2017 for Reddit with the exception of a few posts whose data was corrupted and recollected on October 17 (posts three, seven, and ten in Gender Critical). One piece of data, the twentieth post from Gender Cynical, was completely corrupted and lost far after the date of collection and was not collected again. For Reddit in particular, the main subreddit pages were also analyzed, given that each subreddit has its own rules. All data from Reddit will be represented in text by noting how many points each comment or post got.

On Tumblr, I used the search function to search for gender, and then limited the search to the top twenty-five posts within this tag, not excluding any form of media. Each post was searched through until saturation point was reached (Chambliss and Schutt 2016). Because the formatting on the website made data collection more time consuming, it took a week to get all twenty-five posts. The data was collected over a one-week period, from October 23-26, 2017.

Data Analysis
The data was framed in a threefold inductive analysis of the websites. (1) The data was inspected for the meaning of gender on each of these websites. (2) Data was analyzed for how discourse was shaped in each of these websites. (3) Finally, I compared how discourse differed on the websites. The data was compared and contrasted between websites to make conclusions about how each constructed gender, and how the format of these websites may control the discourse that happened within them. In order to interpret each website I used Eribon’s (2004) psychic divisions and Bourdieu’s (1992) habitus. Tumblr was understood as a space in which we can break down the psychic divisions due to the structure of the website (Eribon 2004). Reddit was understood as a micro habitus that becomes embodied (Bourdieu 1992).

Validity and Reliability

This study had a high level of validity for the following reasons (Chambliss and Schutt 2016). First, without interacting with or changing the data in any way, I collected posts from both websites and froze them in time, so that I knew exactly what was being said at that time. This method of collection allowed me to look most directly at space and discourse. For the aforementioned reasons, comparative content analysis worked best for this question, as it allowed me to collect a large amount of data from all websites without affecting the discourse or space. Next, I analyzed using an inductive focus that allowed me to examine all the data and major themes (Chambliss and Schutt 2016). Rather than focusing on one aspect of the data, I saw how it functioned, as well as how the discourse compared between these two websites. This enabled me to create themes that allowed the material practice in each space to become apparent.

Due to repeatedly reaching saturation of what was being said in each post, and across posts, it is fair to believe that this data is representative of discourse within these websites,
making this data reliable (Chambliss and Schutt 2016). Each post was pulled from the most interacted with and most popular posts of the moment. This high level of interaction on each post meant that I could look into what kinds of discourse appeared in different spaces, and also understand how these top posts represent the discourse within the spaces themselves. I was, however, the only one analyzing this data. I did not have another coder to look over my data or create themes. For these reasons, both for and against, another study looking at the same data would pull similar conclusions, and my conclusions are representative of the discourse within the data itself.

RESULTS

Gender

In order to understand how gender is practiced, I looked at how gender is understood by each website. I will look at how each of these ideas of gender emerge from what is being practiced in these websites and how the place of practice shapes those ideas. Each website has one main theme when it comes to understanding gender.

Immutable Socialized Biology

Gender Critical practiced what I call Immutable Socialized Biology (ISB), which takes both facets from socialization as gender as well as an essentialist biological perspective and applies them together. Socialization, biology and its immutable nature across circumstances creates gender on this subreddit. While socialization and biology exist in complete opposition, Gender Critical does not acknowledge the inherent contradictions within their perspective. The body became a large fixture in understandings of what gender meant, and discourse around
gender often ended and started by talking about a penis. Gender is connected to biology in the group, and all people with a penis had to be cis men. When talking about what it would mean to have a penis in a women's locker room Karen\(^9\) states:

> Not wanting a penis in your locker room is seen as transphobic, when in reality it is just common sense for a woman to not want a penis around her when she is most vulnerable (Karen 75 points)

From this comment one must look at the idea of having a penis and how it represents violence, and whether it is common sense that a penis, or for this group, the cis man it is attached to, will take advantage of cis women in vulnerable situations. Common sense informs this person that men are immutably violent. This reductive perspective on trans women results in a biological understanding that people with penises, even if they are trans women, must be violent people who can only desire to abuse. This assumption is based on restricted ideas of what gender can be, and is evidenced in Lisa’s description of a trans woman:

> Keep in mind he does not do hormones or surgery whatsoever (laser hair removal, that's about it). His daily look, when not dancing, is "counterculture punk." He looks like a big tattooed man in short shorts and a crop top with a half-shaved head...he has no idea what it's like to be a woman and no experience of the true oppression of being female. He became a "woman" last year and suddenly is the most oppressed person ever who should

\(^9\) All the data I gathered was public information. All information was from Reddit and Tumblr, both of which are open to the public and not a private posting website or closed group. While all the information was public, I chose to anonymize my sample further by changing all the names of the commenters/posters to a pseudonym and all quotes have been left grammatically unchanged. I only added in emphasis, and contextual words.
be allowed to trample all over *actual women's* civil rights because they should just accept him at face value when he says he's a woman? (Lisa 41 points).

Lisa notes that this trans woman does not look like a cis woman, and also can never be an *actual* woman due to lack of biological experience, inability to perform gender correctly, and a seeming lack of oppression. This follows into the necessity toward correct performance, that only a person who has the correct body parts can act as a woman or will only ever be male/female.

When talking about how a trans man performed gender, Betty said, “She grew out a beard and took T, but was about 5’3” and clearly was not male” (Betty 65 points). This trans man fails to perform gender correctly nor is able to be more than a woman, because he will always be biologically a woman. This biological ruling factor, named ‘biological reality’ within the group, becomes compounded with a level of socialization that is, much like the biology, immutable and identical across all situations. Ashley speaks to this sarcastically when saying:

> It's almost as if they have been born to a biological reality where you're in a body that is smaller and physically weaker, so you're conditioned to be passive and submissive, therefore easier to bully (Ashley 19 points).

Once again, the level of gendered experience is tied to biology, which is then tied to a larger immutable circumstance. Biology points us toward the socialized experience of these people, and one cannot remove socialization or biology from gender, and this gendered experience always happens within the binary. They believe there is no such thing as trans socialization. Kimberly notes this, saying:
It's straight up untrue to say that trans women were socialized as "trans women" and not as boys as children...There's no logic to that argument and it completely undermines what socialization actually means (Kimberly 23 points).

Here again, I found that the person matters little in this space and has little agency over what happens to them or how they experience the effects of socialization. ISB references the connection between biology, gender and socialization and assumes that people can only ever be the product of these larger powers. A few contradictions came up repeatedly within this group that run against this socialized biological perspective. Donna says sarcastically:

Yes, friends, if you believe that genitals are irrelevant to personalities and preferences you are a TERF and you are co-opting nonbinary identities. Isn't it great, being a progressive? (Donna 48 points).

This is an interesting post, mostly because it claims that gender should have no hold on personality or preferences, and yet the whole subreddit has 500 pages of posts arguing for the existence of a very real socialization process that controls personality and preferences, defined by one’s genitals. For this reason, I understood what the Gender Critical community says only applies to trans people and cis men, and not cis women. Carol has this very interesting contradiction in these two posts, where she states:

What trans activists don't seem to understand is that radfems have absolutely zero stake in seeing people uphold "traditional" gender roles. We couldn't care less if men wear dresses or long hair or painted nails. Unlike what the Tumblr hivemind seems to think,
we are completely fine with GNC people - they're the ones who are projecting (Carol 21 points).

And then in the next thread states:

I was walking to a play rehearsal from the library when an older man shouted at me, repeatedly, that I was "looking good."

Female socialization made me not only shut up and keep walking when I wanted to ream him out (Carol 73 points).

While Carol has no interest in upholding traditional gender roles, I found that traditional gender roles turn into socialization from which people cannot escape, which in turn forces people to behave in certain ways. In this perspective, female socialization makes people submissive, weak, quiet, and unable to combat socialization. Likewise, men become rapists who only have the fetishistic desire to rape women, invade their spaces, and be loud. While Gender Critical allows people to be as they wish within the binary, it seems that oppression is innate in the experience of gender, and the experience from this oppression becomes part of what it means to be a cis woman. Overall, cis women are given more space to be more things than any sort of perceived male. This perception of males plays out in an interaction between Michelle and Amanda. Michelle says, “Typical male violence, they beat and almost kill defenceless and old feminist for merely disagreeing with them. WOMEN DO NOT DO SUCH THINGS, THIS IS MALE VIOLENCE” (Michelle 81 points). Amanda replies, “Women need to arm themselves and defend themselves by any means necessary... when this happens, when the attackers are hurt, when they bleed they will learn to leave women alone. They prey on our weakness” (Amanda 43 points). Amanda and Michelle say that women and men are fundamentally different, that women
are made lesser and weaker through socialization and biology. This argument relates to a biological underpinning recreating gender essentialism, and the traditional gender roles they are attempting to break down (Root Aulette and Wittner 2015). The biological, socialized immutable reality Gender Critical constructs through these discourses is how gender becomes understood in this subreddit.

Opposite of Insult

Gender Cynical is a direct reaction to Gender Critical and works as a satire subreddit. Much of the discourse within must be taken as a negative of what is said. Rather than looking at the transphobic and cruel discourse as their truth, they renegotiate themselves through taking the insult of queerness and making fun of it. Gender Cynical returns agency and human complexity to its users, not allowing the simple narratives of brainwashing and ISB to define them. Through this process of renegotiation, Gender Cynical creates the theme: The Opposite of Insult. First, let us start by understanding how this happens within this space. In a thread focused on pointing out how trans women are constructed in Gender Critical, Emily posts,

TERFs: MtT's can't be real lesbians, they're just autogynephilic straight men who appropriate lesbian identity! Also they pressure wombyn into going against their inborn sexuality and sleeping with them!

Also TERFs: Straight wombyn who avoid men for political reasons are totally real lesbians! Also, all wombyn should renounce men and sleep with other wombyn as an act of sisterhood, even if they're straight, because sexuality is totally a choice and not inborn! (Emily 11 points).
Gender Cynical is attempting to understand themselves via insult and mocking the insult. They point to the ridiculous and the illogical as they construct themselves in the shadow of these insults. Thomas alludes to how the ridiculousness also works for trans men, saying:

No, it's because I've been brainwashed by the trans agenda into thinking girls must be feminine; I need to accept my true tomboy self and join the sisterhood where I belong, and then I need to stop hating femininity and become the lipstick lesbian I was always meant to be (Thomas 78 points).

Thomas mocks the perceived lack of agency to show that he may think differently, that he knows that not all girls need to be feminine but remains trans despite this. Brainwashing becomes a core element in understanding the insult of queer gender identities, because one would never choose to be a queer identity. Gender Critical is seen saying that only through the power of brainwashing and disposal of agency can one become a trans or queer identity. Another trans person notes this ‘trans brainwashing’ when talking about why she is a trans woman, Melissa says,

Personally I'm doing it because it's suuuuper trendy these days to experience crippling self-hatred, shell out hundreds of dollars a year on hormones, relearn mannerisms and give yourself laryngitis training your voice, get kicked out of your house, have attempts made on your life, and move to another continent without a nickel to your name just to escape your family's boiling bigotry. I'm gonna be the coolest kid on the block :))))))
(Melissa 40 points).

Melissa is creating herself satirically; she shows that she became trans not because of brainwashing or the desire to be ‘super trendy,’ but rather because of something much deeper
and more personal. She recreated herself and set out on her own without any support. Queer and trans folks navigate and create trans identities in the shadow of these insults, showing that the often one-dimensional thought processes given by Gender Critical do not completely apply to them. Stephanie notes the increased complexities of privilege when being a trans woman, saying,

The "trans women benefit from male privilege" trope relies on black and white thinking, whereby someone must either have male privilege or not, with no shades of grey in between. It ignores the fact that privilege generally confers a statistical advantage rather than an absolute one, that many types of privilege are often grouped under the same label, and that different types of privilege interact in complex ways (Stephanie 32 points).

Here Stephanie actively, rather than satirically, engages with the ideas of Gender Critical, that one cannot think of absolutes when one thinks about power and socializations. Gender Cynical returns some of the agency denied in Gender Critical back to the people. These folks resist insult, implying that if socialization truly worked as Gender Critical believes, everyone would be cis. This group returns agency to the self by mocking a group built around the marginalization of trans and queer people. They create themselves not as absolutes, or engage in black and white thinking, but rather present themselves as people with complex lives. They do not transition or become queer for the fetishized and simplified motivations that Gender Critical gives us, but rather for a multitude of personal reasons and feelings.

**Tumblr: Trolls, Zealots, and Naming Feelings**

In contrast to Reddit, Tumblr is a chaotic multitude of people all clamoring over each other to be heard, and to speak. For this reason, it was much harder to nail down how people
understood gender on Tumblr, but for the sake of simplicity I am going to focus on what I believe represents the largest part of the discourse around queer folks.

The first group I named is Zealots and Trolls. This focuses on those who attack queer posts to tell queer folks they are wrong, that they are delusional, that they can’t understand the real world, and that biology matters. There is a fine line between zealots (which existed within all kinds of groups) and trolls that can be determined by what they said, and the context of their blog. As talked about in greater detail below, trolls are often easily spotted by their actions, giving often uncomplex, thoughtless comments meant to get a rise out of the targeted group. This is shown when Nicholas states that:

There are only two genders, only two genders, only two genders
There are only two genders, only two genders, only two genders.

This post shows its lack of complexity in the form of a wall of text repeating the same line. The OP’s lack of willingness to engage in any form of conversation, or creation of dialog shows how this person is actively trolling and attempts to get a rise out of people in the queer community. The troll’s behavior must be compared against that of the zealot, the person who more actively engages with the discourse and tries to make conversation. Rather than just saying inflammatory remarks, zealots speak with a little more depth, such as when Laura says:

Sigh. You can call yourself whatever you want but when it comes down to science in the end you are literally either a he or a she. And I’m fine with you wearing whatever you want and dating whoever you want. But you literally scientifically have to either be a he or she. Don’t worry about what sexual organ you’re born with. If you have a penis and want to wear dresses, then do it with joy. If you were born with a vagina and want to

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10 This line repeats more times than shown.
wear what society considers to be men’s clothes, then do so with joy! For years everyone complained about how people should ignore gender roles - we finally reach a point where it has become very accepted for people to do things that the opposite sex was only expected to do, and then all of a sudden basically make it about gender again.

Laura’s post mimics some of the discourse that occurs within Gender Critical, but also popped up unexpectedly inside a post about how to use pronouns in an academic piece of writing that discussed the awkwardness of he/she. Laura took the time to explain her logic, talk about why she wanted to speak, and execute the comment with more care and thought than any other troll. This person seems more like a zealot than a troll, using their platform in a self-righteous way to spread what they think is correct, in this case the opposite of what was said in the original post.

Zealots and trolls entering into these posts can also be seen as a strategic situation in which these trolls and zealots were allowed to both perpetuate and force hegemonic gender beliefs into these spaces (Foucault 1978). These are two easily defined examples of people being trolls and zealots. Classifying them becomes more complex as the troll gets more adept at trolling, and I looked to the posts within a blog to understand how they create themselves in this space.

The queer group of Tumblr focused on finding and naming feelings. This was a highly individualized practice that focused everything they felt into a few words. This happened through a process of self-labeling, and discursive posts about how biology has nothing to do with gender and through this practice untethered gender from a biological necessity. The theme for queer construction of gender on Tumblr thusly become Naming: Feelings of Un-gendered Biology.

To begin, let us look at the ways they utilized discursive posts to remove biology from gender. Rebecca makes this clear when they state, “a monthly reminder that having a period
doesn’t make you a girl and that you don’t have to get periods to be a girl”. Sharon adds to this, saying:

Menstruating simply means you are fertile, are able to get pregnant, and can pop babies (generally, anyway; the human body is weird). It has no bearing on how you see yourself. Does that mean you’re only a girl when you’re able to menstruate? Bleeding vaginas, boobs, nor long hair make a girl.

This removal of the body as a site of gender is only part of practice in this space, but remains an important part all the same, because instead of depending on biology to talk about gender, these people turn to feelings as a way to understand what gender is. Cynthia notes having feelings they could not explain, saying:

growing up before a lot of this information was readily available to extent it is now, I can absolutely confirm that this was the case for a teenager and younger adult, when all I had in place of an identity was a vague amorphous feeling of discomfort and not-belonging that manifested in a variety of confusing and sometimes harmful ways.

People often cited the need to understand these ‘amorphous’ feelings and understand themselves. They often felt like they didn’t (or still don’t) belong and were outsiders. Once they find a label, and things start to make sense to them, they understand themselves far better, and no longer feel broken. Cynthia continues in their post, saying,

It wasn’t until my (I’m turning 32 this year) that I found out being nonbinary was a thing that there was actually a name for it, and if it weren’t for “labels the internet I probably would have spent the rest of my life just [feeling] wrong and trying to live as my assigned gender, which actually would been bullshit.
Cynthia illustrates the process of both feeling and naming. Naming gives them a sense of belonging, like they are where they are meant to be, and that feeling lead them to find this label. The place of naming becomes important on Tumblr and across other websites.

With these themes in mind I will move forward and understand how the space itself is instrumental in shaping discourse within these spaces. I will explore how the website format controls the creation of these gender-based practices and how space shapes practice.

*Space*

This section explores how the material aspects of these websites shape practice. I will be using Eribon’s (2004) *Insult and the Creation of the Gay Self* to understand how this space breaks down the divided psyches of queer people on Tumblr, and how Bourdieu's (1992) *habitus* becomes embodied via the conditioning and cognitive construction of Reddit. I will inspect how the spatial-contexts are at play in these areas but understand them as secondary to the above framework analysis of these spaces.

*What Spaces Do: Tumblr*

To understand the three spatial-contexts of Tumblr, I divided my analysis into two key places of practice of queer gender identities, which appear in the blog biographies and in the posts themselves. Eribon (2004) notes the difference between being gay and saying one is gay (51). He states that, “The control over homosexuality rests on this imposed silence and this forced simulation...Inevitably produce[d] in individual psyches by the division between what one is and what one is allowed to do, between what one is and what one is allowed to say” (51).
Tumblr as an online space allows the user to both be, and say they are queer, and these divisions of self are only broken by the space that one is allowed to speak these words in. One can say they are an agender, demisexual aromantic person in their blog bio and be believed. Then one can proceed to enter into discourse and create a blog that allows that identity to be practiced. This space breaks the division of self, because one is allowed to both say and be their queer self in this online space. While Eribon’s language lends itself to the idea of an authentic self, this study denies that very possibility. The space allows the idea of the authentic self to be created. Tumblr users are not finding something within themselves in this space, but creating a new version of themselves in a blog based format that allows them to speak and become. When I use ‘be’ I refer to an idea of self becoming. I am mirroring Eribon’s language when I use ‘be’, but he also notes there is a material necessity for gayness (or queerness) to be created. To be is to become, and that becoming is dependent on practice within the space.

Eribon (2004) also notes that, “If the possibility of saying [you are gay] were officially allowed, then all the vulnerability and inferiority attached to being gay or lesbian, all the means of control wielded against them would be invalidated” (51). While people are allowed to be and say who they are these sites of queer recreation are permeated by the larger contexts. In the context of this website people are allowed to say they are and be queer, yet societal hegemonic power relations exist around gender, and people may not be allowed to speak and be in the real world. This is often expressed by the *Trolls and Zealots* who impose what they view as truer upon these spaces of practice. All of this practice rests on anonymity. Eribon (2004) notes anonymity allows the gay self to be practiced and created. Online spaces allow for the breakdown of the psychic divisions of self and allow people to anonymously practice queerness,
by both saying and being. These places of saying and being are connected to discrete places of practice materially created by the websites.

First, I understood the blog section as a place where one speaks, or says they are queer, with the second site of practice being the post where one is allowed to be (become) queer. In these two dimensions I will understand how people practice the queer self on Tumblr.

*The Blog Biography: Practice of Saying*

Let us begin to understand this space by how the user interface functions. On Tumblr users have a blog that allows one creative freedom in its layout. Users can change the HTML to change the appearance of the website, and put any information in a description. Users can place and change and reformat as they see fit. The blog biography becomes a key place in speaking, where people identified themselves by labeling. They said such things as:

**Mary:** They/them. 27 years old. Arab-American. Changling child. Very anxious cutecumber. I sometimes post NSFW stuff.


**Patricia:** The Laundry List: white American, Californian, financially dependent on uppermiddle class parents, college student, mentally ill / mad / psychologically disabled / crazy / neurodivergent (Avoidant Traits, Persistent Depressive Disorder with Intermittent Major Depressive Episodes, Generalized Social Anxiety Disorder, Atypical Anorexia Nervosa, Body-Focused Repetitive Behavior Disorder, Alcohol Use Disorder, Delayed
Sleep-Phase Syndrome, Restless Legs Syndrome aka Hell), physically abled, pansexual, quiromantic, femme, salmacian, genderqueer/nonbinary/androgyn/trans/boygirl/gentlelady (ze/hir, but they/them is okay), polyamorous (currently single), submissive, masochist, exhibitionist, pervert, eclectic solitary pagan/buddhist/heretic/witch, future nurse (hopefully), nerd, anti-kyriarchal feminist, sex-neutral, anticapitalist (fuck the system), humanist (in that I believe humans are capable of living moral, ethical, fulfilling, and meaningful lives without religion), vegetarian (vegan when I can), animal, hippie, human. That's all I can think of right now.

These people pull on an excess of identities, pulling the body into a place that inherently does not need a body. Almost all blogs that had a biography labeled themselves as some form of queer gender. In all posts analyzed, only one person identified themselves as straight in their blog bio, and only six people identified as cis in their biographies. This huge discrepancy of who was speaking their identity makes this a place of practice, by naming themselves for queer people. Through this action of speaking, they are allowed to create the idea of who they are this space. Tumbr’s blog format gives these people the means and ability to speak. This practice of naming alone is not a neutral form of interaction. When one names oneself, they are not just telling others who they are, they are telling them that they belong to a group, and that group already has a narrative attached to it. When one says they are an AFAB they are not just saying that they may have female- perceived genitalia, they are doing with that word, and that word is doing a narrative. Our theoretical person is saying that maybe they were raised as a cis girl, that they may have experienced bullying, oppression, or kinship based on the gender identity given to one at birth, or an alienation from their body given this sex-based gender role. The Tumbr bloggers
bring themselves through labels into this space to construct what gender means in this space.
There is an *a priori* that acts in narrative illocutionary force that is making these labels a large part of practice within these spaces.

People need to speak to their queer identities over non-queer identities, that the unmarked nature of being cis and straight means that people must speak when they are not, lest they be assumed cis and straight until said otherwise (Brekhus 1998). Hegemonic power relations still permeate the space, as people still need to declare that they are different, and no one can assume that they are straight and cis. The fact that they must name themselves, and that others who are straight/cis rarely do points to power of privilege in the unmarked categories (Brekhus 1998). Tumblr, and the blogs within, remain in a field of power, and one cannot remove websites from hegemonic power relations. This naming process can also be seen as these people attempting to get at an ‘authentic self’, that through naming they become their ‘truest’ self. Their idea of self then was waiting to be named, thusly they needed to place feelings onto an experience and then they became. The idea of an authentic self is in direct opposition to materiality, which denies the idea of any version of authentic self. I argue then that the authentic self is an idea that the queer community has constructed to make themselves culturally intelligible. They utilize the narrative to create boxes, which relies on a hegemonic *a priori* of identity, that identity must necessarily fit inside a box. These boxes are then used to define an in and out group.

*Posts: The Space of Being*

Posts created a space in which people could practice the queer self. This practice took the form of storytelling that linked people’s identities and the space itself. Barbara creates a mock conversation in which they state:
“if you didn’t discover that label/tumblr/the internet, then you wouldn’t have identified with that bullshit gender.”
no, i wouldn’t have. i would have gone through life thinking something was wrong with me and every time someone uses the wrong pronouns/name, i would have felt like throwing up.
but i did discover that label/tumblr/the internet, and i realised that i wasn’t the only person who felt like this, and that made me feel supported and safe and happy in my own skin.
so kindly fuck off

The interaction and storytelling in this post points directly to Tumblr as a site of practice where people are allowed to be in online spaces. This post was followed by narratives of how people came to understand themselves in this space, and how instrumental the space was in coming to understand their queer identity. Tumblr is a huge site of gender construction that allows queer people to become queer. It is the place where a queer person is allowed to be. Here I also started to see how gender was constructed by these queer people on Tumblr. First, Barbara identifies the fact that they had a feeling, something they needed words for, and finding this name helped them to feel like a part of something bigger. They were not just alone and lost with this gender or sexuality that made them feel insane. Feeling becomes a prime way in which people are allowed to be, and how they come to understand themselves, but they also do so through naming the feeling and becoming part of a group. They are creating new identities for themselves while still depending on some hegemonic constructions of what identity is. They are depending on an idea of determined self that is waiting to be uncovered. They needed to find identity, rather than create identity. In this text post people are allowed to share themselves, talk about themselves,
and become and be as they practice gender, adding their stories. Harry talks about their experience, saying:

   i spent over three decades feeling fucked up about gender and not knowing why. i never heard the term agender til i joined up here and now im still fucked up about gender but at least i know why, and i know what to do about it, and i feel a heck of a fuck of a lot less broken about it than i used to

Harry looks to name their feelings, and just like Barbara they point back to feeling like a part of a group, and above all, the relief of not being alone. The labels are again key in understanding the importance of this practice because they are the largest common thread between all these people. On Tumblr, people can name themselves, and then better know themselves by having words for their feelings. This space gives people the ability to practice, negotiate, and narrativize these identities. These bloggers create symbolic boundaries of what it means to be queer through formulating identities around feelings. These feelings become requisite to being part of the queer group. Wilkins (2012) notes that groups can use emotions to create symbolic boundaries to define the in-group. Here on Tumblr folks both use their feelings to create boundaries, but also tie particular feelings to correct identities (Wilkins 2008, Wilkins 2012). Feeling, and emotion, create and define what it means to be queer when narrating queer identities in posts, and thusly allow the bloggers to be queer.

As discussed by Butler (1990) gender and sexuality cannot be separated, which also becomes a sub part of the practice of this gender. No matter how many times I looked through the gender posts, sexuality was always tied into gender. That could be simply because I also
looked at the LGBTQIA+ community, which inherently connects both sexuality and gender.

Gender and sexuality could not be removed from each other, pointed to by Margaret, who says:

Same goes with sexuality. Being any part of the lgbtq community is not a fashion or trend. There aren’t any more queer people than before but what there are more of are people who are unashamed of who they are and aren’t willing to pretend to be something they’re not just to fit into a cis-gendered, heteronormative society. It really pisses me off when people make others feel invalid because they don’t believe them and think they’re just making it up because they think its cool or something. You can’t tell someone what they are and are not; if someone tells you they’re non binary - THEY’RE NON BINARY, if they tell you they’re pansexual- THEY’RE PANSEXUAL. No questions asked- it’s their identity, not yours. It doesn’t matter if they’re 13, 27 or 89- you don’t tell someone they’re invalid, too young to know or too old to change- you accept them.

Drawing boundaries is one of the most important parts of understanding who is part of the in-group, and who is part of the out-group. Margaret draws symbolic boundaries of who can be queer by stating all you need to do is name yourself. Margaret points to hegemonic gender narratives as attempting to control the narrative of being queer. Tumblr allows folks to be as they are, and as they feel they are, no matter what. If they say they are, they are. This discursive practice breaks down the divisions of self. Tumblr allows folks to be and say what they are via this anonymous online world.

This space of practice allows people to construct and create themselves by saying, speaking and being. This online space and its format breaks down the division of saying and being, set up by Eribon (2004). Sarah notes how this space changed the way they felt, saying:
I wouldn’t have identified that way. Instead I would have been down my entire short life.

I would not understand what was going on, feel like a lot was wrong with me. I would never have landed in my own skin.

Taking on an identity, or more aptly taking up a label, helps people ‘land in my own skin’. Sarah came to know themselves better when they took up that identity. As discussed above, these identities boil down to a labeling process. This process of naming, and coming to a name, is a large part of the practice in this space. This space allows people to break down the barriers of psychic divisions of self and wholly create an idea of queer self in this space. They used both feeling and naming to create symbolic boundaries that helped define clear lines of the in and the out-group. Once again, they are still relying on hegemonic ideas of identity, and the self. They use these perceptions to create the idea of authentic self, which cannot exist within a material frame work. Thusly, I argue that they are creating an idea of authenticity through this narration of feelings, and naming process. They are not finding themselves, as much as they are creating themselves. This space is a space of creation, and that creation is still dependent on hegemonic perceptions of self. They are free to create themselves, but they are not free from how they think they are allowed to create themselves within a queer community.

Zealots and Trolls in Space

Zealots and trolls plague the internet. They do whatever they like in anonymous spaces with little repercussion other than getting banned. I did not simply understand that these queer spaces on Tumblr were wholly free of trolls and anti-trans/queer zealots, because of the more open nature of their format they existed in a far greater quantity than Reddit. I will explore zealots and trolls as in equal measure the out-group to the queer community and showing the deepest importance of anonymity in online spaces.
Blog bios were an easy way to spot zealots and trolls. The trolls would not even take the time to create or customize anything on their blogs, often leaving the blog bios blank, so that one would have to read through their posts to find out what kind of person they were, or more aptly, what kind of troll they were. While it was hard to tell zealots and really committed trolls apart, I will inspect two biographies, one of which I classify as a zealot and the other a troll, to show the differences of speaking in this space. Patricia created a biography on their blog, stating,

I take pride in my country and what it stands for. I will not apologize for anything I have done in service to my country. Angry Veteran. I will say what I want, when I want and how I want. You can go screw yourself. I like who I am, what I am, and what I have done. If you are a liberal, anarchist, communist, socialist, fascist, weak knees wannabe individual or just all around douchebag full of dicks, this blog is not for you. Go jump in front of a bus. Check out my guns at [omitted URL].

While Patricia does appear wrathful, and even quotes themself as being angry, I classify this person as more than just a troll, mostly because their posts reflect with what appears to be their blog motto, that they are a racist American zealot. Their posts don’t just seek to antagonize those around them, but mirror far right values. Elizabeth, a troll, has something a little more straightforward and angry:

you little fucking fags think you get away with this shit!!!! GOD WILL FIND YOU AND YOU WILL BURN IN HELL FOR YOUR WAYS!!!!!!!!!!!

The username of this blog announced that Hitler did nothing wrong. They don’t try to appear as anything other than a troll. Like many trolls, they have gone through the gender tag themselves
to leave antagonizing and inflammatory comments. The blog bios and posting patterns can help easily find obvious trolls.

These anonymous spaces allow people to become queer, but anonymity also allows other people to destroy and ridicule these spaces. The context and the site allow them a great amount of power, they can say whatever they want with little punishment, and can continue to press hegemonic gender views into these spaces (Foucault 1978). Zealots and trolls use this platform to attack, ridicule, and dehumanize queer people. They create many of the same insults that appear in Gender Critical, but with little less nuance depending on if a troll or a zealot is speaking.

Tumblr allows people to actively construct and deconstruct queer genders. On one hand, there are queer people breaking down the divisions of the psychic self in order to speak and be. On the other hand, they confront trolls and zealots who are actively attempting to deconstruct the meanings of queer genders. Both groups depend on anonymity, and also thrive because of it. The cruelty trolls and zealots enact contrasts with the kindness of people learning to create themselves, yet both can occur in the open and wild space that is Tumblr.

*Reddit: The Habitus of Space*

To analyze the material space of Reddit, I utilized habitus as a framework to understand how Gender Critical and Gender Cynical become embodied. Bourdieu (1992) understands *habitus* as the ways in which larger structures of society come to shape us (139). *Habitus* is understood as a series of structures that inform us about society and help perpetuate it. People come into this world, with structures that existed before, and will exist after us, they are created through an intersection of history and present. One cannot understand habitus within an external
power structure, but rather one that is enacted through the relations of power or a field of power. Habitus becomes embodied through two key ideas, *conditioning*, and *cognitive construction* (Bourdieu 1992:127). Bourdieu (1992) understands conditioning as the product of embodiment (127). For the sake this study, I will be understanding *space* as the conditioning factor, it creates embodiment within these groups. *Cognitive construction* is understood as how people become shaped by the structures, and in turn reshape them (Bourdieu 1992:127). Bourdieu (1992) notes that cognitive construction necessarily depends on conditioning, and so in this study practice in these spaces depends on the space (127). Space (*conditioning*) allows us to become embodied, and practice or discourse (*cognitive construction*) allows us to recreate these spaces.

First, I ask, how do these spaces condition? These two subreddits have been created in a two-fold way: the literal user interface, and how things appear on the page. Where information can go, and how the whole page is ordered has already been structured and controls where and how discourse happens. The front page\(^{11}\) shows a selection of threads users can sort through and choose from, but one cannot just go into a general comment thread in this front page. Instead, they enter into the space of the threads themselves to talk. One can upvote, one can push threads around within that space, but the website is focused via its thread based structure for discourse, so that all interactions happen together, in thread, and nowhere else.

Next, the title of the threads informs what content users will be interacting with. The website is structured and set up to inform what kind of space one is entering, what one can talk about, and how one can educate oneself. The structure of the website allows people to practice and create within it, this creation thusly is *cognitive construction*. The control over practice is very powerful on Gender Critical, which has a whole section of its front page dedicated to

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\(^{11}\) The home page or the first page that is seen on subreddits.
education on what it means to be Gender Critical and a radical feminist. Some of this applies to Gender Cynical as well. While Gender Cynical does not have the same extensive level of educational tools, it still has rules on what is allowed to be said in the space. The rules structure how people speak, what they think and the purpose and focus of the space. Cognitive construction allows people to recreate and perpetuate creation in these two subreddits. They add layers to the space, creating more elements in the space, but structuring it so it informs those who come after so they can be embodied in this space, and learn what it means to be Gender Critical or Gender Cynical.

As alluded to above, a secondary aspect to cognitive conditioning is practice. People bring their feelings and selves to this space and restructure it. They bring their stories, and the subreddit educates those who enter the space on how to narrate those feelings, and from there restructure it by adding their words to the subreddit. However, these words and threads are filtered through what is allowed to be said. The Reddit commenters learn how to talk about the feelings of often hatred in Gender Critical and Gender Cynical. The subreddit becomes a micro habitus within a field of power and created by three spatial-contexts: the post, the website and the power relations in these spaces. The elements of habitus can be seen within the realm of the three contexts noted above. First, there is conditioning -- the website context-- which preexists the folks who create in it. Then there is the first aspect of cognitive construction which is enacted through the front page’s informational and educational material. Due to the human creation of the front page, and the educational material, it is seen as the post context. Finally, the second aspect of cognitive construction, which is practice, allows people to both deconstruct and reconstruct hegemonic powers. Commenters enter into a space of social habitus based on becoming and being a part of this group, and as Bourdieu (1992) said, ‘Habitus being the social
embodied, it is ‘at home’ in the field it inhabits, it is perceived it immediately as endowed with meaning and interest...habitus as a ‘feeling for the game’” (128). Once they have a feeling for the game, once they become part of the habitus, they understand what can and cannot be said in these spaces.\footnote{These groups are not creating a positive image of gender. They are insulting, truthfully or satirically, what it means to be queer. Please be aware that as you read on, people say some rather violent things, mostly from Gender Critical, but there will be excessive mentions of rape, fetishes, hate, and violence toward trans people, for this is their game, and how they create the insult people of queer genders.}

**Conditioning: The Website**

Like many websites, Reddit waits to receive information and for communities to build on it, but its format is not neutral; it controls and shapes how people interact with a space. This structure of the website informs how people interact. In the subreddits, one can never enter into a conversation just for oneself, one enters into a thread or creates one to become part of the community. One is not creating content for oneself, but one is creating for the group. Reddit’s format does not allow for the same level of personal space that Tumblr does with the personal blog. Its format facilitates making a community, but the community is based in a hierarchy of upvotes. The post with the best upvote ratio of that time will appear at the top while others will fall to the bottom. Conditioning is based in the structure of the field of practice. The website becomes this structure, controls how folks interact, and controls what is important through a system of hierarchy.

**Cognitive Construction: The Making of a Radical Feminist**

Now, while the space of the website may not be neutral, the cognitive construction of these websites controls how practice takes place. When one enters into the website, one sees a set
of rules and information, and the rules control what content will be deleted or accepted by the group of moderators. The rules create clear boundaries and define what it means to be a part of this group. The cognitive construction process is made visible in a large master thread called Trans Peak, which displays how people both come to practice gender and create Gender Critical ideology. It brought two highly important aspects of practice to the forefront of the discourse. First, people learn how to be Gender Critical or radical feminists through the educational materials of the subreddit. They learn terms, naming, and how to use language to get at their feelings. Second, these feelings highlight how people perpetuate and recreate hate and dehumanization within this subreddit. Commenters practice through bringing their stories and feelings into the threads, which also re-informs cognitive construction of the website, and then finally speak as an embodied person of the habitus of this space. Gender Critical is created by the website, and recreating a hateful group based around the creation of the insult of queer people.

In order to understand all these facets, I show the flow of how one would become Gender Critical, and in doing so practice the insult of queer gender. I will first understand how the front page allows people to create rules, set guidelines, create the boundaries of the group, and define what it means to be in the group. Then I will explore how people actively practice within these threads. In these threads, they practice creating insult by taking the vocabulary of the websites and using it for their own narratives, which they then use to pathologize and dehumanize queer folk. Finally, I will look at how commenters came to understand themselves, and their experience through Gender Critical. With the collision of understanding how structure works on Reddit, I analyze these facets together to show how the habitus becomes clearly embodied within Gender Critical.
One of the first rules appears on the front page. This quote allows the reader to understand the culture of this subreddit:

‘Women do not decide at some point in adulthood that they would like other people to understand them to be women, because being a woman is not an ‘identity.’ Women’s experience does not resemble that of men who adopt the ‘gender identity’ of being female or being women in any respect. The idea of ‘gender identity’ disappears biology and all the experiences that those with female biology have of being reared in a caste system based on sex.’ - Sheila Jeffreys, Gender Hurts.

Immutable socialized biology is a part of the fundamental cognitive construction elements of Gender Critical. On the front page, people are informed of what they need to know, and how to educate themselves to become either a Gender Critical or radical feminist thinker. The next bit of information one is given in this space in the rules section is an infograph that immediately shows the reader what kind of space they are entering into, it states:

**PATRIARCHY: NO!**

“You must change your personality to match your sex!”

**TRANS IDENTITY POLITICS: NO!**

“You must change your sex to match your personality!”

**GENDER CRITICAL FEMINISM:**

“You are both fine just the way you are”

Gender Critical starts by showing what they believe: that queer people do not need to change who they are in order to be valid, that sex has no bearing on personality, and personality should not force one to change one's sex. It is important to note that they both use language of sex over gender. The use of sex rather than gender is an interesting reductive view point and begins the
practice of Immutable Socialized Biology (ISB). They assume that personality is not based on sex, and that one should not have to change one’s personality or one’s sex to meet that gender expectation. They believe that sex should not determine who one is, that people can be who they are in the body they have, no matter what body that is, and yet they believe that people are then defined by this very biology. They exist in a paradox, as they say that sex determines experience, and to follow this logic, one’s personality, but also that one never need to change this sex to be who one is. They appear to fully practice a biological binary understanding of gender based on the socialization around sex. Gender Critical practices a reductive essentialist idea of gender based on the idea that because people are oppressed via sex, only two genders exist.

Next, on the page is a whole selection of ‘resources’ such as:

Banned by Trans, The Trannosphere, Diary of a Trans Widow, What is a woman?, A Feminist Critique of "Cisgender", Sex Not Gender, Culturally Bound Gender, Lost Womyn's Space, Nymeses, Gender Critical, Who Owns Gender?, whoiscis”

These link to other places in which one can continue to inform oneself on what it means to be a radical feminist. They also have a glossary of terms and words used by the subreddit to inform users about the language of the website. They do not use the term MtF(male to female) because they do not believe a man can ever be a woman, so they use MtT (male to trans). They do not use cis gender because they do not believe there is such a thing as being cis gendered. They then state thereafter in the clearest of terms, ISB:

**Gender** - The collection of cultural and social behaviors, expectations, differences, and privileges bestowed upon men and women by their upbringing and socialization. Distinct from biological sex, gender is a social construct.
Sex - The state of being male or female, which each have distinct biological differences - this includes chromosomal makeup (XX for females; XY for males); internal and external sexual organs; primary and secondary sexual characteristics; and hormonal configurations. Distinct from gender, sex is unfettered and unchanged by any one culture or society's beliefs on the differences between men and women.

Here, they inform readers on how they understand gender and sex: they see only two ways one can be socialized and the existence of only two sexes. One cannot escape socialization, and cannot experience that socialization differently, giving readers a reductive view of gender and sex that reinforces the idea that gender therefore reflects sex, and that socialization reflects the sex one was born with (excluding all intersex people). Through all the rules, guidelines, and quotes Gender Critical reinforces how one can understand a gender based on biological absolutism. Nevertheless, this absolutism also is based on the idea that people are socialized into these absolutes, and that therefore only two genders can exist. The structural elements of the website and the cognitive construction come together to create a community based on biological essentialism. The front page is the place where Gender Critical people come to understand what gender is. Rather than actively engaging with the content through comments, they are informed through education materials, rules, and guidelines. It acts as a secondary place of practice that is focused on creating a Gender Critical person, but they are not creating for themselves on the front page. Thusly the front page becomes a site of passive practice.

Next, I move on to understanding how these people actively practice gender. While I have pulled data from all posts to talk about how they create ISB, here I focus on the Trans Peak thread. Trans Peak is a thread in which people explain how they became a part of Gender Critical
or discuss why they think that queer/trans people are invalid. They narrate their own feelings, but also bring in information that was absorbed from the first aspect of cognitive construction from the website. I would like to explore how people first enter into actively practicing through discourse by imitating the word usage. Word imitation was hugely relevant to understanding the cotton ceiling, as Kathleen, Amy, and Shirley note that reading up on these ideas is what made them become more Gender Critical:

I rapidly started consuming gender-critical radical feminist materials, and I saw that this nonsense was just the tip of the iceberg. Reading about the "Cotton Ceiling" was the final nail in the coffin of me completely rejecting transgender politics and the transgender agenda (Kathleen 64 points).

Here Kathleen notes that she came to understand herself better through this education process. Entering into the Trans Peak thread and reading about these topics informed her about radical feminism, which helped her to reach a state in which she began to more actively practice gender in Gender Critical. Shirley notes going through a similar education process as well:

The cotton ceiling is part of my peak moment, though thankfully not an experience, but a realisation. Reading about the cotton ceiling made me feel sick, but I am not a lesbian, so it doesn't really impact me personally (Shirley 44 points).

Both of them note the reading and the learning process as a part of coming to dislike and hate the trans agenda, which the whole thread was about. She also notes that the cotton ceiling was what made her sick; what made her change her mind was interacting and learning from the cognitive construction of the space. Amy uses the cotton ceiling to practice ISB by pointing out how gender (and sexuality) are tied to sex, and one cannot remove oneself from that:
Actually, you know what? The "cotton-ceiling" shit was a huge peak for me. As a straight woman, I would NEVER pressure, say, a gay male, into ignoring my anatomy and having sex with me just because I "act like a dude" (Amy 47 points).

Amy used biology and sex as a way to practice gender based on an idea propagated by the site. These three together show how the Trans Peak thread gives a way to construct via narrating an idea and allowing people to become outraged by it. The space also shapes what is allowed to be said, how it is said, and how they come to understand trans issues.

While commenters in the Trans Peak thread did often use the vocabulary that they encountered in the threads, they also created their own ideas within the threads. They created a very intimate view of trans women. They reduced trans women to three key few elements of self: as perverts, as an autogynephilic fetishism, and the idea that trans women are delusional insane violent males. They took the most time in the Trans Peak thread to talk about trans women, as they appeared to be the biggest threat to Gender Critical. Trans women are explicitly and repeatedly seen as men, without any way to be anything other than a man. They use male pronouns for these women (with a few exceptions), but in my analysis I will use she/her pronouns to refer to trans women. I will show how trans women are thought of as perverted/fetishest, violent, and insane. By using a dehumanized perspective on trans and queer folks, Gender Critical creates the insult of the queer self, particular to trans women, but also uses it to define what a woman is.

Let us begin with the most straightforward piece of discourse on the creation of insult of the queer self. Anna states, “Transwomen are not women. They are mentally ill men who have an odd obsession with women's bodies and fetish the stereotypical gender roles of women”
(Anna 59 points). Anna, in one fell swoop, sums up the whole subreddit’s view of trans women: they are insane, trans women will never be women, and are obsessed with the idea of what cis women are and fetishize the oppression cis women experience. Angela goes into great depth in her discussion about a trans woman, taking the time to talk about all of her kinks, and personal habits, saying,

I met my ex, a MTT (let's call him X since I'm still somewhat uncomfortable with pronouns) at one of those trans workshops. This was 15 years ago and back then, most MTTs were strictly androphilic, very effeminate, saw SRS as their ultimate goal and called themselves transsexuals guess they would be considered truscum transmedicalists today. They were really uncomfortable with X since X was very vocal about being lesbian, kinky, poly, talked openly about fetishes involving girl cock, had extremely wealthy, supportive parents... As time went on, it became clear X has no intentions of getting surgery and rather, saw the idea of surgically removing the penis or building a vagina as a fetish. And of course the girl mode involved schoolgirl outfits, wearing a butt plug all day, being "naughty" and a little slut and X would even wear some of this in public or post about it on Facebook (Angela 37 points).

Here she gives a lengthy narrative about how being a trans woman is all about sexuality and kinkyness from Gender Critical. The trans woman is then placed under a microscope to inspect each of her ‘assumed’ relevant qualities. The commenter characterizes the identity of the trans woman as nothing more than a fetish; she doesn’t want to be nor can be a “real” woman, but only wants to be kinky. This truly dehumanized version of trans women appeared repeatedly in the threads. Trans women are not portrayed as fetishist in the rules or anywhere within the front page cognitive construction, but the posters create the insult explicitly within the bounds of the
threads. Gender Critical posters expand beyond the rules to create a deeper level of practice based on dehumanizing these queer folks. People within this place of practice use the rules to narrate personal feelings of hatred to inspect the kinks of trans women. The trans women are ridiculed and their kinks used to explain why these trans women are trans, but I also observed many people in Gender Critical using insanity and delusion to further invalidate and dehumanize these trans women. Ruth notes when speaking about trans women and queer folk that,

it's literally what pathological narcissists do when someone threatens their delusional self-image and grandiosity. then they are also gaslighting anyone who makes sense, twisting everyone's words and misrepresenting everything we say (Ruth 8 points).

These threads are used as way to construct the idea that trans people are pathological. People of Gender Critical argue that queer and trans folks are insane, twisting and gaslighting others into believing a wild delusion of their own creation. The commenters give a lot of power and control to queer folk, suggesting that queer folk have the power of brainwashing people, and control and twist what is said for their own purposes. Through the discourse, queer folk become dehumanized objects of hate characterized as insane, unwell perverts. Anna believes that trans people have the power to make the whole world delusional. She notes:

Its radfems and places like here is where you guys just make sense but are bashed because we are living in the delusional world of transwomen. They are mentally sick and they are allowed to live in their fantasy world and they avoid anything that will put cracks in their fantasy (Anna 59 points).
Anna portrays the Gender Critical people as logical, that they are the ones who make sense, in contrast to insane and delusional trans people out to destroy the world. Radical feminists see their role as fighting trans women so that women still have a space, and giving meaning to the word “woman”, though that meaning reflects the biological essentialist perspective of gender. As Brenda, a prolific poster in the Trans Peak thread, and while on an even more radical level than most still gets many upvotes, says:

Trans ideology now claims women have no right at all to speak for ourselves.
"Transwomen are women" and so they can speak for us. But we cant speak, because every time we do, we are implicitly referencing trans issues. I suppose that means, talking about abortion means we are referencing that transwomen dont need them. So we are, literally, to be silenced. A handful of men, with serious woman-hating issues, will speak for us. And if you dont agree with this, you are a terf, and therefore not human, and therefore can be beaten...like the woman in Hyde Park (that was another PT, seeing a female New Statesman writer not condemning this and using the term terf.) or raped or killed (Brenda 52 points).

Her comment refers to a wild increase of violence, the logic moves from silence to dehumanization to the violence of rape and death. While her comment may seem extreme, is not unusual within Gender Critical. The commenters see trans women often as being the essential form of male oppression, and violence. As posts get more extreme, and the discourse becomes more violent, the anonymity of Reddit becomes a huge part of these people’s perspectives on what they are allowed to say. Commenters note they would lose their jobs or friends if they spoke about their opinions in the real world, such as when Samantha says:
I realized that expressing my concern over giving heavy hormone therapy to very young children - children who really have no conception whatsoever of gender, identity, or PERMANENCE let alone sex and puberty - would have been TABOO in my social circle (Samantha 69 points).

The threads are where people come to say something about what they believe is wrong according to larger society, and the larger LBGTQIA+ community; they know what they are doing is creating a violent and cruel insult of these queer identities.

These spaces allow people to be able to practice cognitive construction of the website and become embodied in Gender Critical. Through the cognitive constructing elements of the website, commenters learn how to be a radical feminist, and within the threads they begin to create a new cognitive construction.

Finally, I inspected how these commenters use this space to understand themselves, how this space made them see their situation and trans women differently and helped them toward material practice. Pamela says:

He was obnoxiously "female", if that makes sense. Ridiculous makeup. Tight dress. Long, albeit straggly and thin hair. High pitched voice. Everything he did, I see now, was just fetishized (Pamela 83 points).

The key part of her entry is when she says, “I see now…” Gender Critical gave her the tools to understand herself and the trans woman in question, and then enter into the thread to materially practice the insult of queer genders. The structures of the website, and the discourse itself, help to construct material practice in this space. The cognitive construction acts on the commenter to
help them understand how to practice, and the space (conditioning) enforces a community. The inherent community structure and cognitive construction helps them do gender. In commenting, and creating they practice the insult of gender. Pamela became Gender Critical through reading and educating herself; she came to understand her own story and self in reference to trans issues in Gender Critical. Nicole echoes Pamela’s words about how she came to certain realizations. She says:

I am now realizing that my 20 year old daughter, who is a lesbian, not only has to deal with sexism from men and homophobia from society as a whole, but now she has to deal with these entitled, misogynistic, delusional pieces of shit who will fetishize her, and use her so-called "female niceness" to get thier "ladydicks" off???(Nicole 65 points).

These ideas didn’t fully form until the commenters were able to fully realize themselves and the world by practicing in these threads. By participating in Gender Critical forums, they came to understand how to think about trans women, but also how trans/queer folk will affect them and the larger world while recreating gender essentialism (Root Alette and Wittner 2015). The space creates the idea of gender essentialism, and the idea of insult of genderqueer people (Root Alette and Wittner 2015). Finally, Katherine notes, “This is partnered with the incredibly disturbing revelation that a sizable portion of the MTF community are living a fetish” (Katherine 52 points).

These threads are a place of practice, but that practice shapes how people act, defines queer people, and for Gender Critical, who they consider “real’ women. The subreddit creates a micro habitus where folks learn the game by reading, acting, and practicing through discourse on what gender means. The space is shaped to create community, and the creators set up the website
to help the community understand themselves and Gender Critical. While the spaces appear immaterial, they are a non-physical space where people can practice, with practice being the core element of materialism, and they create a material space through practicing. The subreddit is habitus, the site of the material practice of both gender essentialism and the insult of queer /trans genders.

There is a small subset of the Trans Peak threads I would like to explore. A few trans voices showed up in the Trans Peak thread. A subpopulation of trans women in this subreddit entered into the space to talk about what they hated about the trans community. They often refused the complete dehumanization of the group as a whole but discussed other trans people they didn’t like and what they thought were wrong with the trans community. They often noted that trans women have done disturbing things but did not make absolute statements about the group because they were a part of it. Debra noted that she has been physically attacked by a few trans women, and that,

I've been raped a few times over the last few years, once by a cis man, every other time was by a trans woman. I've been assaulted, aggressively pursued, and had some of the creepiest things ever said to me all by trans women. I still defended the trans movement through all of this because I figured maybe there was just a bad sense of boundaries bc I'm trans too. (Debra 46 points)

Here she notes the presence of some unkind and cruel trans women in the community, rather than saying anything inherently cruel about the trans identity itself. Like many of the trans people who entered the Trans Peak thread, she wanted to critique the community and discuss
why she felt like it was failing, rather than talking about the pathological, delusional, and sexual issues of trans women. Debra continues:

I'm so sick of language policing, and trans women dominating all conversations on gender and pushing cis women around however they see fit. I'm so sick of the lack of acknowledgement that male socialization has an effect regardless of how much you reject it, and that you have to be aware of that at all times, especially if the world actually does start seeing you as a woman (Debra 46 points).

She agrees that she was socialized a particular way which is based on a binary of the two sexes, and while she rejects that socialization she agrees that it remains impossible to reject completely, for socialization remains immutable.

Trans people entered into spaces where they are actively insulted and dehumanized. Debra, for example, saw the space as the only place that she could talk about what she disliked about the trans community. Regardless, it remains a place of insult. I find it important that these trans women chose to not write off the community completely, but just actively critique it. To completely agree with the definitions and beliefs of Gender Critical would be at such a level of cognitive dissonance that instead these trans women used the thread to critique the community, but still allowed space for trans people to exist. Some of the cis people within the Trans Peak thread also agreed with the critiques the trans women presented.

I would like to take a moment to talk about how they used critique rather than dehumanization to avoid creating a wholly negative view of themselves. The trans women who commented wished to critique the group, but also allowed themselves to exist. Nevertheless, they
worded their critiques in such a way as to avoid personal harm to themselves or dehumanize themselves into complete non humanhood. The idea of a positive self-image for queer folks will be explored more on Tumblr, as people use the blog space to create a positive self-image. These trans women are in a space that actively discourages a valid or happy version of trans women, and so to stand in that space, and not speak about oneself in a negative way is genuinely fascinating.

Cognitive Construction: The Mockery of Insults

Rather than returning once again to the conditioning aspects of the website of Reddit, one can be assured that the nature of the structured elements of Reddit did not change in Gender Cynical, and so the conditioning elements remain the same.

The creators of Gender Cynical ensure that those who enter into this subreddit know it parodies Gender Critical, first noting that:

This is a subreddit parodying the transphobia and hypocrisy of "gender critical" feminists. This is not an antifeminist or anti-radical feminist subreddit, nor are we against analysis of gender. We are, however, explicitly against transphobia. You will be banned for any anti-feminist statements or misogyny directed at anyone (including "gendercritical" feminists).

Gender Cynical’s purpose is to mock Gender Critical, and the first thing users see on the front page is “Content warning: All posts in this sub will likely contain transphobia, either mockery or link to actual transphobia”. Here they explicitly state the community focus. This is a place of mockery, and that:
We aren't a discussion board. Debating users posts saying that they aren't really transphobic/problematic is not allowed. If you think something is out of line please report it and message the moderators.

The rules define what can and cannot be said. The practice is satire, the negative of what is actively said within the Gender Critical discourse. So, while I do talk about the practice being the opposite of insult, I also understood it as the insult of insult and a measure of meta-discourse.

Cognitive construction defines what content is permissible and what is allowed to be said in these spaces, as well as names the kind of practice that takes place in Gender Cynical. Gender Cynical users mock and make fun of Gender Critical and others like it, and in doing so, practice the negative statement of their identities through an active form of retaliation. For example, they label Gender Critical folks as insane or worthy of mocking. For these reasons the cognitive construction of the website shapes this practice in Gender Cynical.

Next, I examine how cognitive construction is recreated through practice. The top post of Gender Cynical is a fictional conversation between a man and a trans woman. It reads:

**Man on the street:** Excuse me, could I please see your karyotype, birth certificate, and picture of your genitalia? I was going to sexually harass you, but then I remembered you may not be assigned female at birth.

**Transwoman:** Actually, I’m a trans “‘woman’”. Take a look at my Y chromosome.

**Man on the street:** Oh, sorry my dude! Carry on then, my fellow Male comrade in the war against the true wombyn.

**Transwoman:** Good luck! I’m going to go to the women’s restroom and harass women
there. That is, after all, the only reason I went through hormone replacement, voice therapy, hair removal, facial surgery, and cut off ties with the people I care about but did not respect my decision.

This fictional conversation both mocks and defines the queer self. It highlights that the queer self is not defined by acting violently against women, harassing women, or hurting them, but rather a personal feeling so profound that the trans woman changed her whole life to be her whole self. Gender Cynical also mocks the idea that trans women do not experience any kind of oppression. In reality, trans women experience harassment and are often killed for being trans.

While Gender Cynical users mock the logic and language of Gender Critical, they are also practicing gender for themselves. They also create their own definitions of gender when they name what they are not by using language that dehumanizes them, and turn it back around to make an in-group out of an out-group. Gender Cynical latently constructs a group and defines gender by reinforcing the structure of mockery. Virginia shows how Gender Critical creates logical contradictions:

**TERFs**: Trans people need to disclose to everyone they meet. Rape by trans deception is a very serious problem.

Also **TERFs**: Trans people never pass. Nobody could be fooled into seeing them as anything other than their birth sex. You can always tell (Virginia 115 points).

Gender Cynical constantly holds up the impossible paradoxes that they are forced into by Gender Critical and parody their logic to create a tighter idea of the in-group. These trans people create ideas in these spaces according to the cognitive constructing aspects of the subreddit, an idea of themselves based in the opposite of what being said in Gender Critical: they are not rapists,
perverts, delusional, insane, and brainwashed by the trans trenders. Many people in the threads explicitly named themselves as trans as well.

The Gender Cynical folks through mockery of Gender Critical create a stronger in-group, and trans people exist in a multiplicity of ways within Gender Cynical. They represent the opposite of whatever discourse arises around the ideas of self that Gender Critical makes for queer people.

The intention of Gender Cynical, unlike that of Gender Critical, is not insult, but rather to create a space in which queer people can fight back against insults of their identities. The habitus of Gender Cynical becomes simple to understand, as the conditioning aspects of the website enforce a place of community, and this community centric focus enables the group to mock those who seek to dehumanize and assault queer and specifically trans folks. Gender Cynical’s cognitive construction reinforces the way discourse is created in the threads through mocking and reframing identity boundaries. Through cognitive construction the members create themselves and become embodied when they create identities through the opposite of insult.

Comparing the Sites of Practice

There are two large, hyper apparent differences between Reddit and Tumblr: the difference between creating a personal blog and creating a community. The intention and meaning of the space is created through the focus of the format of the website. On Tumblr, users create the idea of self, and the idea of queer identity through naming and narrating personal feelings. Reddit acts as a community space where people gather around ideas and can enter into habitus-based
practice. Gender Critical creates the insult of queer identity through the powerful impact of ISB, whereas Gender Cynical invalidates ISB to create identities through the opposite of insult.

These two websites differ in the types of practice that occur. Tumblr creates and practices through positive reinforcement of the idea of self, where people attempt to educate and validate others about their identities. Reddit creates groups around a shared hatred of the out-group.

These two websites mean very different things, but also create different forms of practice. In this section, I explore how discourse compares and contrasts. I argue that the very architecture of these websites determines how people interacted with and controlled the ideas of practice, how community formats housed hateful discourse, and how individual posts created the positive idea of being. I draw on the idea that the anonymity of Reddit creates a haven for the Gender Critical community. Commenters repeatedly said that in the community they were able to create themselves in a way that they would not otherwise be allowed to do in real life, creating a ‘safe haven’ for people to act in. Gender Critical’s space and community allowed them to conceive of concepts in a way that they would not have had access to without the community.

While the safe haven idea does exist on Tumblr, I argue that the discourse still remains different. The discourse does not revolve around hating anyone, but rather around coming to understand themselves and feeling freer and more like themselves than ever before. I would also like to examine how these groups draw boundaries for themselves. Both subreddits created themselves in the idea of what they were not; they created themselves in the idea of insult. Each focused on creating an “other” to hate in order to understand themselves and strengthen the in-group. Tumblr creates the idea of the queer self not so much through the practice of out-grouping, but instead queer Tumblr folk focusing on boundary creation of what they are, instead
of what they are not. Rather than creating their identities by hating another group, Tumblr users created themselves in the light of self-creation and love for who they were, not an out-group. This is done through both emotional requisites and shared emotional experiences. They draw symbolic boundaries based on a positive image, but also on what is felt and should be felt by the community (Wilkins 2008; Wilkins 2012). In other words, Reddit users define themselves through hate for other groups, while Tumblr users create their identities through self-love. I also saw how the practices of the queer self mirror each other on Tumblr and Gender Cynical. By contrasting two posts, it became clear that Tumblr tries to create a stronger in-group by using insult to help each other understand experience and define what the in-group looks like. On Gender Cynical, users take the time to despise the out-group by also looking at insult. Virginia mocks queer insult in a series of posts on Gender Cynical:

    TERFs: A feminine trans woman? You just think having a feminine personality is the same as being a woman. What sexist and misogynist stereotyping!
    Also TERFs: An unfeminine trans woman? It's obvious you're not a real woman, a real woman would have a much more feminine personality (Virgina 88 points).
    TERFs: Trans people are science deniers.
    Also TERFs: Sure, every scientific body in the world says we're wrong, but what do scientists know? You can't trust scientists, scientists did Tuskeegee (Virginia 73 points).

Again, users create discourse that suggests that the out-group is illogical, therefore their points of view should not be valued as real. Once again, the in-group creates itself through insult of the out-group. Oddly enough, Tumblr does much of the same group work, but creates a solid in-group through talking about negative experiences, which helps validate queer folk. Bruce speaks to this saying,
Shout Out To Trans People

Who…

…are forced to give their birth name in places like Starbucks

…have corrected their friends/family when using the wrong name/pronouns but still are disrespected and misgendered

…are forced to put their birth name on application forms

…have to come out multiple time to people because they have forgotten, don’t believe you or think it’s a phase

…have come out as a gender they identify with then later identify with a different gender and have to come out all over again

…are told, “you’ll always be _______ in my eyes”

…are outing because they came out to some people but not others

You are loved and valid and all of you are gorgeous. I believe in you

🔗 (11, 564 notes, OP).

Bruce ends his post by saying, ‘You are loved and valid’, rather than saying the people who are saying these things are wrong. Instead, he says that despite these insults, queer people are real.

The queer folks on Tumblr focus on creating an in-group based on kindness, space to love oneself and create oneself through education and validity.

But the question remains as to why Reddit creates such a negative atmosphere in comparison to Tumblr. I argue that groups on Reddit that feel threatened based their in-group on hating the out-group. I could also place responsibility for the hateful discourse on the people themselves, how their actions created hateful discourses in Gender Critical or Cynical, but I contend that space plays into the argument. Reddit is a space of community creation. The format
of the website itself shows us what kind of community can be made here, and how people sometimes use that space to create a community based around hate and the creation of an out-group. I cannot say that Reddit’s format is what made them wrathful, but I can say it is what made the community possible.

**Memes**

Both Tumblr and the Gender Critical Reddit have one well-loved meme junkie whose whole purpose within the communities was to post memes. I would like to compare three memes from each website and talk about why the formats created something different for each one (Figures 1-3). Gender Critical memes are often text based and about the illogical nature of the opposing group, a practice that can also be seen in Gender Cynical. While Tumblr’s meme is not about gender, one can see how it illustrates very different constructions of simplified logic. Tumblr’s meme embodies the educate and validate model that I identified as a large part of the more positive, in-group focus, while the other two create memes that show illogical aspects and degrade their out-groups by pointing out logical inconsistencies or satirizing their logic. The memes show

2017 new rules

- A male is a woman if he says so
- A male is a better woman than an actual woman if he performs femininity
- Being homosexual is bigoted (especially lesbians)
- A lesbian refusing to have sex with a man is an act of violence
- Coerced sex is consented sex
- Acknowledging reality kills people
- Everyone that says they’re trans IS trans
- (Except detransitioners, they were never trans)
- Every woman who’s a radfem is now called Karen
- A 16yo girl is not taken seriously if she’s a radfem
- But a 5yo saying they’re trans is completely acceptable

**Figure 1: Gender Critical**

Well, I liked to play with dolls as a kid, so I guess I’m going to grow out my hair, put on a dress, take hormones, go through surgery, and lose the respect of people who once cared about me so I can get a guy or perv on women

**Figure 2: Gender Cynical**
how their group is hated and how they hate the logic of the out-group. Both point to the logical inconsistencies, but neither create a more caring or kind atmosphere. Instead, they create an unkind one, based around hating another group, satirizing an insult, or creating that insult itself. While all the sites do have memes, the groups create and express those memes in different ways.

Anonymity

These spaces are unique because of the very nature of their anonymity. Anonymity allows people to create posts, comments, and ideas in ways they may not be otherwise allowed to. Tumblr creates a space in which people can learn and practice gender. The practice is made possible by both the way the website is structured, and how people behave on the website. I argue that the personal blog format allows people to do a few important things. First, users have complete anonymity. One doesn't have to have any personal information on the website. In the one place where users can enter information into the space, there is no section that requires data about gender, age, or race. While some people choose to enter that information on their blogs, it is not required. Unlike other platforms like Facebook, which requires that often people use their full names with links to a good amount of personal information, Tumblr allows people to create a completely anonymous space. Anonymity allows people to create identities, as well a personal blog based format. Users create anonymous image of themselves, which is why one can have
such a positive creation of discourse on Tumblr. It represents a space in which people can create the positive versions of themselves, while learning about how they feel. Tumblr users learn what it means to speak and create an idea of self, and rather than creating a horrid vision of themselves, they create a positive self-image. As Eribon (2004) discusses, when there is no division between the psychic selves of saying and being, the power of shame and silence leaves as well. Tumblr acts as a material site of practice where to understand themselves, people can create _themselves_ rather than a group, but still, find a community and place of belonging. All of these factors rely on the very inherent structure of having a personal blog basis of the format.

The case remains the same on the subreddits. These are also sites of material practice, and places where people are creating not just themselves, but the group. They came to embody habitus and perpetuate it. The space of a subreddit lends itself toward group creation and not personal creation. One comes to understand oneself as the structure allows, through practicing through comments and discourse. Reddit creates community based on how the format creates a group, rather than personal identity. Anonymity is also relevant in these subreddits, because much like Tumblr, users are not required to place any personal information into these spaces. User profiles are secondary to the space of Reddit, and names may have nothing to do with what or who they are. For these reasons, people are also allowed to speak more freely, as noted throughout Gender Critical, expressing discourse and feelings they did not feel like they could express in the real world. The importance of speaking freely is most clearly noted by Catherine, who shares that she could never speak freely in the real world or in other parts of Reddit, and so she needed to make a new account. She states:
I have been reading through this sub for the past few weeks and it has been an absolute breath of fresh air. I made a different account to post here because the people I interact with on my main account care about transgender rights and I would get labeled as a TERF if anyone saw this (Catherine 63 points).

Catherine points to the nature of the space, how Reddit remains a place where users can be themselves and speak their minds, even though her thoughts would not be permissible anywhere else. Anonymity is what makes these spaces special. A user is whoever they say they are. While some groups point to the importance of anonymity explicitly, others have done so implicitly in the practice of these places. On Tumblr, people named bodiless selves and used personal blogs to create themselves. They created a body that they wished they had, and the very lack of that body made them able to be completely and unquestionably believed. On Gender Critical, people looked at the subreddit as a safe haven that allowed them to express things that they would not ever be allowed to say in other parts of the internet or in their personal lives. In some cases, users made anonymous accounts, so they could create the insult of gender. Gender Cynical focused less on the aspects of anonymity, but even as a troll-like parody subreddit of Gender Critical, anonymity allowed users to insult insults and make fun of a group without any threat to themselves. Reddit and Tumblr create special and different types of discourse because of anonymity. Anonymity allows people to create themselves and create together away from the identities and social contexts of real life, but only because they believe that they are acting anonymously. People created without bodies, and without identities apparent in anything more than how people name themselves. These spaces allow people agentic creation but are still controlled by how the space itself is shaped.
Finally, anonymity also endows people with a particular power. The strategical context of being unknown allows for all kinds of things to be said (Foucault 1978). Yet, the context of the space still controls what is permissible. People experience the freedom of anonymity, yet are still subject to power relations of the subreddits or Tumblr. These contexts allow things to be said that are not allowed within the blogger’s or commenter’s real world spaces, but are still subject to a field of power. Due to the control of the moderators the subreddits allowed for less things to be said than Tumblr, but many commenters on the subreddits cited that they were freer to express themselves in these online spaces. This is why the perception of anonymity becomes instrumental in understanding how these online spaces function. The belief that one is anonymous, and therefore free from the real-world self, allows them to say things they would not have otherwise said. This anonymous self is recreated in a space that exists within a field of power. Discourse is then utilized in both of its capacities to deconstruct normative society or to reconstruct it (Foucault 1978). Online spaces are not free of power, but the relations of power change what is permissible in comparison to real world spaces.

CONCLUSION

I wanted to know how people practiced gender on Reddit and Tumblr. I found that online spaces shape different kinds of discourse based around the user interface. Whether one is creating a personal blog or a community, space is what mediates the discourse. Bloggers and commenters come to understand themselves as a queer identity or as a radical feminist through practice that is centralized to these online spaces. People recreate themselves over and over again in different places in the real world, and I argue the same holds true for online spaces (Eribon 2013; Brown-Saracino 2015). These spaces allow for new ideas to take shape, and for people to
come to understand themselves in different lights. It is not a simple one-way process of the space wholly shaping the person, but rather people shape spaces, and spaces shape people. The online spaces inspected housed a site of material practice. They allowed the bloggers and commenters within to become a radical feminist or a queer gender. Online spaces are omnipresent in society, and it is imperative that their reflection of the real world is understood.
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