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Contents

ORIGINAL ARTICLES

- Dynamics of Transphobic Content and Disinformation: Introduction to the Special Issue1
Quinnehtukqut McLamore and Kat Fuller
- “No One Really Knows”: The Impact of Structural Ignorance on Transphobic Disinformation..... 15
Beck Corby
- Automated Detection of Mainstreamed Transphobic Content on YouTube 41
Lydia Channon and Nicola Mathieson
- Locating the Asymmetry in Information Flow between Local and National Media on Transgender Discourses 77
Alyssa Hasegawa Smith, Sagar Kumar, Yukun Yang, and Pranav Goel
- Cyber Trans Panic: Chinese Trans-Antagonistic Feminism and the Transnational Circulation of Transmisogyny on Social Media 121
Chris Jingchao Ma and Heng Simone Wang
- Astro-TERFs: LGB Alliance’s Role in the UK Media’s Anti-Trans Moral Panic 139
Gina Gwenffrewi
- “I Took a Deep Breath and Came Out as GC”: Gender Critical Storytelling, Radicalization, and Discursive Practice on Ovarit and Mumsnet 165
PB Berge and Madison Schmalzer
- “He’s Not Even Trying to Look Like a Woman”: Cisgenderist Misinformation and Conspiracy Theories in Online Talk About Transgender Women Athletes 193
Gabriel Knott-Fayle
- “You Can Always Tell”: Determining the Impact of “Transinvestigator” Visual Misinformation on Attitudes Towards Transgender People 215
Walker West Brewer

Dynamics of Transphobic Content and Disinformation: Introduction to the Special Issue

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During the 2020s, prejudice, hostility, and violence towards LGBTQIA+ people has rapidly become re-normalized across most of the industrialized world, threatening the unprecedented expansions of civil rights that had been achieved during the 2010s (US: Alfonseca 2024; Brenan 2024; Lavietes 2024; Paterson and Gingerich 2022; PRRI 2024, 2025; UK: Home Office 2024; Kuhr 2021; National Centre for Social Research 2023; Germany: Anarte 2021; Nicholson 2025; Europe and Central Asia: Datta 2021; Di Sario 2025; ILGA–Europe 2025; Strand and Svenson 2021; China: Liang 2023).

Where hate crimes are recorded, they are at record highs, with transgender and gender-expansive (TGE) people have borne the brunt of these attacks across multiple countries (UK: Home Office 2023, 2024; US: Alfonseca 2024; Meyer and Flores 2025; Uniform Crime Reporting Program 2025; Germany: Anarte 2021; European Union: de Groot and Immenkamp 2025). Policymakers and adjudicators have introduced and affirmed stances that heavily restrict or outright criminalize the public presence and legitimacy of TGE people, ranging from bans on gender-affirming healthcare (e.g., US youth care bans; Dawson and Kates 2025) to legal declarations that TGE identities are fictitious and illegitimate (e.g., UK Supreme Court Ruling; Dawson and Sobel 2025) to outright declaring that presenting TGE identities are forms of fraud or public indecency (e.g., proposed Texas legislation H.B. 3817). Broadly, news media and public policy have become more hostile towards TGE people during this time (Alstott et al. 2024; Billard 2023, 2024).

The transnational political movements driving these shifts are heterogeneous, but rely upon shared core beliefs, tactics, and strategic tools. Broadly speaking, the

anti-transgender movement and its successes can be understood through the critical framework of *cultural hegemony* and through practical models of *alternative influence networks*, *disinformation*, and *conspiracy theories*. Anti-transgender politics represent what Gramsci termed cultural hegemony in the sense that they reproduce longstanding dominant cultural narratives and beliefs (“transgender people are mentally ill”; “genitals present at birth define gender”) while delegitimizing and countering movements that challenge this dominant framework (“transgender identities are non-pathological variations in human identity”; see Adamson 1980). As a hegemonic product, the anti-transgender movement positions “gender ideology” as a threat to the natural, “common-sense” order of reality and therefore an assault on the rights of people who believe in said order.

This special issue of the *Bulletin of Applied Transgender Studies* solicited a diverse range of articles that each, despite varied foci and methodologies, aim to explore the dynamics of how anti-transgender politics have succeeded worldwide. Some contributions explicitly focus on the role of manufactured doubt in politics and litigation (Corby 2025, this issue; Gwenffrewi 2025, this issue) or the role of credulous news media and institutional support in the movement (e.g., Gwenffrewi 2025, this issue; Smith et al. 2025, this issue). Others highlight how social media-based communities radicalize and reinforce beliefs about TGE people among laypersons (e.g., Berge and Schmalzer 2025, this issue; Brewer 2025, this issue; Knott-Fayle 2025, this issue; Ma and Wang 2025, this issue), or how technologically mediated communication and networking promotes the flow of anti-transgender content (e.g., Channon and Mathieson 2025, this issue). Yet, each contribution interrogates some aspect of how this anti-transgender movement functions. Here, we review the context surrounding the politically heterogeneous, transnational anti-transgender movement, and elaborate upon how the current issue’s contents contribute to our collective knowledge.

CORE ORGANIZING PRINCIPLES OF ANTI-TRANSGENDER MOVEMENTS

Nobody’s calling to exterminate anybody because the other problem with that statement is that transgender people is not a real ontological category. It’s not a legitimate category of being. There are people who think that they’re the wrong sex, but they’re mistaken. They’re laboring under a delusion. And so we need to correct that delusion.

–Michael Knowles, Conservative Political Action Conference
(March 4, 2023)

We affirm that:

For the purposes of state/federal law, a person’s “sex” is defined as his or her biological sex (either male or female) at birth;

For the purposes of state/federal law, a “female” is an individual whose biological reproductive system is developed to produce ova; a “male” is an individual whose biological reproductive system is developed to fertilize the ova of a female.

–Women’s Bill of Rights, Women’s Liberation Front (March 31, 2022)

Across the country, ideologues who deny the biological reality of sex have increasingly used legal and other socially coercive means to permit men to self-identify as women and gain access to intimate single-sex spaces and activities designed for women, from women's domestic abuse shelters to women's workplace showers. This is wrong. Efforts to eradicate the biological reality of sex fundamentally attack women by depriving them of their dignity, safety, and well-being.

—Donald Trump, Executive Order 14168 (January 20, 2025)

The fundamental organizing principle of anti-transgender political movements is the belief that transgender identities are illegitimate and that “biological sex,” conceptualized as reproductive anatomy and karyotype, inherently determines the “correct” sex and gender a person should possess. Within this framework, sex and gender are both determined by what gametes and reproductive role a person “should” develop, with intersex variations and fertility challenges represented as “disorders” of “normal” functioning rather than legitimate identities. Gender identities other than “male” and “female” are dismissed entirely as fabrications or delusions. This belief is shared across anti-transgender political movements transnationally, including groups from the United States, Canada, Australia, the UK, Europe, Russia, Latin America, China, and Japan (Agius et al. 2023; Billard, 2023; Biroli and Rousseau 2025; Caiani and Tranić 2024; Corredor 2019; Edenborg 2023; Kawasaki 2023; Paternotte and Kuhar 2017; Zarembek et al. 2021).

This shared axiom allows for cooperation and collaboration between groups that are nominally antagonistic. The re-normalization of homophobia and opposition to gay rights is driven primarily by right-wing partisans and religious conservatives, particularly—but not exclusively—in the United States (Brenan 2025; Guillot and Coi 2025; ILGA–Europe 2025; PRRI 2024), and can be interpreted as part of a broader process of right-wing populist democratic backsliding that has occurred across many countries over the past decade (see Carrier and Carothers 2025; Riedl et al. 2025; Waldner and Lusk 2018). These platforms consistently include “anti-gender” politics, including opposition to “gender ideology,” which conceptually encompasses anti-feminism, anti-LGBTQIA+ politics, anti-egalitarianism, anti-abortion, and biologically deterministic positions (Datta 2021; Di Sario 2025; Graff and Korolczuk 2022; Hajek and Domrowski 2022; ILGA–Europe 2025; Paternotte and Kuhar 2016; Strand and Svenson 2021). While the transnational anti-gender movement began as a project of the Catholic Church that characterized deviations from cisgender, heterosexual, patriarchal nuclear families as antagonistic to God's design (Zengarini 2024), the movement itself has secularized over time as normative populist right-wing politics (for a review, see Graff and Korolczuk 2022).

By emphasizing anti-transgender politics, a “big tent” movement opposing the normalization of TGE people in civil society can be constructed that allows religious conservatives and secular anti-gender activists to cooperate with anti-transgender liberals, so-called “trans-exclusionary radical feminists” (TERFs), “gender critical” feminists, and atheist “skeptical” communities. Women's Liberation Front (WoLF) was able to work closely with Family Policy Alliance, Alliance Defending Freedom (ADF), and the Heritage Foundation despite their goals with regard to women's rights (in par-

ticular, abortion access) and gay marriage being completely incompatible. That these groups were directly responsible for overturning *Roe v. Wade* and heavily restricting abortion access in the United States was no object to continued collaboration (see Alliance Defending Freedom 2025). Cooperation between the radical feminist WoLF and well-known right-wing religious think tanks has been regular and recurrent for years (e.g., Norris 2021). This cooperation has included financial support from ADF to WoLF dating back to 2015.

Why someone believes that transgender people are delusional and illegitimate is irrelevant; the shared belief itself is sufficient for collaboration and movement advancement. Whereas religious perspectives argue that sex and gender are divinely ordained by God (Zengarini 2024), TERF groups present their opposition to “gender ideology” as radical left-wing “gender abolitionism” that will enable women as a sex-based “caste” to obtain and retain the “means of production” (uteri) within their framework (see Deep Green Resistance 2020). Under TERF frameworks, normalizing transgender identities represent a threat to women’s control of the means of production, and therefore it is sexist and dangerous to normalize mutability between sex castes. Other “skeptical” or “gender critical” perspectives instead represent current normalization of TGE identities as the products of adolescent fads or psychiatric malpractice through the use of conspiracy narratives and/or pseudoscience.

The importance of preventing TGE identities from becoming normalized was more important than all other concerns:

What’s at stake here is the end of women’s and girls’ existence as a legal class. Gender identity policies in public accommodations not only forbid lawmakers and the courts from seeing sex as an immutable characteristic, they redefine any separate legal recognition for women and girls as discriminatory. With so much on the line, it’s urgent to build bridges across disagreement and take action to protect our rights.

—Natasha Chart, WoLF

Fundamentally, it is the refusal to acknowledge transgender women as women and transgender men as men that the anti-transgender movement values above any other concerns. Research has even found that among people who consciously describe their support for anti-transgender policies as being about “safety” for women or “fairness” for athletes, transphobia explains their policy support more than any other stated concern (Morgenroth et al. 2024). That this shared perspective allows cooperation between actors who are openly antagonistic on matters of gay rights is a key reason why right-wing policy groups have adopted it, as Meg Kilgannon explicitly articulated at Family Research Council’s *Value Voters Summit* in 2017:

For all of its recent success, the LGBT alliance is actually fragile, and the trans activists need the gay rights movement to help legitimize them.

Gender identity on its own is just a bridge too far. If you separate the T from the alphabet soup, we’ll have more success. (Montgomery 2017)

That American poll data suggest that cisgender queer people see more similarity between themselves and cisgender heterosexual people than they do with TGE people, and that relatively large minority proportions support anti-transgender positions, suggests that this strategy has been particularly effective (Minkin et al. 2025), despite

most cisgender LGB adults polled expecting Republican policies to make life worse for them (Minkin et al. 2025).

However, this belief system is necessary, but insufficient, for engagement with anti-transgender politics. Poll data indicates that while support for anti-transgender positions is increasing across all points along the left–right political spectrum in multiple countries, the majority of cisgender people polled report little interest in and place little importance on issues related to gender and gender identity (Parker et al. 2022). These patterns suggest that while central principles of transphobia have become more socially normative over time, this process has not necessarily happened through laypersons placing importance on these principles.

Thus, while these positions are endorsable across the political spectrum, what factors shape how and why someone endorses and values these positions to the point of participating in radical transphobia remains an understudied question. Several contributions in this special issue explore these questions through the lenses of online radicalization and community narratives. Three contributions (Berge and Schmalzer 2025, this issue; Knott-Fayle 2025, this issue; Ma and Wang 2025, this issue) conduct qualitative analyses of discussions in anti-transgender social media circuits in the Anglosphere (e.g., Ovarit and Twitter/X) and the Sinosphere (e.g., *Douban*) to explore the content and discussions that contribute to community radicalization and narrative formation. Brewer (2025, this issue) experimentally explores the impact of edited visual misinformation used by “transvestigators” (conspiracy theorists that attempt to “uncover” and “expose” people they believe to be transgender) on attitudes towards TGE people and how these processes that exist in online spaces facilitate radicalization in people who consume them. These contributions explore how the interconnected processes of discussion and consumption online facilitate acceptance of transphobic (mis)information and increase support for radical anti-transgender politics. From another angle, Channon and Mathieson (2025, this issue) model detection of anti-transgender content on YouTube, potentially developing tools to monitor its spread.

NORMALIZING PROCESSES OF ANTI-TRANSGENDER POSITIONS

Other contributions in this special issue instead focus more on the processes that help normalize anti-transgender politics and beliefs within the Overton window of acceptable politics. These contributions examine how anti-transgender narratives are mainstreamed in local and national news outlets (Smith et al. 2025, this issue); how disinformation strategies developed in other political arenas are leveraged in ongoing litigation surrounding restrictive, anti-transgender policies (Corby 2025, this issue); and the central role pressure groups play in normalizing anti-transgender positions within legacy media (Gwenffrewi 2025, this issue).

Smith and colleagues (2025, this issue) and Gwenffrewi (2025, this issue), in particular, explore the politically paradoxical nature of anti-transgender politics: while the movement itself is politically heterogeneous, substantial political resources and influence associated with the movement comes from the American and British far-right (Datta 2021; IGLA–Europe 2025; see also Ma and Wang 2025, this issue, noting the influence of translated Anglosphere narratives in Chinese TERF circles). While Women’s Liberation Front (WoLF) helped originate the model legislation for sex definition

bills in the United States, it owes its influence to funding from the Alliance Defending Freedom (Gabbat 2023; Pope 2024). While liberal political parties (e.g., US Democrats, UK Labour) have embraced slogans and positions consistent with anti-transgender politics in recent years (Lavietes 2024; Thompson and Doherty 2025), they have done so following right-wing success at implementing and normalizing said positions, rationalizing that failing to do so alienates normative majorities (Holzman 2024; McKiernan and Zeffman 2025).

Thus, Gwenffrewi's (2025, this issue) study of LGB Alliance, a prominent UK-based pressure group who were influential in securing a Supreme Court ruling declaring that transgender people could not use gender congruent public facilities in the UK, and how it exercises hegemonic influence as a registered charity yields, provides key insights about how such processes function in media landscapes. In a similar vein, Smith and colleagues (2025, this issue) examine how anti-transgender coverage flows through local and national news ecosystems, expanding an existing body of research and public criticism which suggests that prestigious, traditional news media outlets (e.g., *The New York Times*, *The Atlantic*, *The BBC*) have played central roles in normalizing anti-transgender beliefs and politics (see Billard 2023, 2024). Both prestigious legacy media (e.g., *The BBC*, *The Guardian*, *The New York Times*, *The Atlantic*) and right-wing partisan outlets (e.g., *The Telegraph*, *Fox News*, *The Federalist*) alike have circulated exponentially increasing amounts of hostile coverage (e.g., Billard 2023, 2024). However, while right-wing outlets typically distribute overtly hostile, conspiratorial stories (e.g., grooming conspiracies, allegations of children "identifying as cats"), prestigious legacy media like *The New York Times* instead position their coverage as neutral perspectives on "complex" debates, presenting anti-transgender politics as an equally legitimate opposing opinion to that of the scientific community and TGE people (Ashley 2020; Elster 2022; NYT Contributors' Letter 2023). Such tendencies reflect a broader pattern; comparisons can be made to coverage of evolution versus creationism (Allgaier and Holliman 2006; Rosenhouse and Branch 2006), climate change denial (Imundo and Rapp 2022; Painter and Ashe 2012), AIDS denialism (Grimes 2019; Slothouber 2020), and pseudoscience linking vaccines to autism (Dixon and Clarke 2012; Holton et al. 2012; Stroud and Jamieson 2017). In this issue, Smith and colleagues (2025) examine the bidirectional relationships between agenda-setting national news outlets (i.e., *The New York Times*) and local news on these subjects.

This pseudo-neutrality is enabled in part through widespread misinformation narratives surrounding the safety, etiology, and outcomes of gender-affirming care (Billard 2024). Examples of such narratives include the concept of "rapid-onset gender dysphoria" (i.e., that gender dysphoria is instantiated through peer influence and social media; see Restar 2020 for discussion and elaboration), misrepresentations of what "low quality" evidence means in medical practice, insinuations that TGE youth will "grow out of it" if left to their own devices, and conspiracy theories implicating the pharmaceutical industry in intentionally pushing transition onto youth (see Billard 2023, 2024; McLamore and Leveille 2023; McNamara et al. 2024; Wuest and Last 2024). While some of these narratives originated from antiquated scientific models that have since been challenged (e.g., the claim surrounding desistance; see Ashley 2019; Karrington 2022), others originated entirely from within radicalized online spaces before

being granted an air of legitimacy through scientific publications and editorials (e.g., ROGD; see Kessler 2022; Restar 2020; Serano 2020).

All of these discussions are commonplace in news coverage surrounding TGE youth and, as Corby (2025, this issue) explores, in litigation surrounding care for TGE youth. Much of the United States now outright bans or criminalizes providing gender-affirming care (Redfield 2025; Trans Legislation Tracker 2025), and during the second Trump presidency, the Supreme Court has upheld these bans. Unprecedented action from the Department of Justice has *de facto* banned gender-affirming care for minors on the basis of these misinformation narratives, even in states with shield laws, through intimidating professionals out of providing it (Simmons-Duffin and Bolton 2025). As such, Corby's (2025, this issue) analysis of a specific court case models how these narratives manufacture doubt, similar to previous studies of widespread misinformation in other contexts. Nevertheless, while anti-transgender politics may be separate from the broader anti-gender movement conceptually, anti-transgender animus is an integral and inseparable component of the anti-gender politics that are fully integrated within transnational far-right populism (Graff and Korolczuk 2022; Marchlewska et al. 2019; see Datta 2021; Di Sario 2025; Hajek and Dombrowski 2022; ILGA–Europe 2025; Paternotte and Kuhar 2017; Strand and Svenson 2021).

ANTI-TRANSGENDER MOVEMENTS IN BROADER CONTEXT

Transphobia, homophobia, racism, sexism, and most other systemic prejudices continue because they are either explicitly or implicitly encouraged and reproduced within societal systems and norms. While landmark changes such as widespread legalization of gay marriage, acknowledging anti-trans and anti-queer hate crimes as hate crimes, expanded gender recognition procedures, elimination of sterilization mandates for said recognition, and depathologization of transgender identities all constituted systemic changes that expanded the rights and dignities of queer and TGE people, these changes signaled social norms without necessarily changing them. For example, research suggests that *Obergefell v. Hodges*, which legalized same-sex marriage nationwide in the United States, did not change American's personal attitudes towards gay marriage, only what they thought was the normative majority position within the country (Tankard and Paluck 2016). While polls suggested rising majority support for gay marriage in the years since, even among Republicans (Borelli 2022), these patterns sharply reversed when homophobia was re-normalized through the widespread “groomer” conspiracy (Brenan 2025) and, as of 2025, longtime opponents of gay marriage have initiated a process that could overturn *Obergefell v. Hodges* (Dwyer 2025).

Meanwhile, institutional actions favoring anti-transgender beliefs normalize anti-trans beliefs. While advocates in the UK have long decried close associations between the Equality and Human Rights Commission (EHRC) and anti-trans pressure groups, these associations specifically normalize and legitimize transphobic positions and narratives within the country despite these objections (Lemkin Institute for Genocide Prevention & Human Security 2025; Siddique 2023). Despite being small, non-expert organizations, groups like Sex Matters UK and LGB Alliance have been successful litigants in court and adept at signaling to both liberal and conservative cisgender people that transphobia is normative. The pseudoscientific narratives discussed in some

papers have been adopted as official policy in both the UK and the US following both the Cass Review and the Trump Administration's declared positions on TGE People. Such processes are likely to be imitated in other countries.

These trends mean that the renormalization and re-pathologization of transphobia will likely continue for the foreseeable future across the industrialized world, particularly if liberal political parties do not reject these processes. As far as the contents of this special issue are concerned, the collection overall provides both retrospective insights about how anti-transgender narratives and communities coalesced prior to transphobia's re-mainstreaming and some of the mechanisms through which that re-mainstreaming happened. While the strategies that they collectively suggest for preventing these processes from intensifying are seldom able to be implemented by researchers and lay readers, as they often are contingent on community moderation and action by platform holders, understanding their underlying mechanics can still be helpful for preventing new fronts from opening in an increasingly trans-antagonistic world.

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“No One Really Knows”: The Impact of Structural Ignorance on Transphobic Disinformation

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This article argues that transphobic disinformation is strengthened by structural ignorance about transgender identities and experiences. While disinformation is often defined as intentional spread of false information, a narrow focus on intent obscures the role of structural oppression in producing both knowledge and ignorance about transgender communities. This article analyzes disinformation appearing in *Brandt v. Rutledge*, a US court case addressing a ban on gender-affirming care for minors in Arkansas, to argue that anti-trans experts leverage gaps in legitimate research about trans people to produce disinformation. For example, fearmongering about the rapid growth of trans youth populations relies on the longstanding historical invisibility of trans people in survey data that assumes a male/female binary. Similarly, disinformation about transition as decreasing quality of life draws on pathologizing research frames that emphasize suffering, thus producing structural ignorance about transgender joy. Understanding ignorance as *structural* implies a need to shift strategies for correcting disinformation. While critiquing disinformation is necessary, mitigating the harm of false claims also requires grappling with the impact of oppression on “legitimate” knowledge production.

KEYWORDS transgender legal cases; transphobic disinformation; structural ignorance; queer data; agnotology

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A growing number of states in the United States of America have passed legal restrictions on transgender people, from bans on gender-affirming care (GAC) for minors and young adults to bans on access to gender-segregated spaces such as athletic teams and restrooms. The rhetoric animating these bans often relies on disinformation, such as the idea that there has been a “surge” of young people claiming a transgender identity. This paper examines disinformation that has become prevalent in anti-trans political rhetoric. I argue that transphobic disinformation is the strategic

mobilization of structural ignorance about transgender identities, communities, and experiences. Structural ignorance about transgender identities and experiences is produced unintentionally through mechanisms of research. For example, structural ignorance about transgender perspectives is produced in survey research through the standard practice of categorizing all respondents as male or female. Structural ignorance about trans people can also be produced as part of research about trans communities, by focusing only on negative experiences and neglecting to collect evidence of trans joy. Disinformation separates data from the context of its production, isolating findings of harm to argue that allowing fewer people to transition will reduce transgender health disparities. Therefore, countering disinformation requires not only less biased and more inclusive research but also understanding and changing the structural conditions that allow false knowledge claims to thrive. Unpacking the structural roots of disinformation is a necessary step toward mitigating the ongoing harms of historical erasure.

My research builds on work by McNamara et al. (2024), who analyzed disinformation in rationales for legal bans on GAC in the United States. They identified numerous disinformation themes and argued that these constitute a threat to public health. McNamara et al. (2024, 5) defined disinformation as “encompass[ing] deliberate use of false or misleading information or omission of correct information,” emphasizing that the difference between disinformation and misinformation is intent. My research extends McNamara et al. by not only examining disinformation (which appears to be intentional), but also conceptualizing disinformation as rooted in structurally produced (unintentional) ignorance about transgender people.¹ I argue that structural ignorance about transgender identities and experiences creates a knowledge vacuum that diminishes resistance to disinformation among various publics.

To develop this argument, I analyze disinformation in *Brandt v. Rutledge*,² a US court case on GAC for minors in Arkansas, as well as its appeal in the Eighth Circuit, *Brandt v. Griffin*.³ The case was brought by four trans youth, their parents, and two doctors, all of whom argued that they were harmed by the ban on GAC. The trans youth and their families argued that their lives were improved by access to GAC, and that they were harmed by the burden of travel to access care outside Arkansas. The medical doctors argued they were prevented from providing medically necessary care. I analyze Arkansas’ defense in *Brandt v. Rutledge*, which rested on several forms of transphobic disinformation. This tactic was noted in the 2023 Eighth Circuit court order:

Throughout this litigation, the State has attempted to meet their heavy burden by offering the following assertions in support of banning gen-

- 1 In extreme cases of transphobia, ignorance about trans people is created by force, as occurred in the 1933 Nazi burning of books at Magnus Hirschfeld’s Institute of Sexual Sciences (Bauer 2014). While openly transphobic actors contribute to the flourishing of ignorance and disinformation, I argue that anti-trans disinformation draws strength not only from spectacles of violence and hatred, but also from everyday practices of research.
- 2 *Brandt v. Rutledge*, 677 F. Supp. 3d 877, 2023 U.S. Dist. LEXIS 106517, 121 Fed. R. Evid. Serv. (Callaghan) 1768, 2023 WL 4073727 (E.D. Ark., Cent. Div., June 20, 2023).
- 3 *Brandt v. Griffin*, 47 F.4th 661, 2022 U.S. App. LEXIS 23888, 2022 WL 3652745 (8th Cir. Aug. 25, 2022).

der-affirming medical care for adolescents: (i) that there is a lack of evidence of efficacy of the banned care; (ii) that the banned treatment has risks and side effects; (iii) that many patients will desist in their gender incongruence; (iv) that some patients will later come to regret having received irreversible treatments; and (v) that treatment is being provided without appropriate evaluation and informed consent. The evidence presented at trial does not support these assertions. (*Brandt v. Rutledge* 2023b, 66–7)

My purpose here is not to analyze the outcome of this case, but rather to make sense of the false claims that were key elements of the state's defense. At the time of writing, the ban on GAC is blocked from enforcement. However, the case is undergoing its second appeal in the Eighth Circuit. While strategies of disinformation have (so far) been unsuccessful in this case, I follow philosophers B. R. George and Stacey Goguen (2021, 15) in “focus[ing] on the structure and function of the rhetorical ‘tool-kit’” used in producing disinformation. This litigation provides insight into expert rationales for bans on GAC. Exploring these rationales is important in understanding how these bans have expanded to 25 states across the US at the time of writing (Movement Advancement Project 2025). The false claims articulated in *Brandt v. Rutledge* are not unique to this case but demonstrate rhetorical strategies underlying bans on GAC across the US.

In this paper, I refer to false claims articulated in *Brandt v. Rutledge* as “disinformation,” though it is difficult to prove intent to mislead. Some expert witnesses and amici may be genuinely convinced that risks to children's health or social order outweigh benefits of transition or bodily autonomy, engaging in ethical debate about medical and legal understandings of acceptable risk. However, my analysis does not rely on proving intent. Instead, my analysis of disinformation is structural, taking institutions of knowledge production into account in evaluating the creation and spread of transphobic claims.

First, I develop the theoretical framework for this paper, synthesizing concepts from transgender studies, queer data studies, indigenous studies, and science and technology studies (STS). Next, I describe my research methods, including selection and analysis of *Brandt v. Rutledge*. Finally, I analyze disinformation from this case study, unpacking specific claims about social contagion and transition regret. I conclude with takeaways about the use of data in correcting disinformation.

STRUCTURAL IGNORANCE OF TRANSGENDER EXPERIENCES

This article builds on growing conversations in trans theory and philosophy about ignorance of trans identities and perspectives. In this literature, ignorance is referred to by many terms, including epistemic injustice (Fricker and Jenkins 2017), mystification (Serano 2007), data silences (Smilges 2022), a joy deficit (Shuster and Westbrook 2024) and erasure (Bauer et al. 2009). Each of these concepts points to the ways that systemic failures to create and share knowledge about trans lives perpetuate the dominant gender order and transphobia. I bring these works together with STS literature in the field of agnotology, or ignorance studies, to argue that ignorance about trans people in research and policy is a structural phenomenon.

Many works in trans theory engage with the concept of “epistemic injustice” to analyze trans exclusion from knowledge production in various settings, including medicine (Fricker and Jenkins 2017; Stewart and Freeman 2022), law (Aultman 2016), media (George and Goguen 2021), and education (Schey 2022). Much of this literature explores the impacts of ignorance about trans identities, using interviews with healthcare providers (Mikulak 2021) and trans people to understand “the experience of being met with ignorance” (Westerbotn et al. 2017, 194). Other contributions are more theoretical: transfeminist theorist Julia Serano (2007, 291) proposes the concept of “enforced ignorance,” arguing that cisgender ignorance is enforced through the assumption that one must be transgender to have interest in, or knowledge of, trans experiences. Serano argues that enforced ignorance produces “mystification,” an inability for privileged individuals to understand or relate to those with marginalized identities (292). Philosopher Blas Radi (2019, 55) similarly argues that ignorance, particularly in the form of universalizing statements such as “we are all trans,” harmfully abstracts the concept of inclusion from the material disparities trans people face. This body of literature primarily investigates “ignorance...as an outcome,” describing its effects on cisgender and transgender communities (Pape 2020, 222).

Queer data studies literature explores issues of ignorance, research gaps, and partial representations of LGBTQI+ communities (Guyan 2022; Keilty 2024; Naylor 2018). This literature brings to light data silences due to the absence of marginalized individuals in knowledge production (Fausto-Sterling 2000; Smilges 2022). Some of these works articulate a clear link between knowledge gaps and disinformation. For example, Hil Malatino analyzes trans and intersex patients’ disappearances in archival records. Malatino (2017, 169) argues that “racialized, classed, and queer absences and misrepresentations” lead to a fixation on medical transition procedures that distracts from “holistic approaches to health.” In other work on queer data, Paisley Currah and Susan Stryker (2015, 2) argue that population data is important in establishing a “national imaginary.” Surveys that limit responses to “male” and “female” shape who is seen as a legitimate citizen deserving of recognition and protection. In turn, survey-based research structures decisions about budgets as well as broader understandings of which identities are real or valid. Furthermore, as my analysis below will show, knowledge gaps and partial representations in LGBTQI+ data are not merely relics of the past but are reanimated in establishing baseline data for contemporary claims about how trans populations have changed over time.

Ignorance about trans joy can also arise from research that emphasizes oppression. Indigenous studies scholar Eve Tuck (2009, 409) describes research that centers disparities as “damage-centered research.” Tuck (2009, 415) argues that research about oppression in Indigenous communities is easily weaponized as disinformation through obscuring context: “without the context of racism and colonization, all we’re left with is the damage, and this makes our stories vulnerable to pathologizing analyses.” Likewise, while some organizations advocate for heightened visibility of trans identities in data collection, some scholars take issue with the partial nature and limited political impact of the stories often told with data from oppressed populations. Sociologist Laurel Westbrook (2021, 27) argues that “the profusion of narratives about violence experienced by transgender people has not been offset by narratives of transgender joy,” explaining that “this imbalance produces an unlivable life filled with fear”

for trans subjects who only encounter negative representations of themselves in media. stef shuster and Laurel Westbrook (2024, 791) relatedly argue that a “joy deficit” has been produced in research about transgender lives. The spectacle produced by shocking statistics about violence and harm in transgender communities reifies the boundary between normative and othered groups, naturalizing oppression as justified or unchangeable while also creating ignorance about the existence of trans joy. I argue that such spectacularized narratives structure interpretations of data about transgender people, as well as assumptions made about transgender people in the absence of reliable information.

The field of science and technology studies has also made important contributions to understanding ignorance (Croissant 2014; McGoey 2012; Oreskes and Conway 2010; Proctor and Schiebinger 2008). Madeleine Pape (2020, 222), for example, conceptualizes ignorance “as a process: as an act of turning away in a given moment when it was possible to know differently.” This approach works to de-naturalize ignorance, framing ignorance as an ongoing project rather than a default state of non-knowledge. However, understanding ignorance as continually produced does not mean that it is always *intentionally* produced. For example, using binary male and female categories on a survey produces ignorance about trans people, but may stem from a desire for simplicity or lack of thoughtful engagement with trans identities, rather than conscious transphobia. The STS concept of “structural ignorance” (Gershon and Raj 2000) emphasizes ignorance as unintentional, with a “deep-rooted structure” and “societal and historical context” (Juraku and Sugawara 2020, 1423).

In the analysis that follows, I use several key terms to characterize structural ignorance as it facilitates the spread of transphobic disinformation. These concepts include informational erasure and institutional erasure (Bauer et al. 2009), epistemically disadvantaged identities (Tuana 2006), and undoable science (Frickel et al. 2010). Public health scholars Greta Bauer et al. (2009, 352) define “informational erasure” as “both a lack of knowledge regarding trans people and trans issues and the assumption that such knowledge does not exist even when it may.” They describe “institutional erasure” as ignorance resulting from “a lack of policies that accommodate trans identities or trans bodies, including the lack of knowledge that such policies are even necessary” (Bauer et al. 2009, 354). Research projects, such as surveys, often assume binary cisgender identities (institutional erasure), resulting in a lack of knowledge about trans people (informational erasure). These processes of erasure are both structural and individual: decisions about research funding, curricula, and policy are made by individuals or small groups, creating a pattern of trans erasure over time. As I will show below, in *Brandt v. Rutledge*, Arkansas’ experts engaged in informational and institutional erasure to argue that there is not enough research about trans people, while also dismissing existing research projects as biased.

Issues of erasure are compounded due to the construction of transgender as an “epistemically disadvantaged identity” (Tuana 2006, 13). Feminist philosopher Nancy Tuana (2006, 13) uses this term to describe “individuals and groups who are rendered ‘not knowers’ [and] constructed as untrustworthy.” For example, the Fourth Edition of the Harry Benjamin International Gender Dysphoria Association (1990, para. 4.6.1) Standards of Care required two years of gender dysphoria for a diagnosis of transsexualism, proof of which necessitated either a relationship with a “clinical behavioral

scientist” for “an extended period of time,” or an “interview of the patient’s appointed informant (friend or relative).” This policy framed trans people as unreliable narrators of their own life stories, likely to say what doctors wanted to hear to access care (Meyerowitz 2002, 226). In *Brandt v. Rutledge*, Arkansas’ experts leveraged epistemically disadvantaged identities to argue that trans youth should not be trusted to know what is best for their bodies and futures.

Finally, some of the ignorance in *Brandt v. Rutledge* stemmed from problems of “undoable science” (Frickel et al. 2010, 453). STS scholars Scott Frickel et al. use this term to describe questions that are unanswerable because “structural constraints such as limited access to resources coincide with practical constraints” (Frickel et al. 2010, 466). Undoable science often stems from taking a narrow approach to a complex situation. Frickel et al. use the example of risk assessments as undoable science projects, as there are too many variables to efficiently determine whether drugs or chemicals could cause harm over a long period of time or at a broad ecological scale. Similarly, Arkansas’ experts raised unanswerable research questions about the safety of puberty blockers and hormone replacement therapy for minors, arguing that unforeseeable long-term risks of harm or regret render these medications unsafe for youth. Ignorance about the causes of trans identity was leveraged to argue that there is no way to be sure a person will not regret transition later in life.

Structural ignorance, in the forms of informational erasure, institutional erasure, epistemically disadvantaged identities, and undoable science, strengthens disinformation about trans identities and experiences. Systemic oppression of trans people impacts the production of knowledge, creating gaps that are weaponized to cast doubt on whether GAC is appropriate for youth. In the rest of this paper, I explore the role of structural ignorance in supporting disinformation about two topics central to Arkansas’ defense: social contagion and transition regret. Arkansas’ experts relied on institutional erasure of trans identities in survey data to argue that growing numbers of youth identify as trans due to social contagion. Arkansas’ defense also utilized research about disparities faced by trans communities to argue that youth will inevitably regret GAC because it lowers quality of life. While major medical associations agree that GAC is necessary (GLAAD 2024), Arkansas relied on patterns of structural ignorance to cast doubt on whether youth seeking GAC are actually trans, arguing that transition is unnecessary or harmful given the possibility of regret.

METHODOLOGY

This article presents interpretive findings from discourse analysis of the *Brandt v. Rutledge* case. I chose *Brandt v. Rutledge* in large part due to the abundance of documents that were available for analysis, including written declarations and oral testimony from expert witnesses. Because the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) is involved in this litigation, all the court documents are hosted on their website. The litigation in Arkansas has been ongoing since 2021, involving a wide range of perspectives and arguments, including amicus briefs. While there are other cases in other states, they are in earlier stages of development, with fewer documents to analyze. Furthermore, Arkansas’ law banning GAC for minors served as a model for the states that followed in

restricting GAC, making analysis of this case relevant to understanding similar laws in states across the US (Wuest and Last 2024).

In *Brandt v. Rutledge*, the court found that the ban on GAC for youth was unconstitutional and imposed a permanent block on the law. Testimony from some of the state's expert witnesses supporting the ban was found irrelevant and discredited by the judge. Despite their failure to convince the judge, I analyze some discredited claims as common examples of disinformation. The purpose of this analysis is not to understand the outcome of the case, but instead to understand these experts' "rhetorical 'toolkit,'" and by extension the rhetoric used in growing movements to ban or restrict GAC (George and Goguen 2021, 15). For each claim I explore in *Brandt v. Rutledge*, I open with an example of how this rhetoric circulates outside of litigation, demonstrating that this discourse does not have to be successful in every legal case to be broadly meaningful in society and culture. Eve Tuck (2009) demonstrates the circulation of legal discourse far beyond the scope of a courtroom, arguing that legal structures of problem definition and proof of harm are taken up by social scientists in the hopes their work will inspire political change. I similarly demonstrate that disinformation in the *Brandt v. Rutledge* case circulates widely through opinion articles, news summaries of research, and activities of the executive branch of the federal government, even though it was unsuccessful in this court.

To start my analysis, I coded court documents using the qualitative data analysis software Atlas.ti. I primarily took an emic and inductive approach to coding, which allowed me to explore the perspectives of different actors in the case, such as the judge and expert witnesses (Tracy 2013). I focused primarily on the use of quantitative data and statistics in supporting legal arguments, descriptively coding the information conveyed through numbers such as "population size" and "suicide." I also descriptively coded the concerns expressed in legal arguments, such as "risk" and "regret." I began by exploring differences between the "Defendants' Proposed Findings of Fact" (*Brandt v. Rutledge* 2023a) and the court's "Findings of Fact and Conclusions of Law" documents (*Brandt v. Rutledge* 2023b). These documents summarize the facts in the case from two perspectives: Arkansas' rationale for their ban on GAC, and the court's justification for blocking the ban. I followed the citations supporting these claims to code their source documents, aiming to unpack the methods and logics used in the construction of transphobic "evidence." I chose to analyze claims evaluating the state of knowledge and ignorance in trans health research, and in which disinformation was not fully corrected by the court.

I analyzed examples of claims typical to this case, addressing two topics which appeared in headings in the "Defendants' Proposed Findings of Fact" document: "The Transgender Population" and "Desistence" [*sic*] (*Brandt v. Rutledge* 2023a, 2). The claims I chose were supported by citations to verbal statements made by expert witnesses in trial. I followed these citations to code their sources, exploring their context and alignment with the arguments presented in written testimony. While I focused on one court case, the experts and claims I analyzed do not only appear in this case but are typical of anti-trans political movements in the United States. I center claims made by two expert witnesses for Arkansas, Mark Regnerus and Stephen Levine, who have been critiqued for spreading transphobic disinformation in *Brandt v. Rutledge* as well as in expert witness roles for other cases (Alstott et al. 2024; Caraballo 2022).

Mark Regnerus is most well-known for controversy surrounding a biased study of LGBTQ parents, summarized in *Brandt v. Rutledge* as a reason his previous testimony in another case was found “entirely unbelievable,” as his research “funder clearly wanted a certain result and Regnerus obliged” (*Brandt v. Rutledge* 2022c, 1028). Scholars have critiqued his research methods, analysis, and conclusions (Bailey et al. 2016; Cheng and Powell 2015). The Eastern District of Arkansas ultimately discredited Regnerus’ testimony in this case, as “he lacks the qualifications to offer his opinions and failed to support them” (*Brandt v. Rutledge* 2023b, para. 296). While the claims of expert witness Mark Regnerus were dismissed in *Brandt v. Rutledge*, his arguments are not only relevant to this case. Regnerus remains influential as a tenured professor in the University of Texas at Austin’s sociology department. His website contains a page on his “legal writings,” including six amicus briefs and three expert reports in addition to those submitted in *Brandt v. Rutledge* (Regnerus n.d.). One case in which Regnerus submitted an expert report was *Loe v. Texas*.⁴ In this case, the court found that Texas’ ban on GAC for minors was constitutional.

In contrast, Stephen B. Levine, a psychiatrist and expert witness for Arkansas, testified about his personal experience providing GAC. *Brandt v. Rutledge* is one of many cases in which he argued against GAC, among other work consulting for state Departments of Corrections about GAC for prisoners (Caraballo 2022; Stahl 2021). While other expert witnesses for the state, such as Dr. Patrick Lappert and Dr. Mark Regnerus, had their testimony discredited due to their lack of qualification, Dr. Stephen Levine was “the State’s only expert witness who has experience treating patients with gender dysphoria,” thus “the Court found Dr. Levine a very credible witness” (*Brandt v. Rutledge* 2023b, para. 291, para. 293). He founded the Case Western Reserve University Gender Identity Clinic in 1974 and has been involved in the writing of diagnostic criteria and treatment protocols for medical transition, including developing diagnostic criteria for gender identity disorders and chairing the fifth edition of the HBGDA Standards of Care.

To explore the structural underpinnings of the disinformation that these two experts perpetuated, I chose claims that cited data about trans communities. I analyzed these claims and their underlying evidence through writing memos on two key questions: “What information would correct this disinformation?” and “What allows this disinformation to persist elsewhere?” I found that disinformation often cites legitimate research about transgender people, including CDC surveys and clinical case studies. However, disinformation separates data from the context of its production, relying on longstanding structural ignorance to strengthen false assumptions about transgender communities. In the following sections, I provide context which corrects the assumptions made by Arkansas’ experts. However, the information necessary to correct this disinformation is often impossible to produce (historical survey estimates of trans population size) or devalued as not credible by Arkansas’ experts (findings that transition improves mental health).

4 *State v. Loe*, 692 S.W.3d 215, 2024 Tex. LEXIS 545, 67 Tex. Sup. J. 1421, 2024 WL 3219030 (Tex. June 28, 2024).

CLAIM 1: TRANS POPULATION GROWTH AS SOCIAL CONTAGION

In 2024, columnist Pamela Paul published an opinion piece in the *New York Times* based on interviews with medical experts, parents, and “detransitioners” who returned to a cisgender identity after a period of transgender identification. Paul (2024, under “A New and Growing Group of Patients”) argued that “the small but rapidly growing number of children who express gender dysphoria and who transition at an early age, according to clinicians, is a recent and...controversial phenomenon.” In the same section, she explained that some clinicians and researchers understand this growth “as rapid onset gender dysphoria, in which adolescents, particularly tween and teenage girls, express gender dysphoria despite never having done so when they were younger.” While the theory of rapid onset gender dysphoria (ROGD) has been widely critiqued by academics and clinicians (Bauer et al. 2022; “CAAPS Position Statement” 2021; Restar 2020; Turban et al. 2023), Paul relies on this concept and increasing numbers of trans youth to argue that these youth exemplify a new type of dysphoria which requires mental health care rather than medical transition. She argued that GAC should be delayed or restricted while professionals decide whether adolescents meet the criteria for this diagnosis, which is not recognized by medical associations or in diagnostic manuals. I follow experts’ construction of disinformation about ROGD and increasing numbers of trans youth in *Brandt v. Rutledge*. While Arkansas’ argumentative strategy was unsuccessful in court, the publication of similar rhetoric in *The New York Times* demonstrates that these ideas continue to circulate among credible sources.

Similar to Paul’s (2024) *New York Times* piece, Arkansas’ case in *Brandt v. Rutledge* relied on disinformation about transgender identity as a social contagion. Claims about trans identity as socially contagious were used to cast doubt on whether youth receiving GAC are actually transgender. Arkansas’ expert witness Mark Regnerus argued in a written declaration that “a rapid surge in gender dysphoria” among youth is evidence of social contagion and cause for concern (*Brandt v. Rutledge* 2021b, 4). He supported this claim through citing survey data which shows an increase in numbers of trans-identified youth. I argue that this interpretation of evidence relies on long-standing institutional erasure of trans identities in survey projects which assume all respondents can be categorized as “male” or “female.”

In this case, Regnerus relied on ignorance about trans population size to support his argument that contemporary trans youth are subject to social contagion. Regnerus argued that “a wave of rapid adolescent transitions numbering in the tens of thousands” is not a neutral change in demographics (*Brandt v. Rutledge* 2021b, para. 78). He instead framed this change as a pressing social problem, as it “has been accompanied by a surge of young people who have come to see that their transition was not the answer to their problems after all,” but instead realized their “gender dysphoria was related to other issues” (*Brandt v. Rutledge* 2021b, para. 78). Regnerus argued that these youth are vulnerable victims of social contagion, who must be legally banned from access to “treatments that will almost invariably lead to de facto sterilization” (*Brandt v. Rutledge* 2021b, para. 86). Regnerus constructed modern trans youth as markedly different from transgender populations of the past, for which diagnosis and treatment protocols were designed. Despite the large body of research on GAC, he claimed that “the science of transgender medicine—including but not limited to adolescents—does not speak with a univocal voice about the long-term psychological and physical ben-

efits of hormonal and surgical treatment of dysphoria” (*Brandt v. Rutledge* 2021b, para. 49). Here, Regnerus pitted “rapid-onset gender dysphoria,” a theory widely critiqued by researchers and medical professionals, against “gender dysphoria,” a diagnosis recognized by the American Psychiatric Association (Drescher 2015). Through establishing certain adolescents as exemplifying a new subtype of gender dysphoria, Regnerus asserted they “are not yet understood,” implying that they may be more likely not to be transgender and regret medical interventions later in life (*Brandt v. Rutledge* 2021b, para. 6b) This problematization encouraged urgency through implying that trans identity is both temporary and uncontrollably spread. A growing trans population would mean a future rise in detransitioners.

Regnerus used demographic survey data to support his argument about change over time in trans populations:

Transgender self-identifications have surged in the United States, and throughout much of the West, in the past 10 years. What had once comprised around 0.3 percent of the total population as recently as 2011 doubled to 0.6 percent by 2016 (with adolescent transgender self-identification comprising 0.7 percent). Since then, the pace of increase has accelerated further, especially among youth. Population-based survey data from 10 state and nine urban school districts found that an average of 1.8 percent of high school students identify as transgender. A study in Pediatrics, leaning on a 2016 statewide survey in Minnesota, revealed a figure of 2.7 percent. (*Brandt v. Rutledge* 2021b, para. 13; citations omitted)

Regnerus framed demographic estimates of trans communities as evidence of a growing problem, rather than a growing desire to measure and produce data about transgender identities. A declaration that there is a “surge” in trans-identified individuals implies that there is a clear baseline for comparison, a measure that establishes a status quo from which change can be determined. However, this historical baseline data does not exist.

Unpacking the methods used to arrive at the statistics Regnerus cited reveals the extent to which this “growth” claim is an expansion of data collection, rather than of the trans population itself. The earliest claim Regnerus cited was from a 2011 report by the Williams Institute, an LGBTQI+ law and public policy research center at UCLA. In this report, demographer Gary Gates (2011) estimated that 0.3% of the US population identified as transgender. Gates produced this figure through averaging findings from the 2007 and 2009 Massachusetts Behavioral Risk Factor Surveillance Surveys (BRFSS), as well as the 2003 California LGBT Tobacco Survey. Gates (2011, 5) relied on data from only two states to produce a national estimate, as he explained that “Population-based data sources that estimate the percentage of adults who are transgender are very rare.”

The next number Regnerus cited was from a 2016 Williams Institute report (Flores et al. 2016). By the time this report was published, the BRFSS question about transgender identity piloted in Massachusetts had expanded to eighteen other states. Williams Institute researchers used mathematical modeling, specifically multilevel regression and post-stratification, to fill in the gaps between these data points. The authors identified demographic characteristics correlated with trans identity in

BRFSS data. They produced state and national estimates of transgender population size through projecting these demographic trends to states where transgender identity data was not collected. The national estimate, 0.6%, doubles the estimate from five years prior, but this is primarily because the 2011 estimate was more conservative, given limited data collection about transgender identity.

The estimate of 0.7% of US adolescents identifying as trans came from another report by the Williams Institute, published in 2017 (Herman et al. 2017). This report also relied on BRFSS data, which had expanded to 27 states by 2015, illustrating the rapid growth of data collection over a short period. However, the BRFSS is only given to adults. Herman et al. used multilevel regression and post-stratification to estimate the number of trans youth in each state. They again identified demographic characteristics correlated with trans identity in BRFSS data, and projected these trends, particularly among 18- to 24-year-old respondents, to predict trans identity among 13- to 17-year-olds.

The 1.8% figure Regnerus cited represents the first time that youth were asked about trans identity in a national survey. In 2017, the CDC Youth Risk Behavior Survey (YRBS) piloted a question about trans identity in ten states and an additional nine urban school districts (Johns et al. 2019). In contrast to the previous secondary analyses conducted by the Williams Institute, this data was released in a report by the US Department of Health and Human Services and Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

While Regnerus' citations were chronological through 2017, he then turned to a slightly older and more localized survey, conducted in Minnesota in 2016 and published in 2018 (Rider et al. 2018). In contrast, the YRBS data was collected in a variety of states and school districts in the US in 2017 and published in 2019 (Johns et al. 2019). The jump from a newer national estimate to an older statewide survey suggests that the 2.7% figure was chosen due to its large size, rather than its relevance to trans youth in Arkansas.

Despite Regnerus' comparison of these different trans population metrics, the court decision in *Brandt v. Rutledge* does not discuss rising numbers of trans people according to survey data. The judge instead focuses on growth in the provision of GAC:

There is evidence of a rise in referrals to gender clinics in the United States in recent years. The increase in gender clinic patients is not surprising given the undisputed testimony that there is an increase in awareness of gender dysphoria and an increase in the number of gender clinics and insurance coverage for treatment, making such care available when it previously was not. (*Brandt v. Rutledge* 2023b, 8)⁵

The court decision did not provide a correction to bad data, but instead introduced

5 This claim includes a citation to testimony given by Dan Karasic, a psychiatrist, in support of GAC. Karasic spoke of his experience providing GAC since the 1990s, arguing that the recent rise in referrals is due to increases in “insurance coverage” and the number of “centers that are providing care,” as well as “more awareness in society of the possibility of getting care” (*Brandt v. Rutledge* 2022a, 78–9). Karasic further explained that survey measures of trans identity “are not people who received a diagnosis,” drawing a line between self-identification as trans and medical treatment of gender dysphoria (*Brandt v. Rutledge* 2022a, 82).

different data to contextualize the historical and structural factors underlying survey measures. The judge in *Brandt v. Rutledge* concluded that broader access to GAC increases its uptake. I similarly conclude that broader adoption of trans-inclusive survey measurements increases numbers of trans people identified in surveys.

While alternative stories can be told about the causes of growing transgender population statistics, there is no “baseline” demographic survey estimate for trans youth, because surveys have long relied on a male/female binary. For example, the US Census has never collected data on transgender identities, despite Census Bureau testing of trans-inclusive questions in smaller surveys (Edgar et al. 2018). In 2017, the Census Bureau reversed their announcement that a gender identity question would be included in the 2020 Census (Naylor 2018). Missing data about trans identities constitutes institutional erasure due to a lack of trans-inclusive measurement of sex and gender in survey research. Regnerus framed contemporary trans youth as new and different from previous transgender populations based on a change in how data about transgender people is collected, operationalizing ignorance caused by longstanding institutional erasure of transgender identities from surveys.

Historical estimates of transgender population size exist, but these are based on clinical data such as diagnoses and medical interventions which incorporate various gatekeeping procedures (Collin et al. 2016, Shuster 2016). These estimates leave out those who do not desire, or cannot access, medical transition, establishing trans identity as exceedingly rare. In one historical example, Ira Pauly (1968), a psychiatrist who worked with trans patients in the 1960s, estimated that the US trans population consisted of 1 in 100,000 people assigned male at birth and 1 in 400,000 people assigned female at birth. The following year, Pauly (1969, 56) explained that this ratio would lead to an estimate of “2000 male transsexuals in the United States alone,” but noted that in recent years, “the Gender Identity Clinic of the Johns Hopkins Hospital ha[d] received applications from over 2,000 persons requesting a change-of-sex operation.” Pauly’s estimate was based on the number of people who would qualify for surgery rather than the greater number of people who desired surgery. Archival research found that only 32 patients received gender-affirming surgeries at Johns Hopkins by 1972 (Siotos et al. 2019, 133). This discrepancy demonstrates the distinction between those who considered themselves transgender and the much smaller number of people who were able to access GAC.

In contrast to medical estimates, survey estimates present different challenges. Measurement of small populations is complex for broad population surveys, as the Federal Interagency Working Group on Improving Measurement of Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity in Federal Surveys (2016) explained: “it is labor-intensive and costly to recruit a large enough sample in general population surveys for meaningful analysis of these populations and their subgroups” (20). Methodological obstacles, as well as understandings of transgender identity as a rare medical diagnosis rather than a common demographic category, led researchers to rely on a male/female binary in survey research for decades, producing ignorance about transgender identity through institutional erasure.

The uptake of gender identity measures in surveys constitutes a shift in researcher construction of transgender identity, and a correction to “undone science” about transgender demography (Frickel et al. 2010, 444). Clinical estimates of trans-

gender population size reify medical providers' decisions about who is trans enough to deserve diagnosis and treatment. In contrast, self-identification metrics on surveys allow anyone, rather than only those deemed eligible by a clinician, to label themselves as transgender. Changing definitions and measurements of trans communities complicate efforts to compare trans demographics over time.

While Regnerus' claim about growing trans populations could be countered through baseline data on transgender youth, determining the number of adolescents who would have identified as trans on a survey fifteen years ago is undoable science, as no surveys were asking that question. Regnerus mobilizes this undoable science problem to argue that the population of trans youth is growing rapidly, and that this growth is due to social contagion. His rapid growth hypothesis implies deviation from a baseline population of transgender individuals, yet historical data on trans populations used a diagnostic approach, rather than a self-identified survey approach, to measure trans identity. While trans-inclusive survey measures have increasingly been adopted in US surveys over the past decade (National Academies 2022), such inclusion does not mitigate the legacy of harm stemming from institutional erasure. The longstanding use of binary sex categories in surveys led Regnerus to naturalize sex and gender as binary, framing alternative measures as biased and politicized. In the bench trial, Regnerus argued that the inclusion of survey measures designed to understand details about sex and gender are not tested and validated survey methods, but instead a case of "ideological capture" (*Brandt v. Rutledge* 2022c, 994). This term reflects his belief that gender is a political ideology forced on social scientists, rather than a phenomenon social scientists explore through survey methods. Regnerus' argument reveals the limitations of "more inclusive" research as a correction to structural ignorance. Because longer-standing knowledge is framed as more trustworthy, trans population data can be dismissed as a new trend requiring further validation. The assumption that trans youth did not exist until surveys began measuring them cannot be corrected by survey data alone, but requires grappling with the role of oppression in the production of knowledge and ignorance.

CLAIM 2: REGRET AND QUALITY OF LIFE

In recent years, transgender regret and quality of life during and after GAC have been important topics in discourse about the ethics of, and protocols for, providing such care. *Fox News* has published articles arguing that "so-called 'gender-affirming care'" has not improved mental health outcomes, but instead "created new mental health struggles and, for many, introduced suicidal thoughts for the first time" (Rudy 2025, 2024). The *New York Times* released an article about pediatrician Johanna Olson-Kennedy's choice to delay publication of a study on puberty blockers due to concerns this work would be politically "weaponized," or used to justify restrictions on GAC (Ghorayshi 2024). Under the Trump administration, the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (2025, 46) published a report demonstrating that trans people reported happiness after gender-affirming surgery, but cautioning that "objective measures told a different story" of suicide attempts, unemployment, and a lack of romantic partners. Similarly, the Trump administration ordered the National Institutes of Health to pursue research on regret and detransition (Stein 2025). Through analysis of *Brandt*

v. Rutledge, I argue that this focus on regret, despite transgender self-reports of satisfaction, stems from damage-centered research, informational erasure, and epistemic disadvantaging of trans perspectives.

Arkansas' Proposed Findings of Fact document claimed that trans people will come to experience regret because "gender transition surgery is correlated with a worsening quality of health" (*Brandt v. Rutledge* 2023, 22). While this example of disinformation misinterprets correlation as causation, I argue that this claim is strengthened by the prevalence of damage-centered research which documents harm in marginalized communities. Emphasis on proving harm creates a joy deficit in trans studies, as evidence of trans suffering is more prevalent than evidence of trans fulfillment and happiness. Arkansas' experts invoked this joy deficit in framing transition as inherently harmful to youth throughout the case, informationally erasing findings that GAC is beneficial. Levine argued that "the profile of the health and the social problems of adult trans communities are so problematic" that providing GAC to youth entails "putting them on a pathway to join that community of problems" (*Brandt v. Rutledge* 2022b, 792–3). The state's "Proposed Findings of Fact" document addressed "desistence" [*sic*], defined as "individuals who at one point had a gender identity discordant with their biological sex later desiring to allow their body to proceed through development consistent with their sex" (*Brandt v. Rutledge* 2023a, 3). Two self-identified detransitioners, Billy Burleigh and Laura Smalts, testified in support of Arkansas. Additionally, an amicus brief filed by Arkansas and other states opposing GAC argued that "no one really knows what percentage of children come to regret their transition" (*Brandt v. Rutledge* 2021a, 30). Prediction of which children would experience regret and later identify as cisgender was framed as undoable science. Because it was seen as impossible to predict who might regret GAC, Arkansas' experts and supporters argued that GAC should be restricted for all youth.

Importantly, a person does not need to medically detransition, or even state that they regret their transition, for Arkansas' witnesses to categorize them as regretful and irreversibly harmed by GAC. In his written declaration, Mark Regnerus described a Dutch case study to demonstrate that medical transition results in a lower quality of life.

not even all who experience regret or difficulties attributable to their transition will actually seek to physically detransition. There are many reports of individuals having regret but seeking to make the best of the irreversible changes and situation they find themselves in. Consider the pioneer patient of the Dutch protocol, "B," who was followed for 22 years until the age of 35. It was reported that "he indicated no regrets about his treatment." However, B "scored high on the measure for depression. Owing to 'shame about his genital appearance and his feelings of inadequacy in sexual matters,' he could not sustain a romantic relationship." One cannot help but wonder whether B could have enjoyed greater lifetime wellbeing if he had not been placed on the medicalized transgender trajectory at the tender age of 13. (*Brandt v. Rutledge* 2021b, para. 80; citations omitted)

Regnerus argued that B experienced regret, despite the statement that B "indicated no regrets about his treatment," due to epistemic disadvantaging of transgender per-

spectives. When trans stories are told by clinicians, ignorance is produced about trans people's feelings on their own lives and medical decisions. While Regnerus included a quote in his description of B, this quote comes from a medical provider; B's own words are not included in this frame (Cohen-Kettenis et al. 2011). In the bench trial, Stephen Levine similarly participated in informational erasure through framing trans joy as anecdotal when compared to harm documented in "the public health data":

I'm one of the people who say wait a second, one of the things we need to think about when we're considering giving hormones and reinforcing and supporting the idea that you can live a happy, successful life as a trans person is to look at the lives of adults who are trans. I'm not talking about picking out one person who's successful or five people who are successful but look at the public health data. The public health data which has been published in very reputable journals all recognize that the trans community is a problematic community in terms of public health parameters. (Brandt v. Rutledge 2022b, 793)

Levine engaged in informational erasure through asserting that knowledge about transgender happiness or success does not exist, despite evidence of trans joy, which I explore later in this section.

Stories of trans joy appeared in an amicus brief by "Elliot Page, Major Griffin-Gracy, Gwendolyn Herzig, Jazz Jennings, and fifty-four others" who are transgender, which was filed in support of the trans plaintiffs in this case (Brandt v. Griffin 2023b). Authors included celebrities, activists, pharmacists, teachers, and police officers. Their arguments focused on trans people's ability to build fulfilling lives, with subheadings such as "Amici Have Meaningful Careers and Do Important Public Service" and "Amici Find Joy in Family Life and Care for Others" (2). Arkansas' argument constructed trans success as anecdotal compared to "reputable" public health data. A sole focus on the partial perspectives provided by quantitative data and interpretations from medical providers, rather than from trans people themselves, demonstrates epistemic disadvantaging of transgender perspectives, in addition to informational erasure of existing knowledge on transgender joy.

The court concluded that "the body of medical research as a whole shows that gender-affirming medical treatments are effective at improving mental health outcomes for adolescents with gender dysphoria" (Brandt v. Rutledge 2023b, 34). Judge Moody compared GAC to other medical treatments, arguing that "The risks of [GAC] are not categorically different than the types of risks that other types of pediatric healthcare pose" (Brandt v. Rutledge 2023b, 35). While the court ruled in favor of the trans adolescents in this case, their view of transition relies on medical authority and diagnosis with gender dysphoria. Medical transition is not provided because it creates joy, but because it lessens the mental health impacts of gender dysphoria, further contributing to a negative framing of trans people as suffering.

Claims about regret and detransition rely on structural ignorance about what Levine terms transgender "success," or happiness. Shuster and Westbrook (2024, 792) describe this ignorance as a "joy deficit" that is "particularly prevalent in trans studies." While scholars work to demonstrate the impacts of transphobic oppression, such an emphasis on negativity in research has broad effects on how transgender people are understood. Shuster and Westbrook further argue that "when scholars equate oppres-

sion with misery in the study of social inequalities, this way of thinking becomes culturally entrenched in how cisgender people understand trans people and how transgender people come to understand themselves” (792; citations omitted).

Ignorance about the possibility of trans joy is structurally produced through a focus on suffering in scholarship, which Tuck (2009, 409) calls “damage-centered research.” Tuck argues that research documenting the “pain and loss” of oppression borrows its theory of change “from litigation discourse,” where harm must be proven for a court to act (413). The longstanding lack of governmental data collection on transgender people has motivated advocacy organizations to spend money and resources collecting data in studies such as the “National Transgender Discrimination Survey” (Grant et al. 2011) which aim to make problems visible to governments as part of a “data-driven decision making” approach (Tuck 2009, 411). Given the relatively limited resources of these organizations, the priority is documenting damage, producing shocking statistics that aim to motivate political change rather than nuanced portrayals of complex transgender lives. For example, the amicus brief filed by California and other states cites the National Transgender Discrimination Survey to establish that “restricting access to gender-affirming medical care significantly harms transgender minors”:

If unaddressed or untreated, gender dysphoria can affect quality of life and trigger decreased social functioning. The symptoms of gender dysphoria, and the compounding effects of societal discrimination, can also be fatal. One study in 2014 found that suicide attempts are nine times more common among transgender people than in the overall U.S. population (41% versus 4.6%). (Brandt v. Griffin 2023a, 13)

This quote makes clear that “untreated” dysphoria and “discrimination” can increase suicide attempts, rather than blaming trans individuals for their suffering. However, Tuck argues that damage-centered arguments are easily manipulated for disinformation through decontextualization, isolating individuals from the structural causes of harm. She states, “without the context of racism and colonization, all we’re left with is the damage, and this makes our stories vulnerable to pathologizing analyses” (Tuck 2009, 415).

Arkansas’ experts in *Brandt v. Rutledge* similarly isolate findings of harm and poor health from the context of transphobia, producing disinformation through blaming trans suffering on the provision of GAC, rather than structural and interpersonal transphobia. Levine argued that because “adult individuals living transgender lives suffer much higher rates of suicide and negative physical and mental health conditions than does the general population,” “‘affirmation’ treatments will increase the number of individuals who suffer” (*Brandt v. Rutledge* 2021c, para. 8i, para. 8e). The absence of data-driven narratives about trans joy strengthens the argument that trans health concerns can be prevented by allowing fewer people to transition. Levine obscured the role of structural oppression in trans lives, as well as the presence of trans joy, in equating trans identity with suffering. In Levine’s declaration, findings about mental health disparities and even fetishization of transgender individuals are isolated from the social context of oppression, cited only to demonstrate that people would face fewer struggles if they could be prevented from identifying as transgender (Anzani 2021; Reisner et al. 2015). While research does not demonstrate that greater access to GAC

causes greater harm among trans people, studies documenting poor mental health among trans people, even after gender-affirming surgery, are used to argue that this care has no benefit.

Despite the abundance of medical data about trans suffering, trans advocates in *Brandt v. Rutledge* frequently cite data that shows not only harm, but improvement. For example, the amicus brief filed by California and other states argues that GAC “improve[s] mental health”: “for teenagers and young adults ages thirteen to twenty, receiving [GAC]...was associated with 60% lower odds of moderate or severe depression and 73% lower odds of having suicidal thoughts over a twelve-month follow-up” (*Brandt v. Griffin* 2023a, 14).⁶ However strong the literature about trans joy and effectiveness of GAC, proponents of bans on GAC continually point to the past, framing trans suffering as longstanding due to its documentation in clinical research. In the Defendants’ Findings of Fact document and Mark Regnerus’ declaration, findings about benefits of GAC were dismissed as “anecdotal” or “too few and too new” (*Brandt v. Rutledge* 2023a, para. 146; *Brandt v. Rutledge* 2021b, para. 33). While correcting the “joy deficit” in trans studies is important in understanding trans strategies of resiliency, Arkansas’ experts dismiss existing data about the benefits of GAC, instead emphasizing longstanding “damage-centered” research on trans suffering.

CONCLUSION

Analysis of Arkansas’ argument in *Brandt v. Rutledge* demonstrates that disinformation is strengthened by longstanding structural ignorance about transgender lives and experiences. While these claims about rapid-onset gender dysphoria and regret were not convincing to the judge in this case, similar claims continue to circulate broadly in news stories, opinion articles, and policies enacted by the executive branch of the federal government. Arkansas’ experts relied on longstanding institutional erasure of transgender respondents in surveys to argue that transgender youth are victims of social contagion. Arkansas’ experts also relied on damage-centered research and epistemic disadvantaging of trans perspectives to argue that trans suffering is a result of GAC. Overall, these disinformation strategies are strengthened by the abundance of transgender research that occurs in the fields of medicine and public health. Case reports in which clinicians describe their patients’ experiences, and surveys evaluating surgery outcomes, attempt to isolate individual transgender bodies from experiences navigating structural and interpersonal transphobia. Because transgender medical research has existed for longer than gender-affirming social science work, such as trans-inclusive surveys and studies of trans joy, Arkansas’ experts produced disinformation through manipulating medical research findings and devaluing other projects as too new or too ideologically driven to be trusted. Understanding the structures underlying these areas of research and ignorance help to contextualize these attempts at disinformation.

6 The brief cites an article on “Mental Health Outcomes in Transgender and Nonbinary Youths Receiving Gender-Affirming Care” by epidemiologist Diana Tordoff et al. (2022) to support this claim, demonstrating that not all clinical research is damage-centered. However, the data is framed as lowering depression and suicidality, rather than increasing happiness or satisfaction.

Through historicizing ignorance and analyzing anti-trans disinformation in *Brandt v. Rutledge* and its appeals, I have argued that contemporary transphobic disinformation is strengthened and legitimated by legacies of structural ignorance about trans people. In the face of malicious, intentionally spread disinformation about trans people and GAC, structural ignorance creates confusion in the public imagination about what it means to be trans. If federal survey data on an identity enrolls that group into a national imaginary, the absence of LGBTQI+ identities in contexts such as the US Census undoubtedly impacts public perceptions of acceptability and legitimacy of these identities. However, as I have argued, simply adding more trans-inclusive studies today will not repair this situation of ignorance. Longstanding erasure creates a faulty baseline for any future comparisons.

While many researchers frame ignorance “as an outcome,” analyzing its effects on trans people, this article follows Pape (2020, 222) in investigating ignorance “as a process,” asking “what has prevented the broader recognition of...alternative feminist accounts of sexed bodies?” (Pape 2020, 220). Outcome and process framings imply different strategies for addressing ignorance. While ignorance as an outcome may seem simple to correct through education, understanding ignorance as an ongoing, historically situated process reveals erasures that lead to varied interpretations of evidence, impacting the information that various publics are primed to believe or distrust. Disinformation does not stem from a contemporary lack of data about trans people, but a failure to seriously engage with the power dimensions underlying the production of knowledge and ignorance. Understanding ignorance as structurally produced helps to contextualize the non-linear path of knowledge growth about trans identity, such as the late-breaking reversal of plans to include a gender identity measure on the US Census in 2017 (Naylor 2018).

More broadly, this work contributes to growing literature on queer data. While some works focus on the emergence of queer identity representation in data (Guyan 2022; Naylor 2018), and others approach queer data as a method of questioning various assumptions in data collection and analysis (Keilty 2024; Malatino 2017), this article evaluates the consequences of erasure and epistemic disadvantaging of trans experiences in data. Evaluating the causes and impacts of ignorance and disinformation can help to target surveys and research where data is most needed. However, attention to queer data studies also necessitates grappling with data as a starting point, not a political solution, as research requires amounts of time and resources that are incompatible with the political urgency of bans on GAC.

It is easy to dismiss LGBTQI+ inclusion in government data as a doomed project; queer people can exceed the official categories that are provided for them or strategically conceal parts of their identities in contexts that feel unsafe. Through historicizing tensions, inconsistencies, and absences in data about trans lives, this article argues that data collection about LGBTQI+ identities is important, but insufficient in mitigating the harm of disinformation. Even when data on trans experiences does exist, longstanding erasure of these communities strengthens false claims that trans identities are new, or that there is not enough data supporting the existence of trans youth. Data is one of a variety of strategies to use in resisting disinformation, but particularly among publics who are not comfortable reading scientific articles, merely linking “good” research about trans people does little to overcome legacies of ignorance and

research neglect. Historical narratives can help to unpack the reasons for oppression and ignorance, rather than naturalizing phenomena of trans exclusion as common sense.

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Automated Detection of Mainstreamed Transphobic Content on YouTube

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How has transphobia entered mainstream discourse and media? And can the detection of mainstreamed transphobic content be automated? We argue that transphobia on social media platforms has undergone a process of “mainstreaming” that actively transformed historically fringe and extreme narratives so that content no longer appears taboo or inappropriate. Consequently, the mainstreaming of hate speech presents unique challenges for its detection and removal from social media platforms. This paper introduces a content classifier designed to identify transphobic content online and categorize the emergent mainstreamed narratives that currently typify transphobic content. To test the classifier, we utilize an original dataset of over 49,000 comments from five YouTube channels known to post transphobic content and identify nine mainstreamed transphobic narratives that fall below content moderation policies.

KEYWORDS transphobia; far right; content classifier; mainstreaming; YouTube

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At the 2024 Paris Olympics, two cisgender women athletes—Imane Khalif from Algeria and Lin Yu-ting from Taiwan—were subject to a disinformation campaign accusing both of being transgender (BBC News 2024; Beacham 2024; Dunbar 2024; Li, Burke, and Abdelkader 2024). Both athletes had failed an unspecified “gender test” administered by the International Boxing Association at the World Championships the previous year, an organization that has since lost its recognition by the International Olympic Committee. Transphobic narratives of fairness and safety in women’s sport

quickly spread among competitors, media, and online despite neither of these women being trans. The media storm followed the concerning pattern of the year-on-year increase in recorded transphobia globally (ADL 2023; Higgins 2023; McLean 2021; Reid 2021; Squirrell and Davey 2023). The incidents in Paris also exemplified the intersectional dimensions of transphobic hate by targeting athletes of color. Transphobia disproportionately affects individuals with multiple marginalized identities along axes of race, gender, and socio-economic status (Colliver 2022; Gill-Peterson 2018; Koyama 2020; Upadhyay 2021). As the events in Paris highlighted, once the purview of extremist, fringe communities, transphobia has spread into mainstream media and conversation globally.

This article investigates how transphobia has entered the mainstream—in media, legislation, and wider society—by examining how transphobic narratives are framed online. The mainstream is defined by Brown, Mondon, and Winter (2023, 166) as “a normative, hegemonic concept that imbues a particular ideological configuration or system with authority to operate as a given or naturalize itself as the best or even only option, essential to govern or regulate society, politics and the economy.” Mainstreaming, then, is the process where movements on the margins attempt to move their ideologies from the fringes to the mainstream that results in content no longer being considered taboo or inappropriate as a means of “making their views more palatable to a wider audience” (Gallaher 2021, 224). Transphobia has become the focus of public discourse (Ashley 2020; Gambino 2023; Kessler 2022; Peterson 2021; Trinko 2019), legislation (ACLU 2024; The Trevor Project, n.d.; Trans Legislation Tracker 2024; Track Trans Legislation 2023) and increased targeting of trans people offline, including physical violence and murder (see, for example, Cardwell 2023; Compton 2019; Joseph 2022; Kelly and Rachwani 2023; Sasani 2024; Wareham 2023). While the LGBTQI+ community have always been a target of extremist hate and violence, there are relatively few studies that focus exclusively on the targeting of the trans community or how transphobic narratives are constructed and disseminated. Instead, transphobia is often noted as an element of gendered violent extremist rhetoric (Blee 2020; Hackworth 2018; Miller-Idriss 2020; True and Eddyono 2021) or a category of hate against minorities including misogyny, racism, homophobia, and antisemitism (Ryynänen, Kosonen, and Ylönen 2022).

To address this gap, this paper builds a content classifier using a Large Language Model (LLM) trained to identify transphobic content and measure the prominence of mainstreamed narratives. As transphobia often intersects with other forms of hate, we included other forms of targeted hate in our labels to capture this intersectionality, including Racism, Religion, Gender, Homophobia, and Xenophobia across a range of issue areas. As one of the main perpetrators of transphobic hate online are “right wing media commentators” (Squirrell and Davey 2023), we select five of these commentators known to post transphobic content on their YouTube channels. Prominent online right-wing figures are central in propagating anti-trans narratives, often framing trans people as a threat to societal values, under the guise of protecting societal norms, such as women’s rights and children’s safety (Ging 2019; Lewis 2018; Marwick and Lewis 2017; Mondon and Winter 2020). The selection of multiple influencers also highlights the transnational flow of ideas contributing to a global discourse on transphobia (Fielitz and Marcks 2019; O’Callaghan et al. 2013).

We utilized the language model DistilBERT to classify 49,000 comments. The content classifier identified 7,965 of the comments in our original dataset as likely containing transphobic content. We then conducted an analysis of these comments, identifying nine mainstreamed transphobic narratives: children, definitions, women's rights, mental health, misgendering and critiquing pronouns, transphobic terms, religion, detransitioning, and conspiracy. We find that the most common narrative within our dataset were related to children across three themes: child abuse, medical abuse, and education. The second most prominent narrative was defining the term "woman." The comments focused mostly on trans women and excluding them from being identified as women. We also conducted a comparative analysis of transphobic discourse being employed between comments and videos and network analysis of users in our dataset across channel to identify transphobic user communities and their online behavior identifying distinct differences between posting behaviors. In line with mainstreaming, comments rarely contained explicit hate speech or the use of derogatory terms. Instead, transphobic narratives were framed around concerns for women and children safety. The movement from explicit hate to threat-based narratives is a deliberate strategy by right-wing commentators to increase their appeal to a wider audience (Colliver, Coyle, and Silvestri 2019). Consequently, as seen in the case of the Paris Olympics, these narratives have crept into mainstream conversations, reporting and legislation and have become normalized in the public domain.

There are many practical applications of this project. First, this classifier contributes evidence of the scale of online transphobia and highlights the need to develop content moderation policies that are more nuanced than the current category of hate speech. Second, this classifier and dataset can help track and monitor transphobic narratives and identify how they are changing over time. Monitoring and deconstructing mainstreamed narratives are essential to curbing their impact, requiring both automated detection tools and public education to address the fear-based tactics employed (Squirrell and Davey 2023). Finally, this classifier may be a valuable tool to help researchers process large datasets that contain hate speech and other forms of extremism and reduce potential harm by reducing the amount of content researchers are exposed to.

The article proceeds as follows. First, we provide an overview of the concept of mainstreaming and its application in this project. Second, we outline the research design including case selection, data collection and labelling, and analysis. Third, we present the core findings of our analysis. Finally, we conclude with a discussion of our findings, their implications, and potential for future research. It is important to note that the purpose of this paper is to identify mainstreamed transphobic narratives and their dissemination online. While we do not draw on direct quotes from commenters throughout, this paper does contain terms and summaries of narratives that are transphobic in nature. This content may be distressing for readers.

MAINSTREAMING EXTREMIST NARRATIVES

As content previously considered extreme increasingly moves from the fringe to everyday discourse, the concept of the mainstream and the subsequent process of mainstreaming have been the topic of growing academic research. In particular, the terms

are applied to the increasing presence of far-right actors and ideas in public discourse and elections (for example, see Acha Ugarte 2018; Bleakley 2023; Brown, Mondon, and Winter 2023; Cammaerts 2018; Cornell 2018; Ekman 2022; Hainsworth 2016; Klinger et al. 2023; Stern 2022). Despite the increasing usage of both concepts, there is limited conceptualization (Brown, Mondon, and Winter 2023; Kallis 2015). Instead, the terms have an assumptive quality that the mainstream is the center, and that mainstreaming is simply moving concepts from the extreme or fringe to the political middle. However, the mainstream is not the binary opposite of the extreme (Kallis 2015). Instead, the mainstream is “constructed, contingent and fluid” and not inherently good or bad (Brown, Mondon, and Winter 2023, 166). Brown Mondon, and Winter (2023, 166) define the mainstream as: “a normative, hegemonic concept that imbues a particular ideological configuration or system with authority to operate as a given or naturalize itself as the best or even only option, essential to govern or regulate society, politics and the economy.” Mainstreaming, then, is the process where actors on the margins attempt to move their ideologies from the fringes to the mainstream as a means of expanding their appeal and “making their views more palatable to a wider audience” (Gallagher 2021, 224). Mainstreamed extremist narratives can generate exclusionary public policy (Marwick and Lewis 2017; Mondon and Winter 2020) and increase violence and hate crimes (Baele, Brace, and Coan 2023; Perry 2012; Zuboff 2023), while making it harder to challenge or regulate discriminatory content in public discourse content (Klein 2012; Sunstein and Vermeule 2009).

While mainstreaming can be an unintentional consequence of societal change (Rothut et al. 2024), scholarship focuses on the intentional mainstreaming of discourse by far right and extremist actors by “silently shift[ing]... the public discourse towards more radical positions without being perceived as doing so” (Hohner et al. 2022, 310). For example, mainstreaming can dissociate discourse from radical or extremist ideologies to make it appear more innocuous or respectable (Gerstenfeld, Grant, and Chiang 2003; Graham 2016). Selepak and Sutherland (2012) demonstrate how the Ku Klux Klan have softened their language and symbolism to align their ideology with “white, religious and political conservatives.” Klinger et al. (2023) found that the fringe political party, Alternative for Germany (AfD), used intermediary networks to adopt the language of extreme identitarian movements without affiliating themselves with these actors. The process of mainstreaming can also lead to what is called normalization: what was previously borderline, or unacceptable discourse loses its taboo status and becomes common sense, a legitimate view or politically appropriate (Krzyżanowski 2020). The majority of this work has focused on anti-immigration discourse that has become more common as a result of Brexit, the immigration crisis in 2015, and the election of anti-immigrant populist political leaders particularly in Europe and North America (Bleakley 2023; Ekman 2022; Gallagher 2021; Graham 2016; Klinger et al. 2023). Anti-immigration sentiment, rather than at the fringes of discourse in liberal democracies, is now a core tenant of policy for populist political parties and actors and found in mainstream media and discourse, as well as increasing violence against migrant housing facilities (Bleakley 2023; Cammaerts 2018; Cornell 2018; Graham 2016; Kallis 2015; Klinger et al. 2023; Krzyżanowski 2020).

Far less is known about the mainstreaming of extremist discourse against other marginalized groups. While literature often notes the targeting of the trans com-

munity, there is limited research that explores the dynamics of this targeting separate from other minority identities including women, Black people, immigrants, and the LGBTQI+ community more broadly (Colliver 2023, 412; Ryyänen, Kosonen, and Ylönen 2022; Tsirbas and Zirganou-Kazolea 2025). However, with the rise of social media, there has been a consistent increase in research examining homophobia and transphobia on online platforms (Sánchez-Sánchez, Ruiz-Muñoz, and Sánchez-Sánchez 2024). Research on the impact of online targeting of the LGBTQI+ community include the experience of cyber-violence and cyberbullying (Colliver 2023; Garaigordobil and Larrain 2020; Mkhize, Nunlall, and Gopal 2020; Pescitelli 2018; Rivers, Daly, and Stevenson 2023) and the toll of exposure of homophobic and transphobic speech and acts on the wellbeing of the LGBTQI+ community (for example, see Billard 2024; Colliver 2022; Goldblum et al. 2012; Grant et al. 2011; Marzetti, McDaid, and O'Connor 2022; Mizock and Mueser 2014).

One more recent focus is on the quantitative measurement, or automated detection, of online hate speech towards the LGBTQI+ community across platforms. There are several projects that specifically seek to automate the detection of explicit transphobia online (Chakravarthi 2024; Lu and Jurgens 2022; Sharma, Gupta, and Singh 2023; Valerio 2022). While the automated models are assessed for accuracy, they often lack qualitative analysis of the themes and narratives or theoretical models for understanding how this content has become more prevalent. By focusing exclusively on identifying transphobic content, these models can also miss identifying the intersectional nature of online transphobia. For example, in 2018, Michelle Obama was often the target of a conspiracy that she was trans, intersecting race, conspiracy theories and transphobia (Brandwatch & Ditch the Label 2020; Lokmanoglu et al. 2023). To be most effective, LLMs need to include other forms of intersectional hate in the modelling and be capable of identifying coded language.

On the other hand, there is a more qualitative approach that looks at the nature of transphobic narratives online. Anti-trans ideologies frame trans people as a source infiltration, corruption and intimate danger to generate what is often referred to as a “moral panic” (Higgins 2023; Owen 2022; Slothouber 2020; Walker 2023). Moral panics can be understood as social anxiety or intensified concern towards an outgroup “that is disproportionate to the threat that it poses and is amplified further by the media” (Walker 2023, 995). Overall, these transphobic narratives are grounded in particular ideas about sex and gender that justifies trans exclusion (see, for example, Bassi and LaFleur 2022; Billard 2023; Dickey 2023; Earles 2019; Shaw 2019). While scholars have categorized the themes of transphobia in several ways, they are embedded in a narrative of harm. First, trans people are portrayed as a threat to women and children’s safety. Trans people, especially trans women, are portrayed as predatory, actively seeking access to women’s spaces to do harm (Colliver 2021; Colliver, Coyle, and Silvestri 2019; Conway 2023; Dickey 2023; 2022; Jones and Slater 2020; McLean 2021; Squirrell and Davey 2023; Thompson, 2022), a threat to fairness of women’s participation in sport (Billings et al. 2024; Fischer 2023; Lucas and Newhall 2019; Pape 2022), and a physical harm through the provision of medical care to trans people, especially trans youth (Ashley 2020; Billard 2024; Slothouber 2020).

The second overarching harm is perceived to be towards (Western) society. The existence and acceptance of the trans community is heralded as a sign of societal and

moral collapse which lead to acceptance of other unacceptable behaviors such as bestiality, pedophilia and necrophilia (Colliver 2021; Conway 2023; Walker 2023) and is sometimes framed through a religious lens such as equating being trans with “Satanism” and conceptions of degeneration (Dickey 2023; Shaw 2019; Squirrell and Davey 2023). There is also threat framing that portrays perceived “trans ideology” as a contagion that links back to the first harm of the safety of women and children (Ashley 2020; Thompson 2022; Walker 2023). As outlined by Bassi and LaFleur (2022, 312), regardless of the core arguments behind different movements” transphobia, they understand themselves as on one side of “a global battle of ideas” in defense of an “essentialist story of womanhood.” However, the ever-increasing levels of transphobic content online globally present challenges for these in-depth and more qualitative approaches that rely on researchers manually reviewing data.

In this paper, we propose bringing together these quantitative and qualitative approaches to be able to better manage the amount of data online research presents. We build on both approaches to analyze online transphobic content by building a LLM capable of identifying mainstreamed transphobic content. In turn, this allows us to systematically examine more transphobic content across social media channels and across issue areas. We also expand on existing models by taking an intersectional approach that interrogates how various forms of hate—such as racism, xenophobia, and homophobia—intersect with transphobic content.

RESEARCH DESIGN

This project built and tested a content classifier capable of automating the detection and identification of mainstreamed transphobic content on YouTube. This section begins with an overview of the ethical approval for this project and the additional measures put in place to protect user identity. Second, we outline the choice of YouTube as a platform before outlining our selection of right-wing media commentators. Third, we outline our methodology including our labelling strategy and data analysis process using DistilBERT before introducing the analysis for our findings.

Ethics

This project received ethics approval from Swansea University (ethics approval number 1 2024 9331 8296). We have taken additional measures to ensure anonymity and reduction of the harm of transphobic content. We have chosen not to publish identifying characteristics of commenters including commenter ID or video IDs in our final dataset. Further, while we identify shared narratives among commenters across videos, we do not directly quote from individuals. This decision is in part to protect the identities of users but also so not to direct people to hateful content. Instead, we only connect comments and themes to channels (Conway 2021).

YouTube Importance for Right-Wing Media

We selected YouTube as a platform to analyze how transphobia has become mainstreamed. YouTube has emerged as a pivotal platform for right-wing commentators due to its vast reach, algorithmic amplification, and financial incentives. The platform’s low barriers to entry allow right-wing media to bypass traditional gatekeepers

and directly engage with global audiences, enabling the dissemination of ideologies often marginalized or challenged in mainstream outlets (Klein, Clutton, and Polito 2018; Lewis 2018; Marwick and Lewis 2017). Recommendation algorithms, which suggest videos based on user viewing history, can lead users toward increasingly extreme viewpoints, contributing to ideological echo chambers and further amplifying right-wing narratives (Ribeiro et al. 2020). Interactive features such as comments, likes, and shares foster highly engaged communities, reinforcing these messages and creating spaces where right-wing content is both consumed and propagated (Daniels 2018). Financially, YouTube monetization options—through advertising, sponsorships, and donations—allow right-wing content creators to sustain and expand their operations independently from traditional media funding (Tuters and Hagen 2020). This, combined with YouTube's international accessibility, enables transnational collaboration among right-wing groups, facilitating the global spread of ideologies (Klein, Clutton, and Polito 2018).

YouTube also has a practical benefit for online research. First, YouTube has an API that allows researchers to scrape data directly from their platform. This differs from other online platforms such as X that have revoked free researcher access to their API (Gotfredsen 2023). Second, YouTube allows the analysis of two forms of content—videos and comments—that allows researchers to examine the interaction of content creators and users (Google for Developers 2024). This allowed us to compare the content and nature of videos by our selected commentators and the comments left by users.

Commentator Selection

We centered our case selection on right-wing media commentators known for disseminating transphobic content. There are, of course, many channels that could be selected that feature transphobic content. However, as we outline below in the data collection section, there are important API and data management limitations that affect the scope of this project. We selected cases based on two core factors. First, right-wing commentators have been widely recognized as key sources of transphobic narratives and their dissemination (Oliver 2022; Squirrell and Davey 2023). Second, these commentators operate as alternative media. Schroeder defines alternative media as non-mainstream platforms that challenge dominant ideologies and bypass traditional gatekeepers (Schroeder 2018). Alternative media, particularly in digital spaces, cater to marginalized or counter-hegemonic groups and can range from moderate to extreme positions. Right-wing commentators embody this alternative media role by positioning themselves as anti-elite, and as purveyors of “truth” and “reason” (Frischlich, Klaproth, and Brinkschulte 2020; Schroeder 2018). This framing allows them to legitimize their positions while disseminating transphobia and misinformation (Dowling, Johnson, and Ekdale 2022; Hameleers 2020). Consequently, these figures play a significant role in the global spread of disinformation and conspiracy theories, including those that target LGBTQI+ communities and promote transphobia (Devin 2023; DiMaggio 2022; GLAAD 2021; Mayerhöffer 2021; Ramirez 2023).

We selected five YouTube channels for our dataset: Kelly-Jay Keen (formally known as Posie Parker), Matt Walsh, Ben Shapiro, Candace Owens, and Blaire White. We selected these channels due to their diversity in gender identity, racial and ethnic

Table 1. Summary of Characteristics of Selected YouTube Channels as of May 2024

	Gender Identity	Race and/or Ethnicity	Nationality	<i>The Daily Wire</i> affiliation	Followers (May 2024)	Videos (May 2024)
Posie Parker / Kellie Jay Keen	cis woman	white	British	N	120,000	580
Matt Walsh	cis man	white	American	Y	2.86 million	4,000+
Ben Shapiro	cis man	Jewish	American	Y	6.86 million	5,900+
Blaire White	trans woman	mixed race	American	N	1.42 million	349
Candace Owens	cis woman	Black	American	N (former)*	3.19 million	1,900+

Note. Owen's joined Daily Wire in 2021 (Murray 2023) but confirmed her departure in March 2024 after clashes with Daily Wire's co-founder, Ben Shapiro. The feud reportedly centered around Owens antisemitism and opposition to US funding to Israel (Pengelly 2024).

background, as well as their relationship to the conservative media outlet, *The Daily Wire* summarized in Table 1. While four of the five commentators selected were based in the United States, we also chose to include Kelly Jane Keen based in the United Kingdom. First, as a so-called “trans exclusionary radical feminist” (TERF), Keen's online footprint is entirely transphobic, and all their content is centered on trans exclusion. Second, Keen has an interesting interaction with the American commentators selected, having either been interviewed by them on their channels, or their taglines, such as “adult human female” being cited on the other channels. Keen's inclusion is an acknowledgement of the overlap between the American far right and TERF ideologies and their intersecting claims on this issue (Dickey 2023). As right-wing commentators and transphobia are becoming increasingly networked and global, we were interested if content produced in the United Kingdom was using the same or distinct narratives then their US counterparts.

Building the Content Classifier and Dataset

The mainstreaming of transphobia has led to an increase in online transphobic content (Brandwatch & Ditch the Label 2020; Lokmanoglu et al. 2023). The sheer increase in the amount of data that can be analyzed poses significant challenges for research design. Large datasets, especially those sourced from platforms like YouTube, demand extensive storage, computational power, and timely analysis (Nguyen and Liaw 2020). The potential vastness of data—including thousands of videos and millions of comments—can rapidly exhaust available resources, necessitating strategic data management (Bender and Friedman 2018; Menghani 2023; Zhou et al. 2017). Importantly, there are also daily limits on the amount of data that can be scraped using the YouTube API that need to be considered when determining the size of your dataset (Google for Developers 2024). In this methodology, we outline how we collected our data and determined the size of our original dataset.

DistilBERT

We developed a content classifier utilizing the Large Language Model (LLM) program DistilBERT (Sanh et al. 2020) for text preprocessing and a Support Vector Machine

(SVM) for classification. A LLM is a machine learning model that can analyze and understand large amounts of text data, as well as generate new content. We used DistilBERT to conduct natural language processing (NLP) where we asked the model to label our comments according to content. We selected DistilBERT due to its efficiency and accuracy. It retains 97% of the previous language model BERT's language understanding while being faster and smaller, making it more effective at processing large datasets. DistilBERT also has a transformer-based architecture that enables it to capture subtle nuances within language, essential for detecting implicit transphobia (Salawu, Lumsden, and He 2021). Recent studies and work on multilingual and context-aware models highlight DistilBERT's success in detecting both explicit and subtle hate speech (C. Li et al. 2024; Rajendran et al. 2022; Sofat, Gill, and Bansal 2022). Additionally, benchmarks like HateXplain confirm its effectiveness in analyzing complex social media data, making it particularly suited to detecting nuanced transphobic narratives in this study (Mathew et al. 2022).

To improve the effectiveness of content classifiers, it is important to train them with labelled datasets. Fine-tuning classifiers with annotated data enhances model performance by enabling adaptation to specific tasks or domains, resulting in improved efficacy compared to using standalone pre-trained models. Moreover, this approach facilitates task specificity, allowing models to be tailored to particular domains or applications and accelerates convergence, expediting model adaptation to new tasks (Rajendran et al. 2022; Salawu, Lumsden, and He 2021). However, due to the intersectional nature of this project and the limited computational research on identifying hate speech, we built our own schema of labels and manually labeled training data. DistilBERT performs most effectively when the training data is relevant to the project. Our training data consisted of 5,450 comments from a wide range of YouTube channels with a focus on videos that were known to contain transphobic content.

Dataset Extraction

To build our original dataset, we utilized YouTube API to scrape the top 1,000 comments from the top ten videos across the five selected channels (Google for Developers 2024). Where a video had less than 1,000 comments, all comments were scraped. This resulted in a dataset of 43,555 extracted via the YouTube API and 5,450 comments from our training data, resulting in a total of 49,005 comments in total. By prioritizing the top comments and their replies, the study focused on content with high levels of engagement, which is often indicative of deeper audience involvement and greater ideological influence (Google for Developers 2024). This approach aligns with previous research on engagement dynamics and content dissemination, which underscores the importance of high-engagement content in fostering online communities and amplifying extremist narratives (Mamié, Horta Ribeiro, and West 2021).

Label Selection

In line with our intersectional understanding of transphobic content, we designed our data labels to capture multiple categories of hate drawing on social media regulatory guidelines, existing research, and expert guidance. First, a thorough examination of YouTube's user guidelines was conducted to identify prevalent themes within the platform's "violent or dangerous" content categories (YouTube, n.d.). This was followed

Table 2. Summary of Data Labels According to Type

Nature	Target	Category of Concern
Cyberbullying	Gendered	Anti-establishment
Defamation	Homophobic	Conspiracy Theory
Harassment	Racist	Counter Narrative
Hate Group Promotion	Religious	Education
Hate Speech	Transphobic	Generic
Incitement of Violence	Xenophobic	Healthcare
Stereotyping		Political

by a comprehensive literature review on hate speech and extremism, which helped refine the label selection (Colliver 2023, 412; Ryyänen, Kosonen, and Ylönen 2022; Tsirbas and Zirganou-Kazolea 2025). Expert consultation with scholars in extremism research further validated the label choices, ensuring they reflect current online hate speech trends. Experts highlighted covert hate, such as dog-whistle rhetoric, and the compounded discrimination faced by marginalized groups like trans women of color (Haney-López 2014). This approach allowed the model to detect both explicit and subtle transphobia within broader discriminatory narratives (Collins and Bilge 2016; Frischlich et al. 2021; Lambie 2008; McCall 2005), enhancing its analysis of transphobic discourse through an intersectional lens.

We did not employ any strict definition of transphobia or set of particular transphobic terms but relied on the broader conception of transphobia as “any negative attitudes (hate, contempt, disapproval) directed toward trans people because of their being trans” (Bettcher 2014, 249). We included language and narratives that advocated for the removal of trans rights, misrepresentation and misgendering of trans people, abuse, violence, desired exclusion from social spaces, and other expressions of discrimination (TransActual, n.d.). We organized our labels into three main categories: the nature, target and category concern. The labels are summarized in Table 2 and defined in depth in Appendix A.

The model exhibited an F1 score of 0.922, indicating excellent accuracy comparable to other classification research (Nirbhik and Kumar 2023; Rajendran et al. 2022; Sofat, Gill, and Bansal 2022). The classifier identified 7,965 comments likely containing transphobic content. The following section categorizes the identified comments into the core mainstreamed narratives identified and measures their prominence in the dataset. To compare user comments against the content of videos, we also systematically reviewed each video. Of the fifty videos analyzed, thirty-three were identified as containing transphobic content, enhancing the accuracy of the broader findings.

“JUST ASKING QUESTIONS”: MAINSTREAMED NARRATIVES OF TRANSPHOBIC CONTENT

This section outlines the findings of our analysis. This section includes an overview of the transphobic narratives and language identified by our content classifier across our dataset. In the dataset of 49,005 comments, a total of 7,965 comments were iden-

tified as transphobic. We manually reviewed the transphobic comments to identify key themes associated with them. These themes are not exhaustive, nor mutually exclusive, as many comments encompassed multiple narratives. To determine the narratives prominence, we performed a simple count of the frequency of all identified terms (Appendix C) within our comments presented in Figure 1. Importantly, while the classifier was a useful tool, it was not flawless—some comments flagged as transphobic were not, and others with clear transphobic content went undetected. However, overall, the classifier has important potential for automating the detection of nuanced hate speech in large datasets (Poletto et al. 2021; Vidgen and Derczynski 2020).

Critically, the fact that the transphobic content identified by the classifier predominantly related to trans women reflects the broader offline discourse around gender (Marwick and Lewis 2017). This consistency between online and offline narratives suggests that online platforms, such as YouTube, play a crucial role in amplifying and normalizing transphobic discourse (Lewis 2018). A key observation was the lack of evidence used to substantiate claims in these comments, which mirrors well-documented patterns of prejudice where unfounded fears are used to marginalize groups (Mondon and Winter 2020).

While comments employed language that denigrates and invalidates the existence and experiences of trans people, there was clear evidence of mainstreaming through the absence of particular types of speech. Most notably, there were minimal calls for violence and reference to hate groups. Instead, there was a pattern in the use of the language of concern and care, often framed as users asking legitimate questions about safety. As demonstrated below, much of this care was embedded in ideas of gender essentialism. Gender essentialism—claims that gender is a category that is fixed, natural and discrete—requires an incorrect invocation of biology to claim that there are only two genders based on chromosomes and equating sex and gender (Atwood, Morgenroth, and Olson 2024). Gender essentialism is also grounded in stereotypes of gendered roles for men and women, including the need to protect perceived vulnerable groups. In the case of transphobic content, the perceived vulnerable groups are women and children.

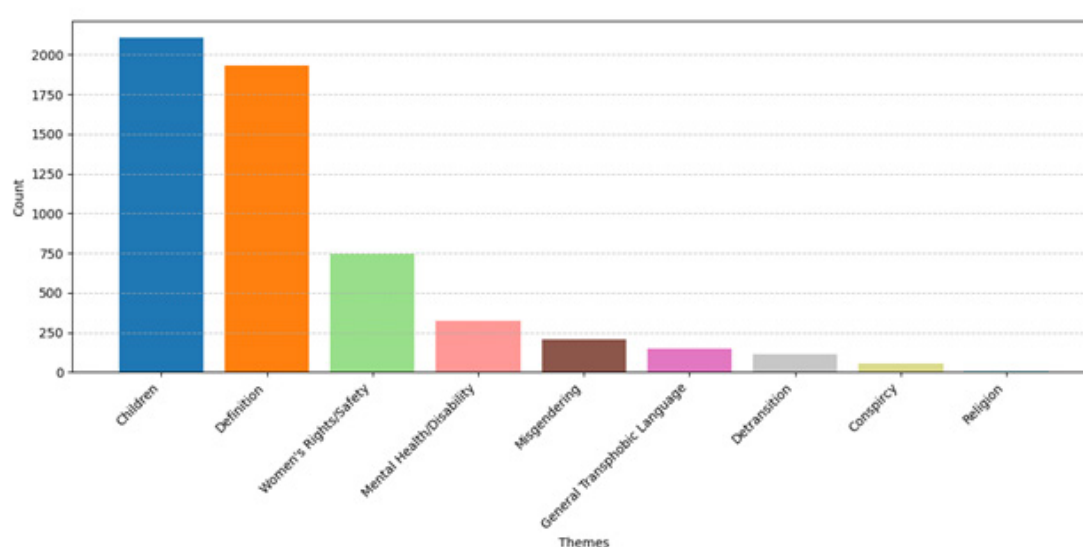


Figure 1. Summary of the number of transphobic narratives found in comments

Children

As expected, narratives around children, especially child safety, form the bulk of the transphobic content (over 36%). Children, as outlined by Dickey (2023, 36), act “as a powerful, deracialised, medicalised symbol, contrasted with the particular deviance ascribed to transfeminine people of colour.” It is also here that mainstreaming of language is most evident. While there is a section of comments that frame trans people as a threat to children and the provision of gender affirming care as akin to torture or mutilation, more common are comments that express opinions framed as concern—rather than hate or disgust—around children’s safety. These commenters usually seek to position themselves as concerned parents—for example, utilizing identity markers such “as a mother”—to legitimize their comments and do not identify their position as transphobic. Instead, as with comments surrounding women’s rights, commenters presented themselves as targeted and labelled transphobic for expressing what they claim as legitimate concerns (Colliver 2021). By positioning themselves as protectors, commenters avoid accusations of transphobia while perpetuating moral panic around gender identity (Mondon and Winter 2020). We identified three main themes among transphobic content including children: child abuse, medical abuse, and education.

Child Abuse

The most common narrative focused on children was child safety from abuse. There are two narratives centering on child abuse. First, is that trans people pose a threat to children’s safety. As has been well reported, transphobic language often claims trans people are predators and a threat to children (Locantore and Wasarhaley 2020; Stone 2018; Williams 2020). Commenters drawing on these narrative deployed common tropes including grooming and fetishes. Second, was child abuse by parents. Comments framed parents that were supportive of gender affirming care as attention seeking, including accusations of having the medical condition Munchausen by proxy. The comments implied that parents were either seeking attention for themselves or that they were homophobic, preferring a trans straight child to a gay or lesbian child. Commenters frequently noted that parents should be reported to protective services for child abuse and children removed from their care.

These narratives reflect a strategic use of moral panic to frame trans individuals and supportive parents as societal threats. By invoking familiar tropes of child abuse, transphobic rhetoric taps into deep-seated fears about child safety, echoing historical patterns where marginalized groups are demonized (Cohen 2011). Accusations against parents of seeking attention or preferring a “straight” child exploit anxieties around parenting and medical authority, weaponizing these concerns to undermine the legitimacy of gender-affirming care (Hameleers 2020).

Medical Abuse

Commentors conceptualized gender affirming medical care almost exclusively as surgical procedures or the use puberty blockers. While not all commenters were specifically referring to children when discussing medical care, they were the vast majority. Comments called surgery medical torture and utilized the language of mutilation and sterilization. In addition to criticizing doctors and parents for the provision of medical care, commenters also framed gender affirming care as a conspiracy by “big phar-

ma” for profits. Commenters reasoned that an increase in the number of children and adults accessing gender affirming care was a result of doctors wanting to profit from what was framed as lifelong medical care. Users described gender affirming care as an “industry”. Commenters also cited their opposition to puberty blockers and countered claims that the effects are reversible. There was no evidence to support these claims. Such disinformation not only delegitimizes gender-affirming treatments but also fuels real-world violence against medical facilities (Gzesh et al. 2024). Most recently, these mainstreamed narratives have resulted in the coordinated targeting of medical facilities that provide gender affirming care to children, including bomb threats (see, for example, Gupta et al. 2023; Gzesh et al. 2024; Yang 2022).

Education

As reflected in offline protests around drag story hours at libraries and the banning of books by school boards (Camiscoli et al. 2024; Coste 2024; Davis and Kettrey 2022; Ellis 2022; Squirrell and Davey 2023; Tylenda 2024), education was a consistent theme in transphobic comments including children. Comments centered on schools being a site of indoctrination and brainwashing, regardless of if there was any provision of education around gender or sexuality. Commenters accused schools of forcing teachers to accept children’s self-identification, often utilizing children’s playful self-identification as animals as evidence of children’s inability to understand their own identity. For parents that did not support any kind of education that featured discussions of gender, commenters threatened to send their children to religious schools or homeschool their children. There were also comments that sought to prevent anyone who is trans from teaching, working at, or being proximate to schools. However, comments also used this narrative against anyone that they perceived as progressive or non-conforming, often noting that someone’s colored hair or tattoos made them inappropriate to work with children.

Defining Sex and Gender

The second dominant theme in comments (over 33%) focused on defining the term “woman” as a tactic to exclude trans women. It was in these comments where gender essentialism was most clearly deployed with incorrect invocations of biology that there are only two genders based on chromosomes and equating sex and gender (Atwood, Morgenroth, and Olson 2024). Many also quoted the google definition of woman weaponized by Keen—“Adult Human Female”—as means of exclusion. This focus on definitions was also likely heightened by the inclusion of comments from Matt Walsh’s channel as several of their top ten videos are excerpts from his documentary titled, “What is a Woman?” This narrative also focused on reproduction: users’ definition of women relies on the fact that women can fall pregnant. While many commenters claim that this does not exclude women who face fertility issues, they claim that it does exclude trans women. Comments also sought to make the distinction between cis people and trans people using terms such as “real men” or “real women” that reinforced narratives of exclusion.

Gender essentialism also extends beyond beliefs about biology to the roles of gender within society. Discussions of defining women were inherently entangled with stereotypes of women as mothers and carers. While trans women and their exclusion

were the core target of these comments, they also excluded anyone that commenters perceived as falling outside of these gendered stereotypes.

Women's Rights and Safety

Trans exclusionary radical feminist (TERF) discourse was prevalent in the dataset at almost 13% of labelled comments, particularly through narratives that positioned trans women as a threat to cis women's rights. This reflects a broader strategy within TERF ideology, which frames trans inclusion as undermining the safety and rights of cis women (Hines 2018; Pearce 2018). The recurring use of Keen's slogan "Let Women Speak" in comments underscores how TERF discourse utilizes language of victimhood to claim that cis women are being silenced. In these comments, we observe what Thurlow describes as a "linguistic pivot from 'anti-trans' to 'pro-woman'" (Thurlow 2024). This tactic capitalizes on historical feminist struggles for women's spaces to justify exclusion (Lamble 2008). The division of comments into women's spaces, appropriation, and sports exemplifies how TERF rhetoric selectively focuses on areas where cis women's safety and identity are portrayed as most vulnerable (Mason 2023). As seen in the comments about children, rather than expressed through vitriol or hatred, trans-exclusion was made to appear more acceptable by justifying comments through the language of safety and fairness.

Women Only Spaces

Transphobic comments frequently centered on the inclusion of trans women in women-only spaces, such as bathrooms, changing rooms, hospital wards, and prisons. These comments often portrayed trans women as predatory men attempting to infiltrate these spaces to harm cis women, a narrative rooted in fear and moral panic rather than evidence (Gwenffrewi 2022; Quatrini 2022). Citing instances of trans women in prisons convicted of sexual offenses, commenters framed women-only spaces as hard-fought protections that are now under threat from trans inclusion. This fear-based rhetoric, which has gained traction through prominent figures like J.K. Rowling, reinforces exclusionary ideologies (Pearce 2018). Such narratives, although disconnected from statistical reality, draw on misinformation or hypothetical scenarios to exacerbate the idea of an imagined threat.

Appropriation

Another prominent narrative framed trans women as appropriating womanhood, with commenters arguing that trans women disrespected cis women's experiences, particularly in relation to reproductive health, motherhood, and gender-based discrimination. This narrative reinforced biological essentialism, the idea that womanhood is inherently tied to biology, by excluding trans women from the category of "real" women (Bettcher 2014; Hines 2018). Commenters also likened trans women to impersonators, reducing their identities to "fancy dress" or performance. Additionally, resistance to gender-inclusive terms like "menstruators" or "birthing people" illustrated a perception that expanding gender language diminishes cis women's experiences (Ging 2019). This rhetoric, which invalidates trans identities, fuels a zero-sum approach to gender rights, where any advancement for trans people is falsely seen as a threat to cis women.

Sport

Unsurprisingly, the participation of trans women in sports is also a key narrative within our dataset. While some commenters noted that there could be a third category within sports to include trans women and maintain fairness, most saw trans women's participation as an attempt for men to infiltrate women's sports. Like the controversy around Khelif and Lin in the Paris Olympics, comments framed these discussions around issues of equality and fairness. A core element of gender essentialism as applied to trans participation in sport is the concept of "fairness." These arguments rely on perceived physical differences between cis men and women and the supposed "biological advantage" of male athletes (Atwood, Morgenroth, and Olson 2024). The infiltration of these ideas into the mainstream is clear in reporting and legislation. For example, as of 2023, there were at least 60 bills across the United States dedicated to excluding trans people from participating in sports with a focus on banning trans women from competing in women's sport (Atwood, Morgenroth, and Olson 2024).

Mental Health and Disability

A clear theme within the comments was equating of being trans with mental health and disabilities (over 5% of labelled data). Comments that link being trans to mental health and disability pathologizes trans identities, framing them as psychological disorders and comments claim to be motivated by care and concern (Frischlich et al. 2021). Commenters often used derogatory language such as "crazy" or "insane" to imply that being trans was the result of a mental health condition. There were also frequent references to trans young people as "needing help" or being narcissists and attention seekers. The frequency of this theme indicates that it needs further exploration. For example, one channel connected autism spectrum disorder and being trans in both the video and comments. However, many of these comments, without the context of the video will not be identified as transphobic by a classifier.

Misgendering or Critiquing Pronouns

Comments also deliberately misgendered trans people or mocked the use of pronouns. However, this was the most difficult form of transphobic language to label as it usually relies on the context of the video. Consequently, these comments only make up 3.5% of the data. When misgendering was explicit, it was usually the use of two pronouns as a single word—for example "heshe"—or the use of combination of pronouns to denote that the commenter disagrees with someone's preferred pronouns—"he/she" or "his/her." Commenters also mocked the use of pronouns by self-identifying as objects or people and making up pronouns. For example, one commenter claimed they identified as an ambulance and used the pronouns woo/woo or Michael Jackson and hee/haa. Misgendering serves as a direct and pervasive tool of transphobia, with the data reflecting the frequent use of incorrect or derogatory pronouns to dehumanize trans individuals (Lamble 2008).

Another common narrative was dismissing trans people's identity based on their conformity to gendered stereotypes. For example, Blair White, a trans woman, often criticizes trans people for their appearance as either cheap or uncommitted to appearing like a "real woman," or in the case of nonbinary people, not being trans. This view reflects contestations within certain parts of the trans community around who

counts as trans (Jacobsen, Devor, and Hodge 2022). There was also hyper fixation on body hair among comments, especially trans nonbinary people or trans women who choose to have facial hair. These comments were often mocking and aimed to discredit individuals gender identity. As outlined by Billard (2019, 464), this notion of “passing” presents a double-edged sword for the trans community: while “passing” legitimates a transgender person’s claim to their gender identity... [it] also renders them more malicious in their deception.”

Religion

Religious-based transphobia often invokes theological justifications for rejecting trans identities (Campbell, Hinton, and Anderson 2019; Crenshaw 1989). There were two core themes around transphobia and religion within comments that featured in 3.45% of our frequency count. The first was the denial of the existence of trans people under the premise that God created people as man and woman. Commenters criticized those who “play god” or violate God’s plan by not identifying with the sex that they were assigned at birth. Narratives relied on the idea that God creates everyone perfectly and framed being trans as a violation of the bible. Most of these comments referenced a Christian God with only two references to Islam in the comments identified as transphobic. Second was the use of religious language to denigrate the trans community. Narratives included references to the trans community as a cult, a creation of the devil, Luciferian, and demons. There were also a limited number of references to activists and trans individuals belonging in hell and calls to “cast them out.” As highlighted by Blyth and McRae, grounding transphobia in theological and biblical languages creates a “dangerous power to grant divine mandate to transphobia and trans-exclusionary practices” (Blyth and McRae 2018, 113).

Transphobic Terms

Comments also contained transphobia, however, these unexpectedly only appeared in around 150 comments (2.5%). There are, however, issues with using these terms to identify transphobic content. Many historically transphobic terms are used within the trans community as a form of reclamation in a way that is not necessarily derogatory (Edmondson 2021). The classification of these terms as transphobic risks restricting self-expression within the trans community. There are some terms—such as “trans-trender” or “transgenderism”—that were more clearly indicate transphobic content. One of the strongest indications of the mainstreaming of transphobic content is the lack of explicit transphobic content—especially in contrast to the other narratives identified.

Detransitioning

Comments also discussed detransitioning (just under 2% of terms analyzed). These comments largely came from a video with Blaire White who interviewed someone who identified as having detransitioned. These comments were framed as concern for the safety and wellbeing of those who “make a mistake” in their decision to transition and that people—especially young people—will regret their decisions in the future. However, narratives were usually motivated by the perceived increase in people identifying as trans being driven by a “trend” and not gender dysphoria. These comments do

not usually deny the existence of gender dysphoria—especially those commenting on Blaire White’s videos who openly discusses her own experiences of gender dysphoria—but that most individuals are transitioning for social reasons including to fit in or because of social exclusion. One commenter compared being trans to goths: where social outcasts used to become goths, they were now choosing to become trans. Those who detransition are often used by commentators as evidence of the illegitimacy of trans people and the inherent risks of gender affirming care. These narratives contradict research on the experiences of individuals that receive gender affirming care that suggest an extremely low level of regret among trans patients after gender affirming surgery (Bustos et al. 2021), improved health outcomes for trans people (Swan et al. 2023), and that those who do detransition often do not regret accessing gender affirming health care (MacKinnon et al. 2022). What was interesting is that these comments did not use the language of “Rapid Onset Gender Dysphoria” or ROGD made popular in the much-critiqued paper published by Littman and later the book by Abigail Shrier that galvanized the anti-trans movement (Ashley 2020; Littman 2018; Jordan B Peterson Clips 2021; Restar 2020). In line with mainstreaming, this debate has moved away from an original source, but the ideas continue to be reflected in discourse.

Conspiracy

Zuboff highlights that conspiracy theories serve to radicalize public discourse by linking marginalized groups to broader fears of societal collapse or manipulation (Zuboff 2019). Despite our labelled data containing a number of comments containing conspiracy theories including Joe Biden being the puppet of Obama, that China was responsible for political discontent within America, and a collection of references to global control, including the Great Reset Theory, the World Economic Forum, and antisemitic references to media and Hollywood, the classifier performed poorly in identifying comments that contained transphobia and conspiracy theories (falling under one percent in our count). Instead, the classifier identified comments that implied that being trans or the trans community was itself a conspiracy. The classifier identified comments containing terms such as “control”, “follow the money,” “wake up,” and “lie” as containing a conspiracy. There were a limited number of comments identified that contained references to actual conspiracy theories, including (but not limited to) references to the increased visibility of trans people and rights being a tool of distraction by global elites—a global syndicate, the UN, antifa, government, the left—who are pursuing depopulation, a ploy by big pharma for profits, and promoting transhumanism.

Comparative Analysis of Videos and Comments

In addition to examining the comments of each video, we also reviewed the video content itself to see if video content and comments deviated in content. What we found was a more strategic deployment of transphobic content and language within the videos. Videos often use moderated language, such as “predator,” avoiding more explicit terms like “pervert” or “pedophile” commonly seen in comments. The absence of slurs in videos highlights creators’ efforts to evade deplatforming, while still engaging fringe followers through coded language and allowing the comment section to carry more direct hate speech (Ging 2019; Nagle 2017). In contrast, the anonymity of comment sections enables more explicit transphobia, creating spaces for unfiltered expressions of hate. This dual strategy—sanitized narratives in videos and more overt

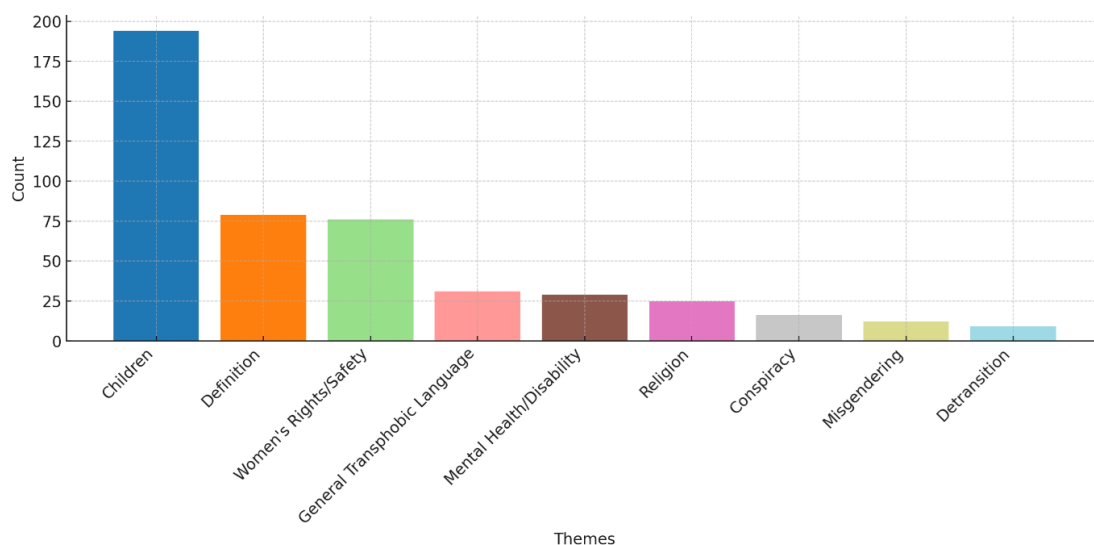


Figure 2. Frequency of transphobic narratives in selected videos

hate in comments—facilitates the mainstreaming of transphobia, normalizing discriminatory discourse without immediate repercussions (Frischlich et al. 2021). This contributes to the broader embedding of transphobic ideologies into public discourse under a guise of legitimacy (Zuboff 2019).

This approach is likely motivated by a desire to broaden appeal and maintain monetization through sponsorships, given that overt hate speech risks demonetization or removal (Lewis 2018; Marwick and Lewis 2017). In many cases, transphobic content was reduced to a single, subtle phrase embedded within longer videos, allowing creators to convey their messages while minimizing the risk of censorship. Additionally, some creators pre-emptively limit the content they post on YouTube, opting to upload more explicit material to alternative platforms, framing this as a response to alleged censorship and suppression of free speech. This narrative of repression serves to galvanize their audience while maintaining plausible deniability on mainstream platforms (Frischlich et al. 2021).

DISCUSSION

As stated by Sadjadi, “Transgender people are a lightning rod for fearmongering” (Sadjadi 2020). The transphobic comments and narratives identified within our dataset contain a spectrum of framing from care—that situate their concerns in the protection of other vulnerable groups—to explicit hate speech but almost all comments were based in mis- or disinformation. Most comments were framed in protective or care-centered language. Commenters claimed to just want to be able to ask questions and discuss the potential harm—even if based in disinformation—of the increased visibility of trans people. In line with mainstreaming, few comments were captured in our first category our labels—nature of speech—including cyberbullying, defamation, harassment, promotion of hate groups, hate speech or incitement of violence. The only label in this category that frequently applied was stereotyping. This stereotyping did not only apply to the trans community but also the role of women and men, femininity and masculinity.

This finding can be explained in one of two ways. First, YouTube is effectively moderating these types of speech or, second, commentators are actively self-censoring and using dog-whistles and coded language to avoid content moderation.

While the narratives identified were not surprising—these reflect broader narratives found in mainstream media and reporting on transphobia—what was notable was the limited comments that were identified as both transphobic and racist or xenophobic. It is possible that racist and xenophobic comments are also employing the same strategies to avoid detection and appeal to a wider audience and the classifier—being trained more prominently on identifying transphobia—struggled to identify more than one category of mainstreamed hate. As this data was collected in May 2024, it would also be interesting to see how the prominence of racist and xenophobic narratives has changed in response to comments made during the 2024 US Presidential campaign. Trump's claim that Vice President Harris “wants to do transgender operations on illegal aliens that are in prison” along with other anti-trans rhetoric risks increasing transphobia further (PBS 2024).

What was also notable is that while our labels covered some of the narratives including healthcare and education that we identified as part of our narratives, they did not match our overarching narrative themes. The identification of these narratives provides an opportunity to further refine our labels for more accurate comment categorization in the future.

CONCLUSION

This paper makes important contributions to understanding the process of mainstreaming transphobia and understanding the spread of transphobic narratives in media, legislation and broader society. As aptly summarized by Aly, studies examining the impact and role of online terrorist and violent extremist content (TVEC) are “often based on the assumption that the violent extremist narrative works like a magic bullet to radicalize audiences” (Aly 2017, 62). What research on mainstreaming suggests is that extreme or fringe content in and of itself is not necessarily appealing to users but needs to be reframed to make it palatable to larger audiences. What is evident in our findings is that the narratives identified are not necessarily built around hate speech and incitement but the perceived threat of trans people, especially trans women, pose to emotive issues of another vulnerable group: women and children. It is evident throughout that the arguments and framing of this threat are not supported by evidence but have been socially constructed among commentators and framed to appear legitimate.

We identify three core implications from this project. First, our content classifier proved capable of automatically detecting transphobic content online. Social media companies and researchers can adapt this tool to improve content moderation policies, as well as to extract and examine transphobic content on a larger scale. The classifier was less accurate categorizing certain comments, namely, the over identification of any comment about trans people as transphobic and struggling to correctly identify conspiracy theories or deliberate misgendering. Interestingly, while the intersection of race and transphobia is well understood (Colliver 2022; Gill-Peterson 2018; Koyama 2020; Upadhyay 2021), the content classifier did not identify many cases of this inter-

action. The causes here may be two-fold. Racism online, like transphobia, has also undergone a process of mainstreaming. Commentators and their followers understand that explicitly racist content is likely to be removed and have developed a range of dog whistles and cloaked language that allows them to avoid detention. As we trained our model to detect nuanced incidences of transphobia, not racism, it is possible the model was not given enough information to accurately detect both forms of mainstreamed hate speech. With further development the classifier could be improved to increase detection of transphobic content online and research using large datasets that can be used for improved content moderation strategies

Second, as transphobic narratives, under the forces of mainstreaming and major political events, should be expected to change over time, this paper's dataset and model present a unique opportunity to track transphobic narratives. The case selection of the top comments against the top videos across the same channels can be replicated to identify how transphobia—and wider narratives of extremism—are evolving. Further, researchers can apply improved LLM models against the same data with the ability to compare effectiveness. This reduces challenges of online research where data is consistently changing, and the size of the potential data sources presents challenges for longitudinal and comparative analysis.

Finally, there are implications for research effectiveness and safety. The automated detection of transphobic content—and other forms of hateful and harmful content—presents an interesting opportunity for research ethics and safety. There is increasing focus on the potential harm to researchers from exposure to content during online research into fringe and extremist communities (for example, see recent research on the harm to researchers engaging in online research including Feuston et al. 2022; Gagnon and Mathieson 2023; Pearson et al. 2023;) We hope that the content classifier designed for this project can be expanded into an accessible tool that limits the exposure of researchers to hateful content as a part of their data collection. There is no way eliminate the harm of researching targeted hate—especially when the researcher is a member of the targeted community—but for researchers that seek to do the meaningful work of online content analysis at a large scale, there are ways of minimizing the risks.

There are however inherent flaws to pursuing queer and intersectional research using big dataset scrapped from social media. Feminist and queer scholars have noted that the disembodied and placeless nature of big data disconnects users and research from their language and context (Cooky, Linabary, and Corple 2018; Giesecking 2018; Luka and Millette 2018; Leurs 2017). There will also always be a limit to the ability of content classifiers to capture the full reem of transphobic content. As experienced in the manual data labelling process, the researchers inherently knew some contents were transphobic due to context—intentionally misgendering people in the videos, referring to trans people as “crazy”—but could not be labelled as transphobic as without the context, there would be no way to know who the comment was directed towards. In this way, there will always be a need for in depth qualitative data analysis to complement big data projects. There is also a need to think carefully about how those members of the trans community, and the LGBTQI+ community more broadly, experience and are impacted by hateful online content. Their expertise needs to be acknowledged and centered in the construction of future research projects.

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Locating the Asymmetry in Information Flow between Local and National Media on Transgender Discourses

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Mainstream news outlets set the agenda and terms of discussion for public discourse. As transgender people experience increasingly vitriolic attacks on their fundamental rights in the US, understanding the dynamics governing media discussions of transgender people becomes even more salient. Intermedia agenda-setting theory suggests that the interplay between news outlets with different geographical scopes—national and local—is an important aspect of media discourse circulation. We analyze this interplay by leveraging

a mixed methods approach, employing a combination of causal inference methods and critical discourse analysis to determine whether, and how, transgender discourses spread across local and national media. We find that transgender discourses on a particular topic propagate from national to state-level outlets; however, this process often involves two steps: national outlets influence particular state(s), which, in turn, influence the other states. Therefore, local outlets play a more complex role in agenda-setting for transgender discourses than previously thought. We conclude by presenting recommendations for interventions to reduce transphobic misinformation and uplift transgender voices in the US news ecosystem.

KEYWORDS local/national news; transfer entropy; agenda-setting; information flow; critical discourse analysis
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Transgender people have recently experienced significant attacks to their rights to transition, access healthcare, enjoy legal protection and, more broadly, exist in public in the US (Carlisle 2022; Fischer 2019; Jones 2024; Jones and Brewer 2020). Mainstream media plays a major role in galvanizing efforts to delegitimize transgender rights in the legal and the public arena (Ciszek 2020; Fischer 2019; Lewis et al. 2022; Scovel, Nelson, and Thorpe 2023; Slothouber 2020). US mainstream media has been particularly problematic in its stereotypical, exploitative, and degrading representation of transgender individuals (Capuzza and Spencer 2017; Cavalcante 2018). For example, narratives that frame transgender people and transgender community allies as trying to “indoctrinate” children are spreading (e.g., Boyd 2024; Penley 2023); this dynamic leads to the exploitation of trans and queer children as pawns in broader ideological battles, robbing them of their agency.

Mainstream news can help spread misinformation (Goel et al. 2023; Tsfaty et al. 2020), provide agendas and materials for fake news content (Guo and Vargo 2020; Vargo, Guo, and Amazeen 2018), and foster political misperceptions (Weeks et al. 2023). Mainstream media outlets, across the conservative-liberal spectrum, play a role in platforming transphobic misinformation (Billard 2023; 2024; Lockmiller 2023). These outlets set the agenda for the public *and* each other (McCombs, Shaw, and Weaver 2014). Intermedia agenda-setting (IAS) theory posits that media is a dynamic ecosystem with different types of agents, such as national and local media, influencing each other. National and local outlets usually have different geographical concentrations, reporting focuses, and audiences, resulting in significant differences in their reporting on an issue (Jerit et al. 2019). While local news is a trusted, agenda-setting actor (Hester and Gibson 2007; Shearer 2016; Tan and Weaver 2009), it also can spread misinformation and sustain misperceptions (Allen et al. 2020; Morrow and Compagni 2020; Yin et al. 2018). The literature generally indicates that national news outlets set or influence local news outlets’ agendas (Su and Xiao 2021), but these dynamics have not yet been studied in the context of transgender discussions in US media. A close examination of the dynamics of transgender discourses *within* the media ecosystem can help better understand the spread of harmful, transphobic rhetoric.

We begin to disentangle the complex media ecosystem starting with the interplay between national and local news. We expect, based on previous literature, that discourses around trans issues will also spread from national outlets to local ones (Oliveira-Araujo 2024), but scholars have cited the transformative power of local news specifically on transgender issues (Michelson and Harrison 2020), inviting an inquiry into whether national media *do*, in fact, influence local media in transgender discourses.

Guided by IAS, we used a mixed-methods approach to study the directional flow of transgender discourses in the US mainstream media. We collected national and local news data through MediaCloud (Roberts et al. 2021) and obtained all articles published between April 1 and June 30, 2023 containing the keywords “transgender” or “trans.” After computing the news article volume and topic distributions over time, we employed transfer entropy, an information-theoretic measure quantifying the directional flow of information between two processes (Staniek and Lehnertz 2008), to examine how transgender discourses propagate between media across regionalization and partisanship divides. We also conducted two detailed, qualitative case studies using critical discourse analysis to understand exactly *what* information travels between state-level media collections and national news outlets.

Our work bridges transgender studies and journalism studies by analyzing intermedia agenda-setting patterns for transgender discourses in the US media context. Our findings illuminate the role local outlets might play in mediating transgender issues and discourses. They also provide scholars, activists, and advocates insights into how transgender lives and issues are discussed across local and national US media, revealing how influence operates within discursive threads and enabling a quantitative understanding of the flow of discourse on various topics. Our qualitative studies indicate what kind of frames spread within different trans discourses and illustrate how reporting on the same incident changes (or stays consistent) when stories flow between media collections over time. Based on our studies, we recommend concrete, practical interventions to improve local news reporting on trans issues.

BACKGROUND

Transgender Representation in US Mainstream News

Transgender people in the US grapple with systematic discrimination, marginalization, and alienation. Legislative bodies oscillate between protecting and disenfranchising transgender rights, causing repetitive battles to occur, particularly at the state level (Jones 2024). Public attitudes toward transgender issues tend to mirror legislative polarization, making trans issues one of the “new fronts in the culture war” (Castle 2019). Mainstream media influences public perception and discursive agendas (Luo et al. 2019), and this is particularly true for contentious issues like immigration reform (Dunaway, Branton, and Abrajano 2010). Trans issues, as a contentious topic, are therefore likely to experience strong agenda-setting effects in mainstream media. This is concerning because recent research has shown that mainstream media can cultivate transphobia by spreading misinformation and disinformation that later enters the public discourse (Billard 2023; 2024). US mainstream media can thereby reinforce state-sanctioned violence against transgender people (Fischer 2019), dehumanize trans people, and devalue their lives (DeJong et al. 2021).

Transgender people experience media coverage fraught with the selective omission of significant details, lack of nuance, and, at times, stereotypical roles (Fink and Palmer 2020). Decisions about visibility and framing are highly selective and one-sided, with discrepancies in coverage of trans men and trans women (Avalos 2024; Bracco, Sczesny, and Gustafsson Sendén 2024). Problematic coverage relegates transness to the “private sphere,” stripping trans people of their citizenship in the public sphere and uncoupling their needs from the general public’s (Galpin, Gwenffrewi, and Stokoe 2023; Scarcelli, Krijnen, and Nixon 2021). The inevitable result of such coverage is what we define as cisnormative hegemony: the privileging of cis lives and issues over trans lives and issues such that trans individuals are discursively eliminated from public citizenship (Fraser 1994). Other facets of cisnormative hegemony in news media include the “depoliticized” portrayal of trans rights movements (Capuzza and Spencer 2017), “episodic” framing where individual people and cases are centered over structural issues (Avalos 2024; Osborn 2022), and flattening expansive gender expressions to fit restrictive binaries (Barker-Plummer 2013).

Trans identities in US news are, therefore, used as a “floating signifier”—repeatedly appropriated to further political interests and conflicts (Ciszek 2020). Floating signifiers are semiotic signs that do not point to any concrete referent; instead, such a signifier is more concrete than the meanings it purports to (up)hold (Hay, Hall, and Grossberg 2013; Mehlman 1972). Studies in representation assert that the modern construction of race, for example, is a floating signifier, inherently designed to oppress (Hall and Jhally 2002). Similar arguments have been made for modern conceptions of fatness (Strings 2019) and womanhood (Haraway 2006). Transness, as a floating signifier, can be used rhetorically by multiple contradicting political ideologies to signify their claims to cultural hegemony (Farkas and Schou 2018). As such, heightened visibility of trans issues might not produce better treatment for transgender individuals (Humphrey 2016).

There are, however, *variations* in news reporting on trans people (Osborn 2022), and we can locate where transphobic hate generally *originates* within mainstream media sources (Billard 2023; 2024). There is research indicating that media framing of trans people is influenced by a multitude of social institutions, like family, friends, LGBTQI+ advocates, and police (DeJong et al. 2021). These variations, if critically understood, can offer opportunities to challenge cisnormative hegemonic narratives, since not all coverage of a given story uniformly aligns with hegemonic narratives. For example, reporting on a Supreme Court decision on a transgender woman’s case against a Virginia prison on June 30, 2023 by *Newsday* emphasized transphobic opposition to a ruling largely framed as a win for trans rights (Lavoie 2023), whereas the article published by KESQ-TV on the same day instead explicates the protections for trans people upheld by the original ruling (Cole 2023), a detail that was omitted in the *Newsday* report.

Examining asymmetries in trans reporting across local and national news can help illuminate the dynamics of US mainstream media discourses. Some sources have indicated the transformative power of local news on transgender issues (Michelson and Harrison 2020), and empirical findings confirm framing differences between local and national outlets (Buzzelli and Towery 2021; Oliveira-Araujo 2024). In addition, local news on transgender issues might perpetuate systematic transphobia (Wood, Carrillo,

and Monk-Turner 2022); local news outlets are more likely to misgender transgender victims and less likely to discuss the intersectional identity of the victim (e.g. race) or cite relevant research (DeJong et al. 2021). However, the US media ecosystem is under-examined on local vs national discourse on trans issues.

Local-National News Influences and Intermedia Agenda-Setting Theory

Mainstream media is never a monolithic, static system; information and influence are dynamic, and their interplay drives narrative and discourses in diverse directions (Gruszczynski and Wagner 2017). The US media landscape is strongly interconnected (Vargo and Guo 2017) and media slant is contagious; local media are likely to adopt cable news slant, showing that biased views of current issues can easily spread from one outlet to others (Widmer, Galletta, and Ash 2023). More generally, news framing can spread inside the news media ecosystem, with political elites driving public opinion (Simon and Xenos 2000). Misinformation and disinformation can also spread between various media components (Guo and Vargo 2020; Tsfaty et al. 2020), including misinformation about transgender people (Billard 2023).

With various phenomena spreading within news ecosystems, it is important to understand the *direction* of information flow: who influences whom? This can pinpoint who provides the informational underpinnings of the *agenda* (what is talked about) and the *framing* (how a particular issue is talked about) present in everyday propaganda, including transphobic propaganda. This understanding can also point to pathways for intervention.

We focus on topics of discourse or *agenda* items and ground our work in intermedia agenda-setting (IAS), which says that news media outlets set public agendas *and* each other's agendas (McCombs, Shaw, and Weaver 2014). IAS effects tend to be stronger during election campaigns (Harder, Sevenans, and Van Aelst 2017; Kim et al. 2016; Sweetser, Golan, and Wanta 2008; Vonbun, Königslöw, and Schoenbach 2016), periods of political activism (Ragas and Kioussis 2011), and debates about policy reform (Heijkant et al. 2019).

IAS research often focuses on deducing factors, such as media type, issue type, and the time period under investigation, that drive the variability and flow of coverage (Vargo and Guo 2017). Factors related to news content also play a role in IAS effects; as discussed above, the veracity of news content is a factor. Fake news can have strong agenda-setting effects, intertwined with partisan media and emerging media (Vargo, Guo, and Amazeen 2018). The degree and type of such influence can vary based on context or topic (Guo and Vargo 2020; Stern, Livan, and Smith 2020).

There are key differences in news coverage between national and local news outlets (Dunaway, Branton, and Abrajano 2010; Lacasse and Forster 2012), with potential avenues of influence existing between the two (Quattrociocchi, Caldarelli, and Scala 2014). Prominent national outlets can often set the agenda for other parts of the media ecosystem. For example, a few studies found that *The New York Times* is the agenda-setter for a variety of other news outlets, including network television news programs (Golan 2006), other national media outlets (Denham 2014), and even social media like X (Kushin 2010).¹ This influence extends to local and regional media

1 While we focus on agenda-setting, other components of content also flow between local

sources (Denham 2014; Palmgreen and Clarke 1977; Su and Xiao 2021; Zhang 2018) and can be particularly pronounced if an issue is not distinctly local (Mathes and Pfetsch 1991). In Spain, it has been shown that national media has tended to amplify the newsworthiness of trans issues for local media since 2006 (Oliveira-Araujo 2024). Therefore, national media might promulgate hegemonic, cisnormative transgender discourses.

However, such findings may not hold across all contexts and subjects. One study found national media outlets may lack agenda-setting effects on each other due to competition (Lim 2011). Moreover, *The New York Times*, along with *The Washington Post*, can sometimes follow online partisan media (Vargo and Guo 2017). In some cases, such as when an issue is local *and* national, local media can have strong agenda-setting effects (Hester and Gibson 2007; Palmgreen and Clarke 1977), which can impact local or state-level legislation (Tan and Weaver 2009).

Additionally, local media might have higher quality news due to their attentiveness to their audience (Jerit et al. 2019). They are also more timely in reporting, though they are more prone to make mistakes as they rely on police reports (DeJong et al. 2021). The public places a great deal of trust in local news sources (Morrow and Compagni 2020), and local news sources can systematically shift their audience's political leanings through slanted coverage (Levendusky 2022). This perceived trustworthiness can create vulnerabilities. Local outlets can be more likely to become the target for propaganda efforts (Yin et al. 2018); they have also been shown to spread misinformation and sustain misconceptions held by the US public (Allen et al. 2020; Morrow and Compagni 2020; Yin et al. 2018).

Understanding the flow of information between local and national news can improve our understanding of the coverage of transgender issues. Moreover, based on the outlet, its partisan type, the regional focus, the nature of the content, and other factors, we can expect different agenda-setting effects for specific discourses around transgender people. We therefore ground our study of trans discourses in local-national IAS.

DATASET

We collected news data through MediaCloud, an open access platform for global media analysis (Roberts et al. 2021). Since coverage of transgender issues is politically polarized (Castle 2019; Jones and Brewer 2020; Scovel, Nelson, and Thorpe 2023), we collected national articles from both *The New York Times* and *Fox News*. These national publications are perceived to be on opposite sides of the political spectrum in terms of their slant and audience (Groseclose and Milyo 2005; Morris 2005) while enjoying large readerships and high credibility among those readerships (Mitchell et al. 2014). We collected *local* news at the US *state* level from six highly populated states with strong partisan tendencies (in terms of their general 2020 US election votes for Democrats and Republicans): New York, California, and Illinois as the Democrat states, and Texas,

and national outlets. For example, local news slant was found to be more similar to that of Fox News (Widmer, Galletta, and Ash 2023).

Table 1. Dataset Summary

Level	Collection	# of Articles	# of Unique Outlets
National	<i>The New York Times</i>	98	1
	<i>Fox News</i>	1,120	1
State (Dem)	New York	2,125	109
	California	3,171	266
	Illinois	547	61
	Florida	1,090	65
State (Rep)	Texas	1,534	85
	Ohio	525	41

Note. This table shows the distribution of 10,210 articles. At the national level, we present the number of articles coming from the left-leaning and right-leaning media outlets. At the local level, states are partitioned by partisanship; we present the number of articles coming from each state, along with the number of media outlets from which articles were collected.

Florida, and Ohio as the Republican states.² We downloaded all articles from each collection containing either “transgender” or “trans” published between April 1 and June 30, 2023. According to MediaCloud, this period saw the highest national attention to our chosen keywords. We then scraped the articles’ full text with the Python *newspaper3k* package (Ou-Yang 2020).

To ensure data quality, we removed duplicate news articles based on the news article URL, the headline, and the article text. We also removed articles from national outlets present in the state (local) media collections, using a combined list of domains classified as local or national created in multiple prior works.³ Some articles were not about trans people or issues in our dataset, so we also removed articles that did not contain the word “gender.”

Our final dataset consists of the outlet name, publication date, headline, subtitle, main text, and URL for 10,210 articles. Table 1 shows the summary statistics, grouped by geographic locality. This dataset is publicly available via the Harvard Dataverse (Smith et al. 2024), as is our code via Github (Smith, Goel, and Yang 2024), to facilitate further research.

- 2 Highly populated states are those that are among the top quarter of US states based on population sizes (i.e., more than the 3rd quartile population size for US states), per July 2022 US census data (US Census Bureau 2023). For state partisanship data, we consulted Rakich (2021).
- 3 The national-local domain labels are pooled from six existing domain classification datasets: Clemm von Hohenberg et al. (2021), Le Quéré, Chiang, and Naaman (2022), Fischer, Jaidka, and Lelkes (2022), Yin et al. (2018), Horne et al. (2022), ABYZ Web Links (2022).

METHODS & EXPERIMENTAL DETAILS

Topic Identification

We used topic distributions to generate time series representing threads of discourse. These distributions were obtained via the MALLET topic modeling tool (McCallum 2002), which uses Gibbs sampling-based latent Dirichlet allocation (LDA) (Blei 2003; Griffiths 2002). We trained a 20-topic model on our entire final dataset (article content including headlines). After obtaining the topics, we used the representative words and the documents with the highest topic probability to develop labels for each topic. The final topic labels required consensus among three authors. The topic labels along with the top 10 words (per the topic model) are displayed in Table 2. Three of the 20 topics we discovered did not focus on transgender people or issues (Topic 0, “movie guides”; Topic 7, “local event guides that include LGBTQI+-specific events”, and Topic 12, “miscellaneous reporting and Q&A blog posts”). We retained these topics as “natural controls.” Observing similar flow patterns in the “natural control” topics to those found in the relevant topics would indicate that such information flows are not unique to news about transgender people or issues.

Time Series Analysis

To detect, interpret, and verify the influence one media collection has on another regarding publications about a particular topic, we used symbolic transfer entropy (STE) as a measure of “influence” between two media outlets (Borge-Holthoefer et al. 2016; He et al. 2013; Staniek and Lehnertz 2008). Transfer entropy has been used in media studies to measure influence among peers in online social networks (Bauer et al. 2013; He et al. 2013; McKenney and White 2017; Ver Steeg and Galstyan 2012), between markets and media attention (Neto 2022), and among geolocalized sub-units in news-sharing (Borge-Holthoefer et al. 2016). We therefore use transfer entropy, specifically STE, paired with topic modeling, to act as a measure of intermedia agenda-setting.

Although the use of transfer entropy to study IAS is a novel methodological development for transgender discourse analysis, it is not unprecedented. Granger causality—a special case of transfer entropy that assumes variables are normally distributed (Barnett, Barrett, and Seth 2009)—has been heavily used for IAS (Su and Xiao 2021). Previous studies used it to examine IAS effects between traditional media and blogs (Meraz 2011), topical coverage across mainstream news outlets (Brosius and Kepplinger 1990), links between different media (Stern, Livan, and Smith 2020), and feedback loops between media and the public (Smith 1991). We chose to utilize the more general metric of transfer entropy over Granger causality to avoid making assumptions regarding the underlying distributions of the latent process being studied.

Preparing Time Series

For each state and each national news outlet, we counted daily article volume as our signal of daily activity in each collection. Using the topic distributions and tags generated, we disaggregated the total counts for each collection and each day by binning articles into their respective topics. On each day, the score for each topic in each collection is the total score (i.e. the sum of the topic probabilities) for that topic across all articles in that collection. Each time series represents a topical, discursive “thread” limited to that national outlet or collection of state outlets.

Table 2. Topics Discovered by the LDA Topic Model

Topic	Top Words	Proposed Label
0	film, new, book, series, documentary, world, story, life, movie, theaters	Movie guides
1	said, police, shooting, brown, school, year, transgender, nashville, three, security	Local law enforcement and transgender suspects or victims
2	twitter, news, fox, media, said, transgender, social, speech, video, musk	Online harms to transgender & LGBTQI+ individuals
3	target, pride, lgbtq, said, company, month, stores, backlash, companies, year	Pride month corporate marketing backlash and company response
4	court, law, rights, case, supreme, judge, said, lawsuit, federal, legal	Supreme court rulings around LGBTQI+ discrimination legal protections
5	new, state, city, million, year, public, california, york, program, housing	Housing market (including LGBTQI+ buyers) & local infrastructure policy
6	gender, care, transgender, affirming, medical, children, health, said, state, minors	Gender-affirming medical care for transgender kids
7	www, https, org, com, june, art, center, may, music, free	Guides to local events including LGBTQI+ specific events or media
8	said, women, year, old, time, race, new, world, university, team	Incarcerated mothers & transphobia and homophobia in sports
9	health, people, hate, said, percent, mental, anti, crimes, women, report	Sexual health & preventative healthcare for women and LGBTQI+ people
10	people, right, anti, american, new, political, black, rights, one, left	Culture wars in education including critical theory and transgender awareness
11	trump, president, biden, desantis, said, republican, former, campaign, house, republicans	Electoral politics and divisions on transgender rights
12	people, like, said, one, know, think, trans, going, time, want	Random reporting and q&a blogs including some reporting on transgender people
13	women, transgender, sports, athletes, trans, said, girls, would, female, gender	Transgender women and athletes in sports
14	abortion, said, house, state, zephyr, bill, montana, lawmakers, republicans, republican	Transgender Montana house representative Zooey Zephyr
15	drag, show, also, music, year, first, new, one, LGBTQI+, best	LGBTQI+ visibility in entertainment shows
16	light, bud, mulvaney, beer, busch, anheuser, said, company, sales, dylan	Dylan Mulvaney Bud Light backlash coverage
17	lgbtq, pride, community, said, people, gay, city, transgender, rights, mont	LGBTQI+ pride month events coverage
18	school, students, said, parents, board, schools, student, district, gender, education	K-12 school policies regarding LGBTQI+ students
19	bill, state, florida, law, texas, lgbtq, would, desantis, said, bills	State-level anti-LGBTQI+ bills

Note. Top words (per the trained model), along with our proposed topic labels, are displayed. Top documents were used alongside the top 20 words during label creation, but only the top 10 words are displayed here for brevity.

Calculating Transfer Entropy

Using these time series, we calculated STE between collections for each topic. Based on testing on synthetic and empirical data, we found that total information flow is maximized with a sliding window of $s = 1$ and an embedding window of $w = 2$. Calculations of STE followed the procedure outlined by Staniek and Lehnertz (2008). We treated each topic as independent; thus, for each binary combination of collections, we measured the information transfer from the two discrete time series representing each collection's topic volume. Because transfer entropy is an asymmetric measure, we followed the same procedure as Borge-Holthoefer et al. (2016) to measure the overall magnitude and directionality of influence between the two sources. However, due to the relatively small size of the dataset and expected effect, we modified their approach slightly by also applying the estimator introduced by Marschinski and Kantz (2002).

TOPIC MODELING RESULTS

Overall Topic Distribution

Table 2 shows the topics extracted from the entire corpus. Of the twenty topics, seventeen are transgender-related (every topic except topics 0, 7, and 12). These topics cover a wide range of issues relevant to trans people's lives, like healthcare, sports participation, and education. Many topics also cover political battles over transgender rights. Some topics capture specific events that made the headlines during our sampling period such as the Dylan Mulvaney Bud Light controversy (topic 16).

Temporal Trends of Topic Distributions

Examining temporal variation in topic volume over time reveals discursive evolution. As shown in Figure 1, topic prominence varies with time; some topics fluctuate a great deal. For example, in April, the discourses about "Electoral politics and divisions on transgender rights" (topic 11) and "Transgender women and athletes in sports" (topic 13) were prominent. Some other topics did not gain prominence until May or June: reporting about "Pride Month corporate marketing backlash" (topic 3) rose to predominance near June (Pride month) along with "LGBTQI+ pride month events coverage" (topic 13). While some topics are time-sensitive and cover discrete real-world events, a few topics, like "Gender-affirming medical care for transgender kids" (topic 6), and "State-level anti-LGBTQI+ bills" (topic 19), exhibit relatively constant article volume in our dataset.

Topic Distribution per Collection

We also find variations in topic volume across different collections in our data (Figure A18). Generally, right-leaning collections (i.e., *Fox News* and state collections of Texas, Florida, and Ohio) and left-leaning collections (i.e., *The New York Times* and state collections of California, Illinois, and New York) have similar volumes of content across different topics. A few notable exceptions include: (1) right-leaning collections dominate the discourses about "Transgender women and athletes in sports" (topic 13), "Online harms to transgender and LGBTQI+ individuals" (topic 2), and "State-level anti-LGBTQI+ bills" (topic 19), accounting for at least 60% of all articles on those topics; and (2) left-leaning collections dominate the discourses about "Guides to local events



Figure 1. Temporal trends for the volume of articles pertaining to discovered topics in our dataset. This scatterplot indicates volume over time for each topic in our dataset. The horizontal axis represents dates, and the vertical one represents topics. The dot represents the mean probability of that topic occurring on a certain day. Larger and brighter dots indicate a higher fractional volume of that topic on that day.

including LGBTQI+ specific events or media” (topic 7—with California itself providing more than a third of all articles on this topic), and “Sexual health and preventative healthcare for women & LGBTQI+ people” (topic 9), accounting for at least 60% of all articles on those topics.

Within each ideological cluster, a few collections can sometimes outweigh others with a normalized contribution proportion of more than 20% (while a uniform distribution would mean a proportion of 12.5% for each collection). Right-leaning collections tend to dominate topics more often than left-leaning ones; such outlets have a highly dominant contribution (>20%) seven times as compared to left-leaning media which only had three such cases. This suggests an ideologically lopsided discourse engagement pattern.

Temporal Trend of Topic Distribution per Collection

Finally, we assess the topic distribution per collection along with their temporal distribution (Figure 2), showing how each collection discussed different topics at different times. Sometimes a particular outlet or collection forms a significant portion of the coverage early in April–June 2023 before receding. For example, *Fox News* was a main contributor to discourses about “Local law enforcement and transgender suspects or victims” (topic 1) in April, but its coverage on this topic reduced around May. Articles covering “LGBTQI+ pride month events” (topic 17) feature more prominently around June across all collections. We also observe some “handing off” of discourse from one collection to another, which is the main subject of inquiry for our transfer entropy analysis. For example, the major contributors to discourses on the “LGBTQI+ pride month events” are left-leaning collections, especially California, before June. Later in June, other media collections—Ohio and Florida—gained more prominence within this topic.

TRANSFER ENTROPY RESULTS

We conducted four separate transfer entropy analyses for each topic, examining the influence of 1) all six state-level media collections on both national outlets, 2) national outlets on state-level collections, 3) state-level collections on each other, and 4) national outlets on each other. We did not see a clear flow pattern present for any of the natural control topics; furthermore, the two-step flow process we noted for several trans-relevant topics was absent for all natural control topics (see Figures A1, A7, and A12 in the Appendix).

Of the seventeen trans-relevant topics, four do not display any clear cross-media information transfer, though some indications of influence between national and local news outlets do stand out in the results. Further, within the thirteen relevant topics displaying evidence of cross-media circulation, nine of them exhibit something akin to a two-step flow process (Weimann and Brosius 1994; Brosius and Kepplinger 1990)—*mediation* by one or two state-level media collections, rather than an individual acting as an opinion leader. In these topics, we consistently see a pattern where one or both national outlets drove discourse in one (and sometimes more) specific state-level collection(s), which then drove discourse in the other states. Although this pattern manifests in varied ways, influence in news media discourses about transgender people and

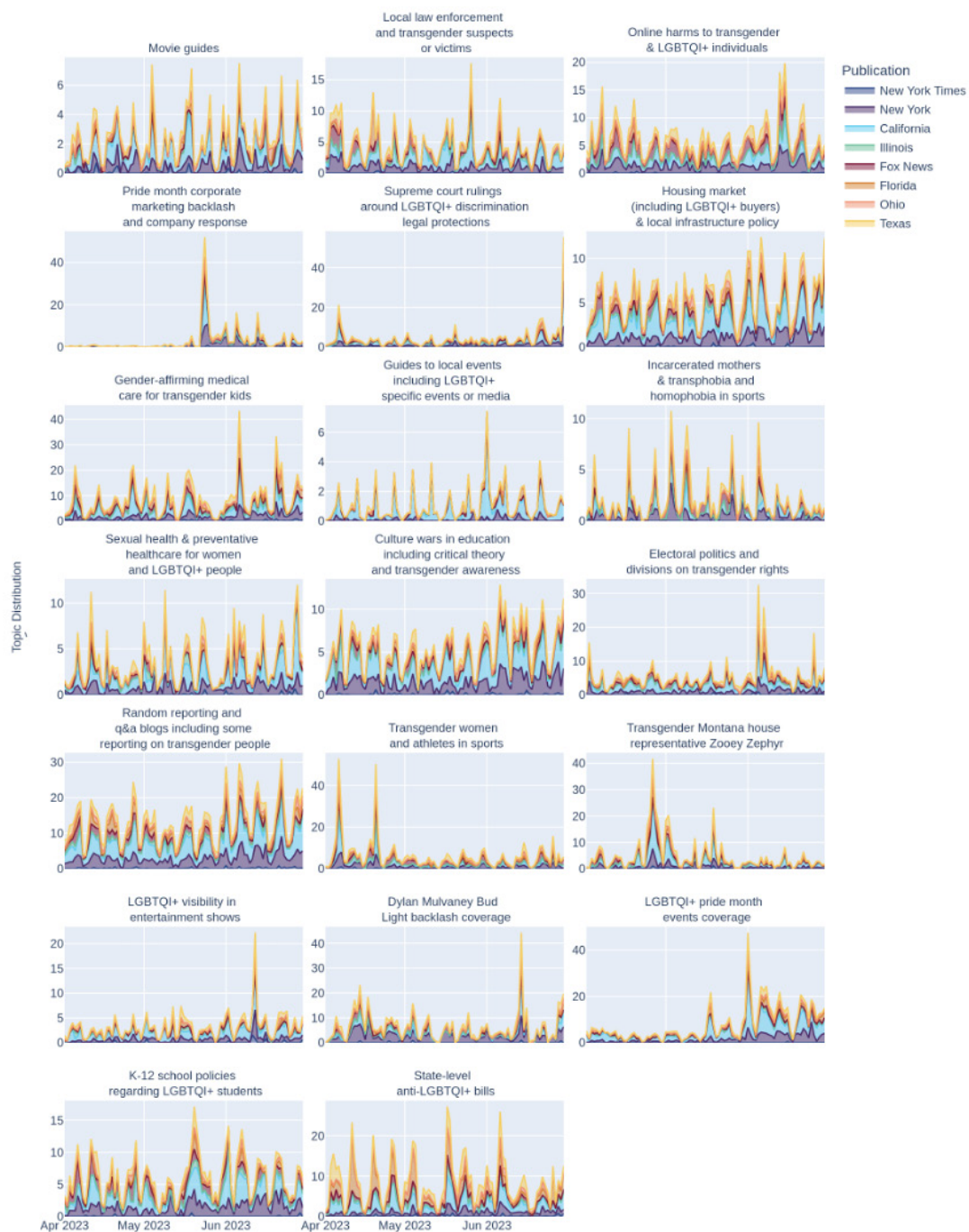


Figure 2. Temporal topic distribution per media collection. This stacked area chart shows the temporal trend of topic distribution by each media collection for each topic. Taller bands indicate a higher volume of news by such media outlet.

issues generally does not flow *directly* from national outlets to state outlets. Instead, one state often acts as an intermediary between national and local outlets.

For example, Topic 1 (“Local law enforcement and transgender suspects or victims”) shows Texas acting as an intermediary between both national outlets and the other five state-level media collections in Figure 3. (Empirical flow pattern plots for all topics not discussed in the main article body can be found in the Appendix.) Transfer entropy directed from Texas to the national outlets is notably low, and the transfer entropy between *The New York Times* and *Fox News* is nearly symmetric. As further discussed in our case studies below, within state-mediated two-step flow processes, frames often spread from a mediating state’s early coverage to other states’ later coverage. While a two-step flow mediated by a single state appears to be the most common pattern, we also observe a partisan block pattern of diffusion for a few topics. This pattern involves information diffusing from the national outlets to half of the states studied, all with the same overall partisanship, and then to the rest of the states (see Figure 6).

CASE STUDIES

While transfer entropy analysis quantifies *who* drives *whom* for each topic, it is still critical to understand *what* information is flowing to understand the dynamics of transgender discourses. Case studies, as a commonly used method in news and journalism research (Ross, Lester, and Konkes 2021) and in transgender studies (Billard 2021), can facilitate such an in-depth study. They zoom in on specific events, aid our understanding of agenda flows, and contextualize our empirical findings.

We therefore conducted qualitative case studies on two topics within our dataset: “Supreme court rulings around LGBTQI+ discrimination legal protections” and “K-12 school policies regarding LGBTQI+ students.” Our case selection was informed by our transfer entropy analysis; these topics demonstrated the typical flow patterns in our dataset (i.e., two-step flow mediated by a single state, and block-structured two-step flow where multiple states consistently influence the others). These topics displayed clear, sustained spikes in volume, allowing us to neatly subset our data for focused analysis. These topics also included multiple actors and incidents, allowing us to follow various narrative threads within each topic.

In each of the case studies, we first obtained a subset of articles representative of the selected topics using the topic modeling output. We employed critical discourse analyses of these articles to better understand the various actors involved, how transgender people are framed, how the same specific stories are covered across different news collections, and more (Charmaz 2008). In our close readings, we paid attention to framing (episodic versus topical), agency (who is portrayed as an actor or a patient), and timing (who discusses a story first). This allowed us to examine how narratives and framings tend to spread, entrench themselves, or evolve. The authors involved with case studies independently read the articles to obtain an impartial understanding of each case’s corpus. The team later convened and discussed the major findings, iterating until consensus was reached.

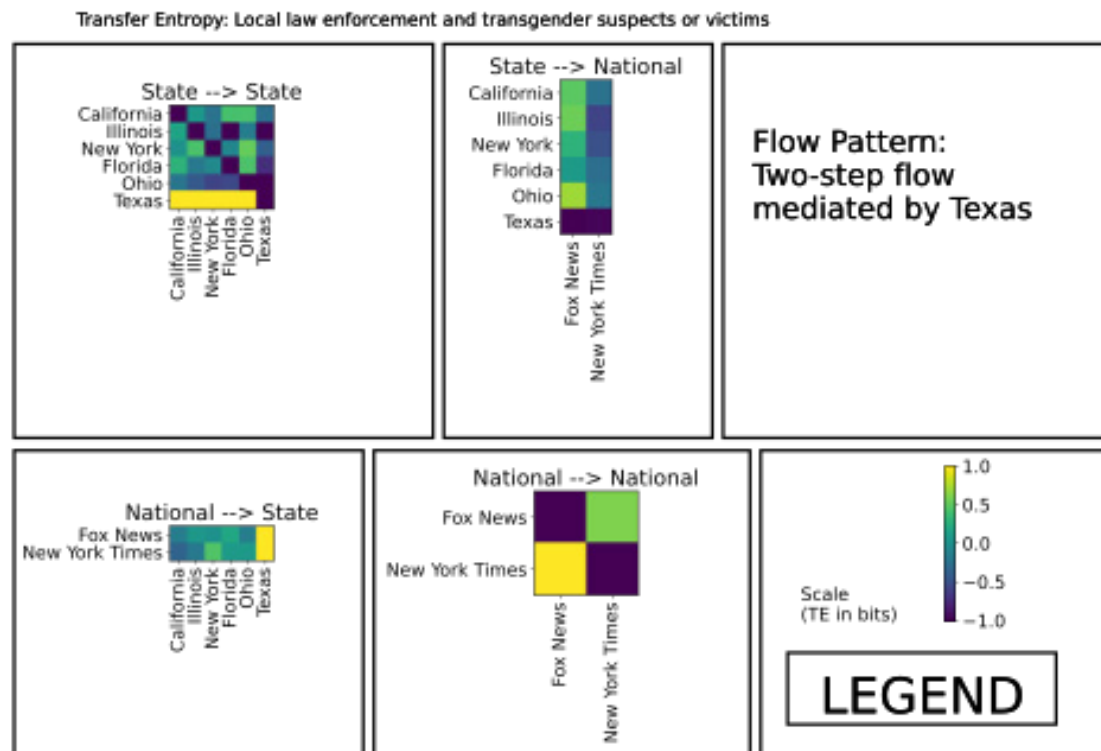


Figure 3. Empirical Transfer Entropy Flow Pattern for Topic 1. This illustration shows the transfer entropy results for a topic, illuminating the influence between different media collections. Top-left panel shows state-to-state influence, top-center state-to-national, bottom-left national-to-state, and bottom middle national-to-national. Within each of the four panels, a heatmap shows the exact information flow from specific media outlets. Vertical axis represents the influencer while the horizontal axis represents the influenced target. Brighter color indicates stronger influence.

Case Study 1: “K-12 school policies regarding LGBTQI+ students” (Topic 18) *Empirical Information Flow Pattern*

Topic 18, labeled “K-12 school policies regarding LGBTQI+ students,” follows the two-step flow pattern we see in most trans-relevant topics that experience cross-media information flow (see Figure 4). In this case, Florida mediates, as it is influenced by both *The New York Times* and *Fox News* while it also influences the other states. Our subset covers the period from May 10, 2023 to May 25, 2023, when Topic 18’s total fractional volume experienced its highest peak relative to its average fractional volume. We restricted our data to the set of articles that scored in the top two-thirds of articles with Topic 18 as their most probable topic.

Specific Story: Houghton University

To enable a deeper examination into this topic’s dynamics, we focused on a particular story that exhibits a two-step flow with Florida as an intermediary (see Figure 5). We

also examined this story with an eye towards intervention: where, and how, could a better understanding of the use of trans people as “floating signifiers” improve coverage?

News on Houghton University in upstate New York firing two employees for refusing to remove their pronouns from emails they sent (violating a new university policy) was reported in both *The New York Times* and *Fox News* on May 19, 2023. Two articles on this story were published in Florida two days later, one by *WKMG News 6 ClickOrlando* and another by *WFLA News 8 Tampa Bay*. Despite none of the outlets having any apparent connections between them (in terms of things like parent companies), almost the entire article text (except the headline and minor changes in the details of the story) is the same in both Florida articles, as well as articles from a California-based outlet and an Ohio-based outlet. Given that the *WKMG News 6 ClickOrlando* Florida article was published before the other three articles, and that the four outlets all vary slightly in bias but are highly credible we conclude that the discursive choices made in Florida spread to California and Ohio’s local coverage.

All articles frame the story in the context of a “new front of culture wars” over transgender people and their rights (Castle 2019). The employees’ dismissal is portrayed as one move in an ever-intensifying fight. This framing is achieved by presenting gender, sexual identity, and trans rights as a key political clash and using modifiers to emphasize its increase in volume or intensity. *The New York Times* article uses phras-

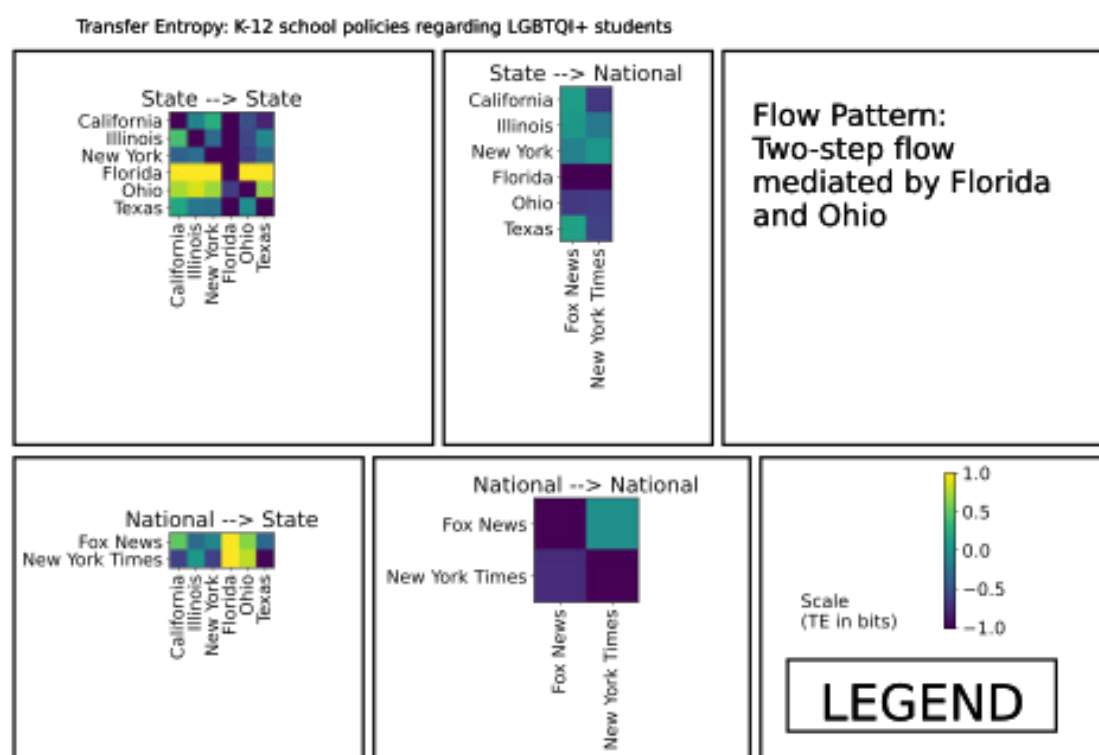


Figure 4. The empirical flow patterns for Topic 18. Florida collection shows strong influence on all the other state collections (top-left panel). At the same time, Florida is influenced by national outlets (bottom-left panel).

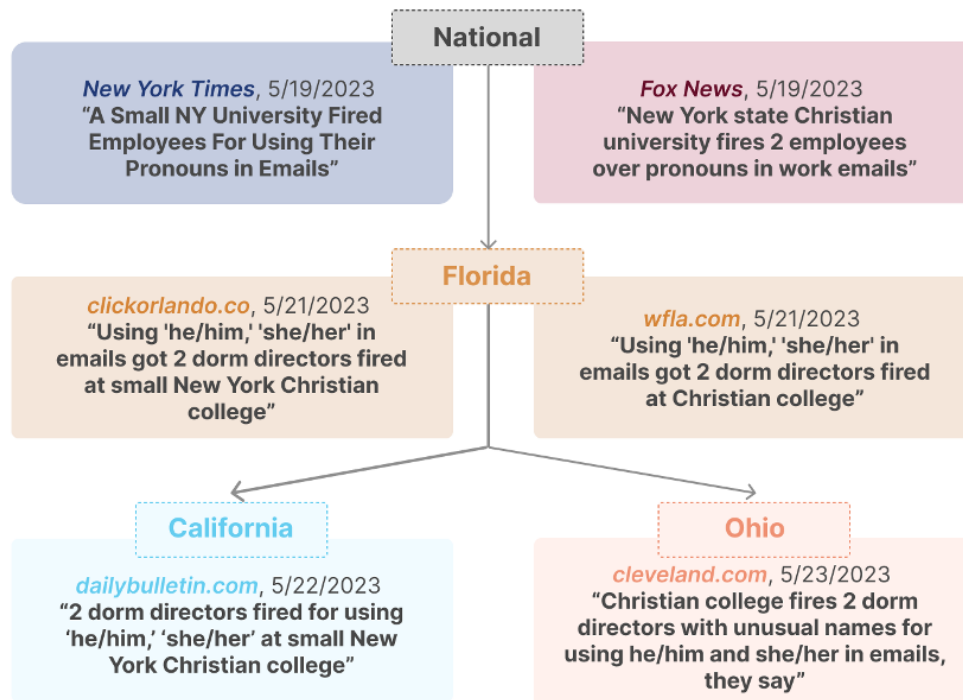


Figure 5. Two-step flow of discourses occurring for a particular news story on university employee firings. This flow chart shows the evolution of the stories in this case study. National outlets first published the story, which was picked up by Florida, then influencing California and Ohio.

es like “escalating debates” and “major fault lines in an increasingly divided nation.” Fox News uses phrases such as “ever-increasing politically divided environment” and presents quotations like “We live in a very divided world right now.” The byline of the *WKMG News 6 ClickOrlando* Florida article presents the dismissals as “fanning the culture wars roiling parts of the United States.” Placing transgender people, or any marginalized group, at the “fault lines” of culture wars endangers the existence and rights of those communities as a matter of public debate. More discussion of this news story is provided in our discussion section below.

Case Study 2: “Supreme Court rulings around LGBTQI+ discrimination legal protections” (Topic 4)

Empirical Information Flow Pattern

Unlike most topics that exhibited cross-media information flow patterns with a single state as the mediator, Topic 4 (“Supreme Court rulings around LGBTQI+ discrimination legal protections”) has a block two-step influence structure where national outlets drive coverage in Democrat-majority states. These states then drive the Republican-majority states’ coverage (see Figure 6).

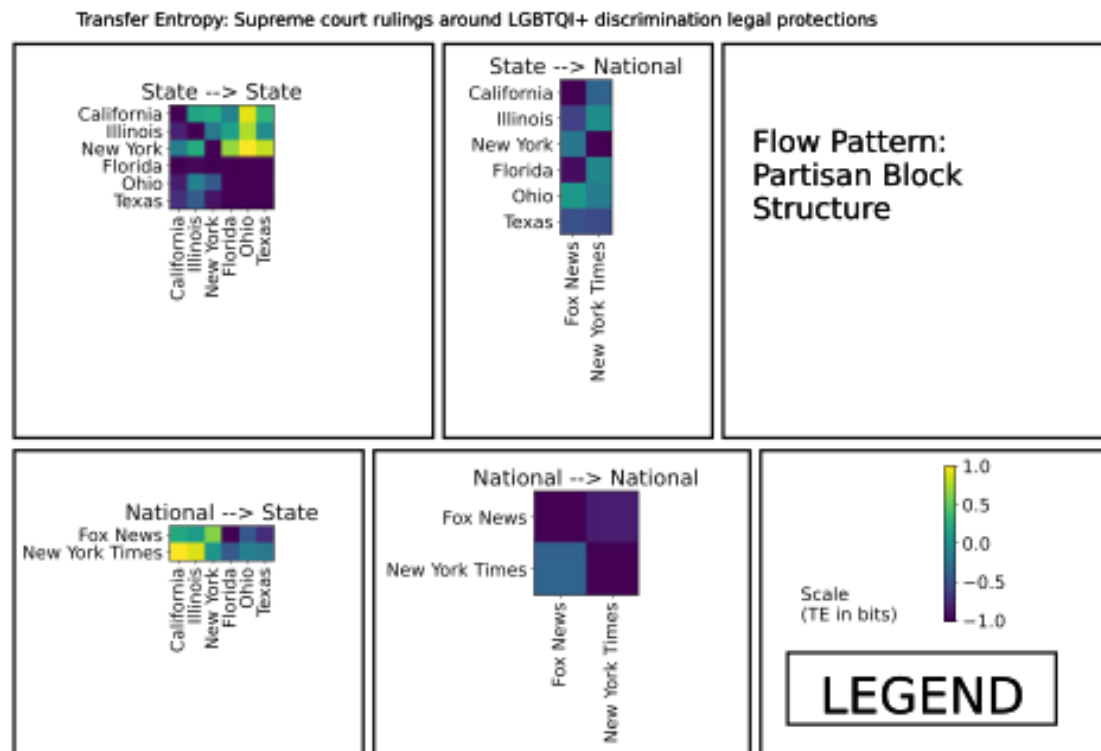


Figure 6. Empirical information flow pattern for Topic 4. National media such as *The New York Times* influenced the Democrat-leaning state collections, forming one influence block (bottom-left panel), then these states influenced the other Republican-leaning states (top-left panel).

To better understand exactly *what* information is propagating across media collections, we conducted a critical discourse analysis on a subset of our data from June 15-30, 2023. As in the first case study, we restricted our data to the set of articles that scored in the top two-thirds of articles with Topic 4 as their most probable topic.

Most stories in this subsample tended to discuss legal decisions impinging on transgender rights (or those of LGBTQI+ people writ large). Republican-majority states tended to sustain these discussions longer than Democrat-majority states did, and Democrat-majority states covered legal decisions *affirming* trans rights for longer than their Republican-majority counterparts did.

Specific Story: Kincaid v. Williams

We conducted a detailed analysis of one story reported across multiple local media collections—Kincaid v. Williams—which reflects the pattern of Democrat-leaning states driving discourse in Republican-leaning states per transfer entropy results (Figure 6). This 2023 Supreme Court case involved a trans woman's right to ADA protections based on gender dysphoria. The case presented significant legal precedent, as the Court's refusal to hear it allowed a Federal Circuit ruling recognizing ADA protections for gender dysphoria to stand.

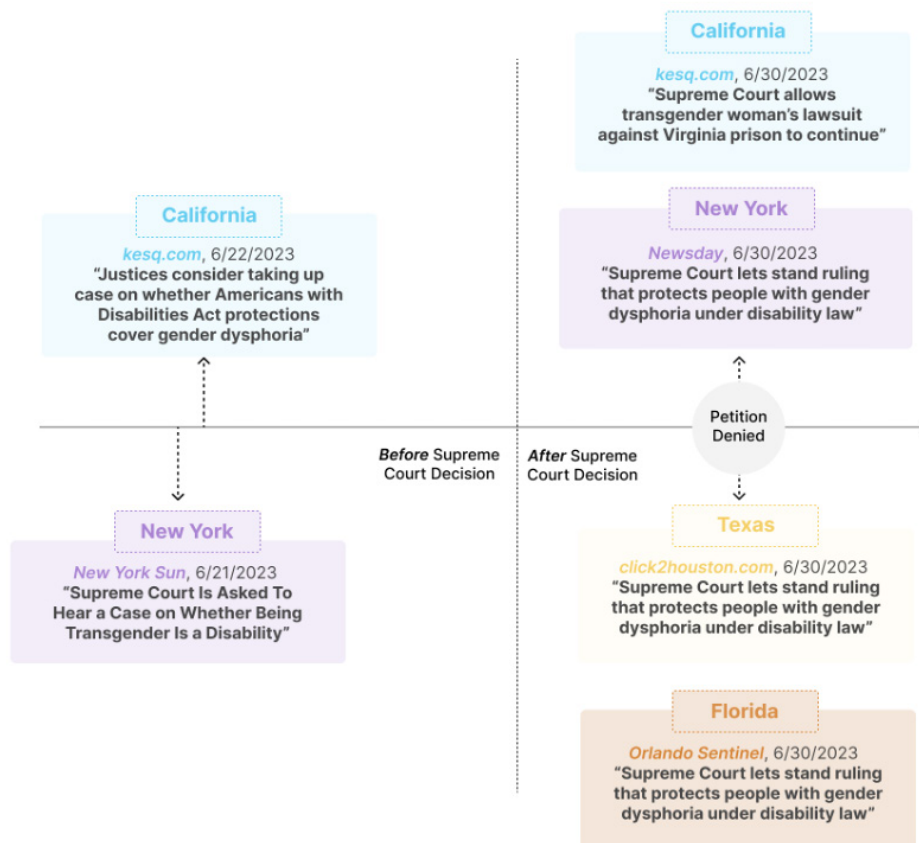


Figure 7. Two-step flow of discourses around Supreme Court rulings around LGBTQI+ legal protections. This flow chart shows the stories' evolution for the case study before and after the Supreme Court decision. Before the decision, only the Democrat-leaning states reported the story, but soon after, Republican-leaning states picked up the story as well.

Local outlets in New York and California reported on this case as the Supreme Court was considering hearing it, providing coverage on June 21 and June 22. After the Supreme Court refused to hear the case, local outlets in New York, California, Texas, and Florida all reported on this decision on June 30, 2023. Figure 7 visualizes this dynamic, with early reports in Democrat-leaning states before the decision and reports on June 30, after the decision, in both Democrat and Republican-leaning states.

All six articles emphasized the 2024 presidential election and the anti-trans dissenting opinions, de-emphasizing the importance of bodily autonomy battles for transgender individuals. Additionally, while news coverage of Williams' case never calls into question her account of the violence and harassment she experienced while incarcerated, it fails to discuss Williams' experiences in the broader context of the mistreatment of incarcerated trans individuals. Episodic framing contributes to the sense that Williams' experiences are aberrant or isolated, when in fact carceral violence is a systemic problem for transgender Americans. More discussion of this news story is provided in our discussion section below.

DISCUSSION

We observed national news outlets' coverage of transgender people driving coverage in local outlets, confirming results from prior work (Oliveira-Araujo 2024; Su and Xiao 2021; Widmer, Galletta, and Ash 2023). By employing transfer entropy, we found that national-local influence often involves two steps of information flow within the US news ecosystem. National news tends to move first, influencing a specific state's coverage; that state's coverage then influences outlets in the other states.

This echoes discussions of opinion diffusion from mass media to opinion leaders to less involved individuals, as well as previous results indicating that the *New York Times*, one of our national outlets, tends to set agendas for local news (Denham 2014; Zhang 2018). Furthermore, our results expand upon existing connections between agenda-setting and two-step flow patterns (Brosius and Kepplinger 1990; Weimann and Brosius 1994) to intermedia agenda-setting, by showing that the relationship between the two processes appears to be true not just between mass media and individual audiences, but also in the media-to-media setting—the spread of agendas *among* media outlets. We hypothesize that one state (and sometimes more than one state) may act as the “opinion leader” for a particular topic or story, guiding the agenda and its salience for outlets in the lagging states (McCombs, Shaw, and Weaver 2014; Stern, Livan, and Smith 2020).

Through our case studies, we show what kinds of information diffuse through the news ecosystem. We also provide analyses of the discursive results of the agenda-setting effects we measured using transfer entropy. Overall, we find a framing asymmetry in the news coverage of transgender issues between local and national news outlets; this confirms previous results (Buzzelli and Towery 2021; Oliveira-Araujo 2024). We also find that framing differences can be heterogeneous across topics, aligned with previous findings that agenda-setters may vary across topics (Stern, Livan, and Smith 2020). Assaults on transgender people's rights are often stripped of political context when discussed in the news (Capuzza and Spencer 2017; Osborn 2022), and when trans

rights are discussed thematically, trans people themselves risk having their stories appropriated as floating signifiers in broader political conflicts (Ciszek 2020).

In case study 1, we found that trans-affirming measures or individuals tend to be given the benefit of the doubt more often than anti-trans entities in local coverage. Both *The New York Times* and *Fox News* often portrayed transgender and LGBTQI+ individuals as patients subject to others' actions, while local news outlets in Florida, the mediating state, tended to portray trans and LGBTQI+ people with agency. On a specific story about a Christian college firing employees for using pronouns in their email signatures, local outlets in Florida and other states followed prior reporting by *Fox News*, using a more episodic framing that contrasted with *The New York Times'* thematic framing. Furthermore, across *Fox News*, the intermediary state of Florida, and the other lagging states, the university was described as Christian, perhaps to draw attention to the broader cultural conflict between US Christianity and LGBTQI+ people's rights (Castle 2019; Ciszek 2020).

Case study 2 explored legal battles over trans rights, with an in-depth look at the news coverage of the *Kincaid v. Williams* case upholding ADA protections for gender dysphoria. The two-step flow phenomenon in this case occurs in a partisan block structure with Democrat-leaning states driving Republican-leaning states at the local level. Our analysis reveals that the news reporting in New York and California prior to the Supreme Court declining to relitigate Williams' case tended to be more episodic in nature, whereas reporting after the Court's refusal across New York, California, Texas, and Florida used both episodic and thematic framing. New York local reporting before and after the Court decision provided more space to anti-trans actors and rhetoric compared to California. Across all local news reporting of this case, the incarcerated trans woman, Williams, was used as a "floating signifier" for broader political conflicts and agendas (Ciszek 2020). The violence that Williams experienced as a trans woman incarcerated in a men's prison is never disputed, condemned, or contextualized as a common experience for trans individuals; only the legal debates around her lawsuit are covered in depth. The lack of discussion of Williams' experiences as part of a larger pattern of anti-trans violence in a broadly violent US prison system matches patterns of invisibility noted by Capuzza and Spencer (2017).

Prior work indicates that local reporting can change how people think about transgender people (Michelson and Harrison 2020); other sources have found that local news media increases the propensity for public stance-taking (King, Pan, and Roberts 2017). Accurate, thoughtful portrayals of transgender people in US national and local media matter, but news coverage tends to portray transgender people as a wedge in a broader cultural conflict and employ episodic framings rather than discussing the systemic issues affecting the trans community. However, the two-step flow process we observed indicates an opportunity for targeted intervention. If a few states' media outlets serve as opinion leaders, intervening in those states first could impact coverage in other states for a particular topic. The interconnected nature of local and national news media in the United States presents unique challenges, but it can also afford cascading positive effects.

With an understanding of how frames vary across both geographic focus and audience partisanship for various media collections, future trans studies research is better equipped to study the dynamics of mainstream coverage of trans people

and issues in the US, which includes transphobia and strategies to mislead readers. Journalists can also use our analyses to investigate their own framing choices. Based on all our analyses, we suggest two possible interventions aimed at preventing the creation and spread of transphobic content within the media and, ultimately, the public. First, subtle discursive choices and framing matter, but it is not always clear how to make choices that will lead to better, more helpful reporting on trans issues. To this end, we advocate for the use and continued development of anti-transphobic style guides, which can help journalists and media outlets make informed choices regarding language use and adoption. We suggest that these guides more strongly emphasize the rhetorical use of floating signifiers to promote misinformative and transphobic frames. Second, because trans lives are often appropriated for broader political conflict, we propose the formation of a syndicate organization that provides news about trans issues, by well-informed reporters to local outlets. This would both support journalism by trans people and help local outlets begin & sustain coverage in a fairer manner.

Limitations

Our dataset, temporally, only covers three months of news data, and spatially, two major national outlets and local outlets from six states; therefore, the findings might not generalize beyond this specific temporal-spatial frame. Additionally, MediaCloud might not index all local and national news media outlets. Although we originally chose *The New York Times* for its often reactionary slant regarding transgender issues, this does mean that we do not include any national liberal outlets that are consistently supportive of trans rights. This could mean that we are missing, or potentially misattributing, information flows that originate with less reactionary national liberal outlets. All our data is also in the English language, omitting potential discourse in other languages in the US media landscape.

Although we implemented a component in our data pipeline to filter out national articles in the local collection, we still encountered some AP stories in our local dataset when we conducted our case studies, indicating that some national discourses persist in the local corpus. Additionally, some articles shared very similar (though not completely identical) texts and headlines, even though they do not share the same parent company. Vigilance with respect to shared story origins and other confounding factors is essential when studying local news. For some local collections, a single outlet accounted for a large percentage (> 20%) of all article volume, which might skew the types of discourses recorded or the volume of topics covered.

Topic modeling is an unsupervised method without a “ground truth” and depends on researchers’ subjective interpretation. Transfer entropy also requires several parameters where different values might yield different results. Future research might incorporate larger-scale datasets and more fine-tuned models.

In addition, because we did not observe the entire US news ecosystem, we cannot account for exogenous shocks when making causal claims. Both state and national media might respond independently to the same story, but, because of differences in capacity, local media might lag in their coverage, resulting in the *appearance* of influence by national media. Our case studies partially refute such alternative assumptions, but systematic and rigorous analysis on this issue is still missing. Elucidating

precise causal links in this ecosystem also requires microdata on reporters' exposure, attitudes, and behaviors, which is beyond the scope of this work.

The patterns we observe might not be specific to transgender discourses; they could result from a systematic power imbalance within US mainstream media. Nonetheless, our findings indicate directions for future research on transgender discourses. For example, the topics we find to be largely irrelevant to transgender issues do not experience a two-step flow pattern. Comparative studies on information flow patterns for other news topics could illuminate the media dynamics involved in upholding other kinds of hegemony.

Theoretically, it is important to note that while the two-step flows we have found appear similar in form to the original two-step flow process proposed by Katz (1957), where ideas are broadcasted from mass media to opinion leaders and then spread through to less active segments of the population via peer-to-peer communication, we do not examine how ideas spread from mass media to any individuals. Our study is confined to the spread of ideas *within* mass media.

Practical Implications

Intervention: An Evidence-based Style Guide for Trans News

When local journalists follow national coverage in their reporting, it is likely that discursive biases that explain the repression of transgender people by the state—such as emphases on a few hyper-visible individuals, omission of significant details, or portrayals of trans people as deviant—are not obvious (Capuzza and Spencer 2017; Fink and Palmer 2020; Fischer 2019). For this reason, we emphasize the use of existing guides such as those from the Human Rights Council (n.d.), Our Watch (n.d.), and Transgender Europe (Yurinova 2023) when reporting on trans issues.

Furthermore, we encourage further development of evidence-based, plain-language style guides for reporting on trans issues. We suggest leveraging scholarship on the rhetorical use of floating signifiers to help journalists, especially local journalists, better understand how uncritical adoption of subtle emphases can have ripple effects on other local outlets' coverage and, ultimately, influence public opinion (Ciszek 2020). An example of a subtle emphasis is the usage of the adjective "Christian" to describe the university in Case Study 1 in a *Fox News* headline. This was subsequently adopted by local outlets, though it was not present in *The New York Times*' headline. *Fox News*' use of "Christian" might be an attempt to contextualize this story within a conflict between religious and LGBTQI+ identities in the US. This conflict has been given particular attention in service settings, and is often framed as a conflict between LGBTQI+ people's rights as consumers or supporters and the Christian supplier's right to deny service based on religion (Minton et al. 2017). However, use of guidelines and tools containing advice about language usage for critically parsing such coverage might have produced news articles with different implicit associations.

Intervention: A Trans News Syndicate

The coverage of *Kincaid v. Williams* (Case Study 2) demonstrates how transgender people's stories can be used to score political points instead of surfacing concerns relevant to transgender people. Therefore, ensuring that local news outlets can disseminate informative, compassionate reporting is crucial. A national trans news syndicate

that employs transgender journalists and pays them to cover trans issues would enable local outlets to offer high-quality coverage of relevant transgender issues. Such a syndicate could have articles about *Kincaid v. Williams* available to local outlets in any state well before the Supreme Court's refusal to hear the case. While heterogeneity is important *within* a given local news ecosystem and *between* different news ecosystems, making high-quality coverage readily available to local news editors allows them to make more informed decisions and alleviates the constraints of reporter availability. Such editorial decisions might even shift audience opinions and interest over time, especially if such decisions foreground issues and themes that are fundamentally important to trans rights in the US today. Additionally, recent work has found that parasocial contact with transgender influencers on social media is associated with reduced beliefs in harmful conspiracy theories about transgender people (Jolley et al. 2025). Therefore, consistent engagement with news about transgender people written by transgender people might foster similar perspective-taking effects in a different subset of the population.

Future Work

Future work can use the dataset we create and release publicly in this work to construct a larger, multi-year dataset on transgender discourses that also incorporates news that is not about trans people in the same period, to contrast agenda-setting effects and framing dynamics *unique* to trans discourses. Although our current dataset's topic modeling output and interpreted topic labels can produce useful research, a higher quality annotated dataset can be created alongside a taxonomy of *human-generated* thematic labels to further enable studying intermedia agenda-setting in the context of transgender discourses.

Our findings can serve as hypotheses for future work to investigate some of the differences we observe in framing or attribution of agency in more depth. With a larger dataset spanning multiple years, future research can assess temporal variation in the trends we observe.

We also encourage future work to explore interactions between news and social media by curating specific stories and narratives, examining which specific articles in trans discourse are shared on social media platforms and how people conform their existing beliefs and agenda with news reports. The broader social media discourse on trans people and issues interacting with news media discourse can help better illuminate the dynamic state of online transphobic content in the US.

Positionality Statement

The authors of this paper carefully examined the interplay between our identities and those of our studied population, transgender people, reflecting on how our identities and values guide our interpretation of the findings and the potential implications, both harmful and beneficial. The authors self-identities span one or many of the following categories: women, queer, nonbinary, disabled, and marginalized racial and national identities. However, we do not have lived transgender experiences shaping our social and political consciousness. This might hinder the ways we conduct our research and how we make sense of our findings. As a collective, we believe transparency helps us to conduct this research in a non-extractive way, contributing to our shared

goal of advancing and advocating for transgender rights. While we exist in a privileged position as academics, we do hope our study can help counter transphobia in the US and beyond, providing possible paths for intervention and future research.

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APPENDIX

Empirical Flow Patterns for All Topics Not Displayed in the Main Article

Figures A1 to A17 display the four transfer entropy plots for all 20 topics (except the three topics visualized in the main articles: topics 1, 4, and 18), examining the influence of all six state-level media collections on both national outlets, national outlets on state-level collections, state-level collections on each other, and national outlets on each other.

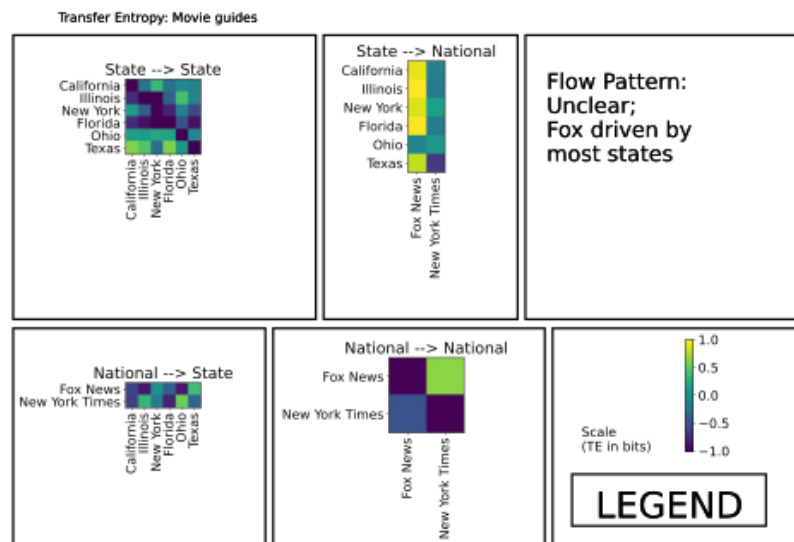


Figure A1. Empirical flow pattern for Topic o

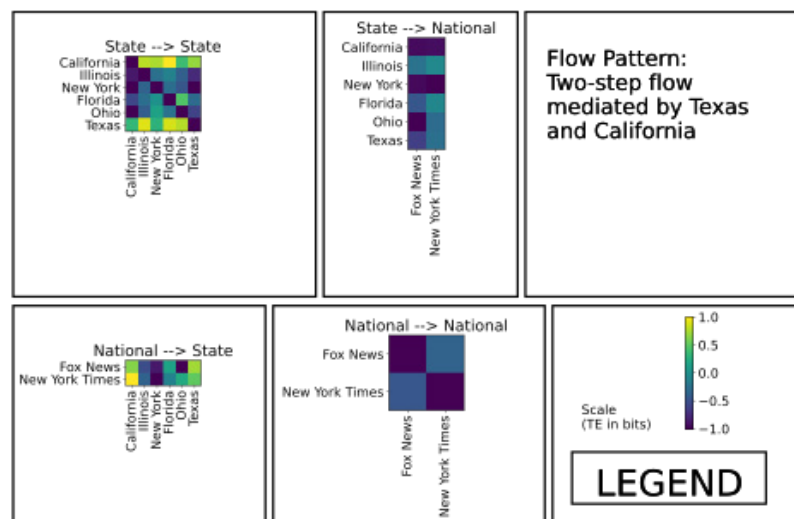


Figure A2. Empirical flow pattern for Topic 2

Transfer Entropy: Pride month corporate marketing backlash and company response

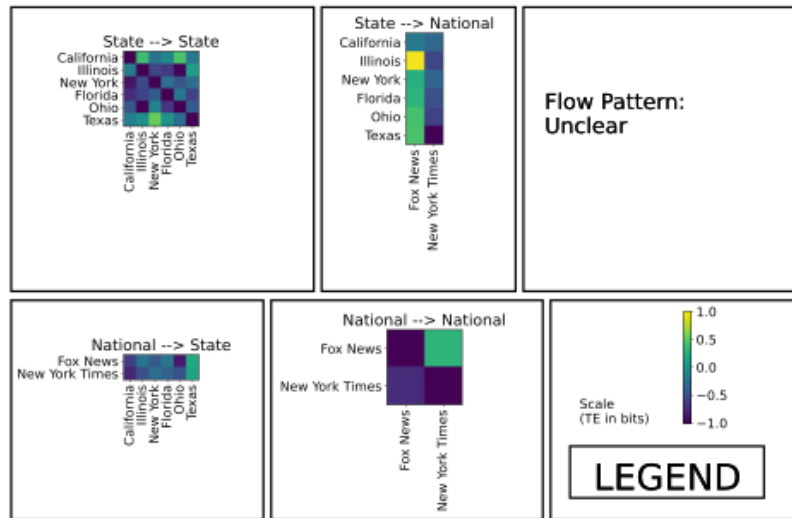


Figure A3. Empirical flow pattern for Topic 3

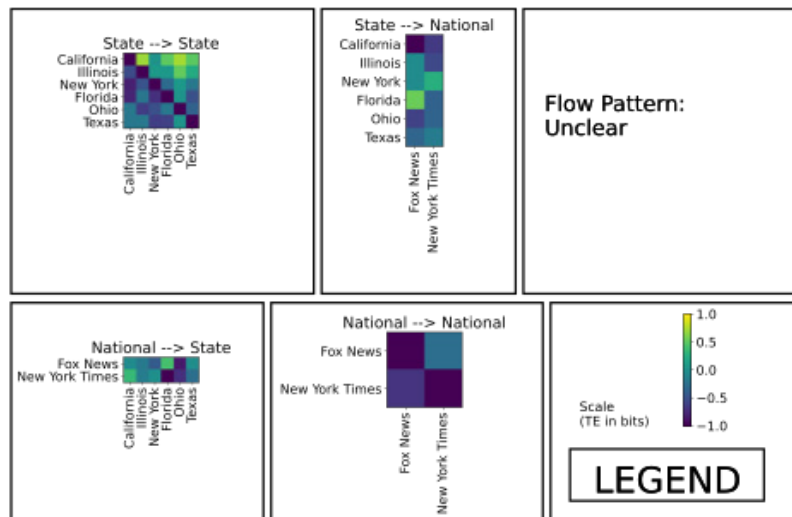


Figure A4. Empirical flow pattern for Topic 5

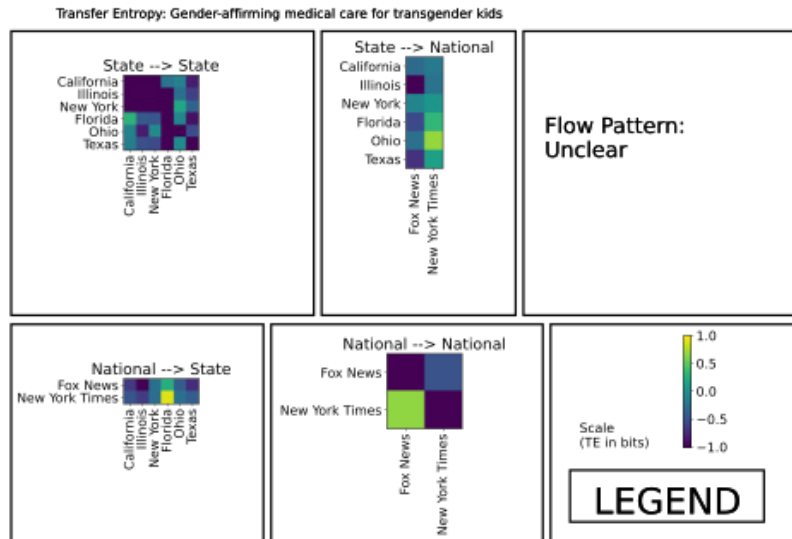


Figure A5. Empirical flow pattern for Topic 6

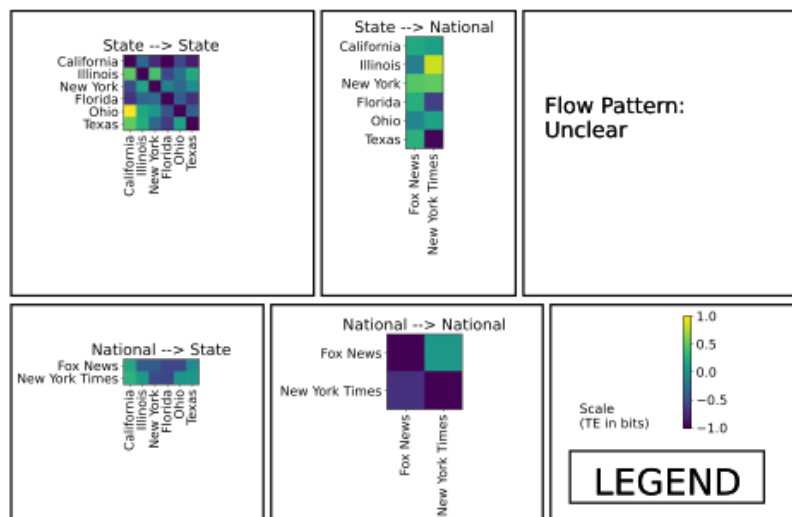


Figure A6. Empirical flow pattern for Topic 7

Transfer Entropy: Incarcerated mothers & transphobia and homophobia in sports

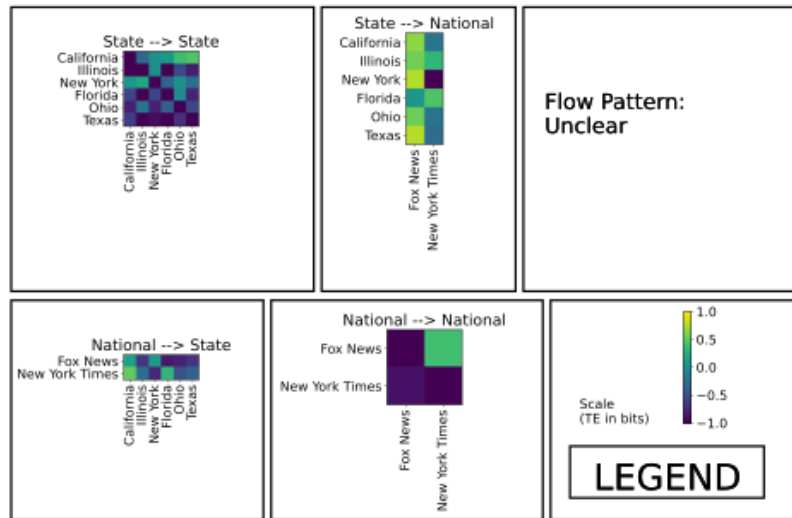


Figure A7. Empirical flow pattern for Topic 8

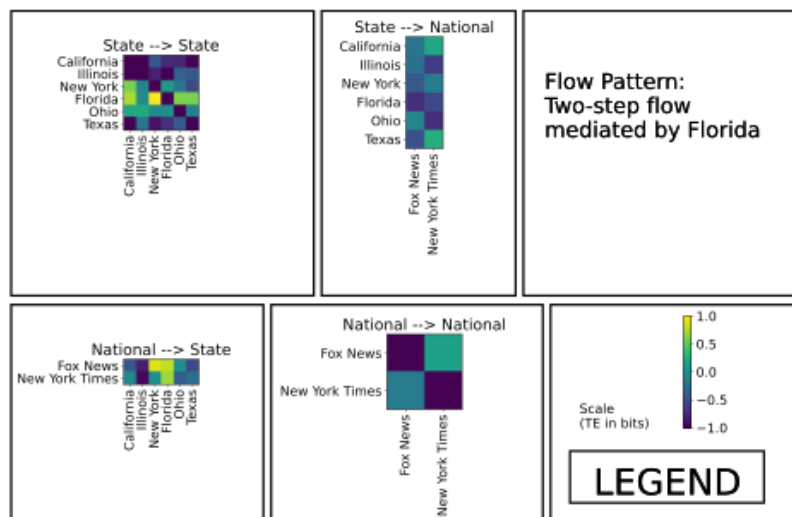


Figure A8. Empirical flow pattern for Topic 9

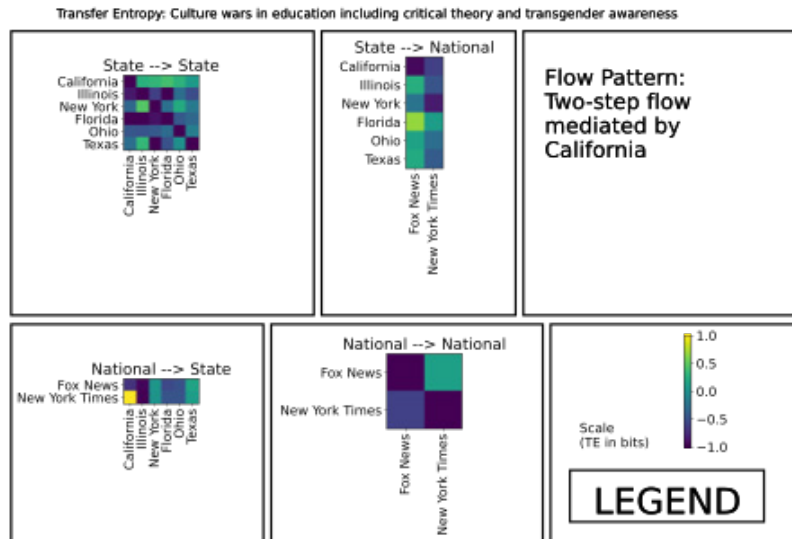


Figure A9. Empirical flow pattern for Topic 10

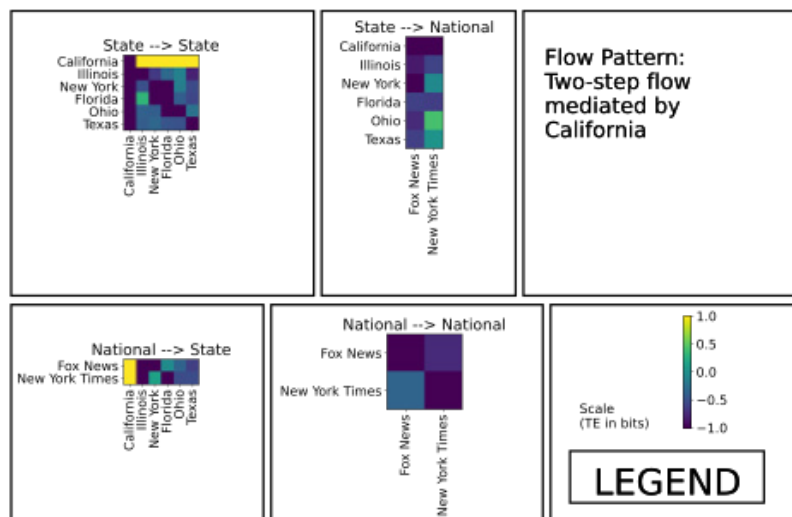


Figure A10. Empirical flow pattern for Topic 11

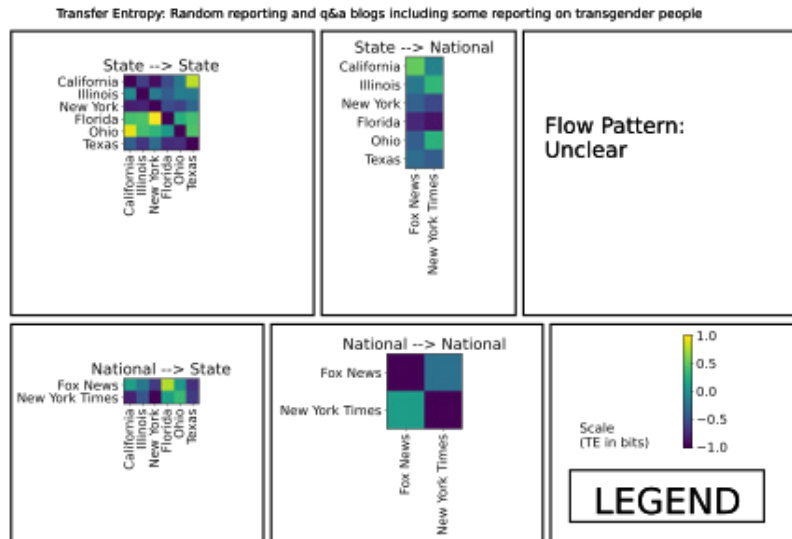


Figure A11. Empirical flow pattern for Topic 12

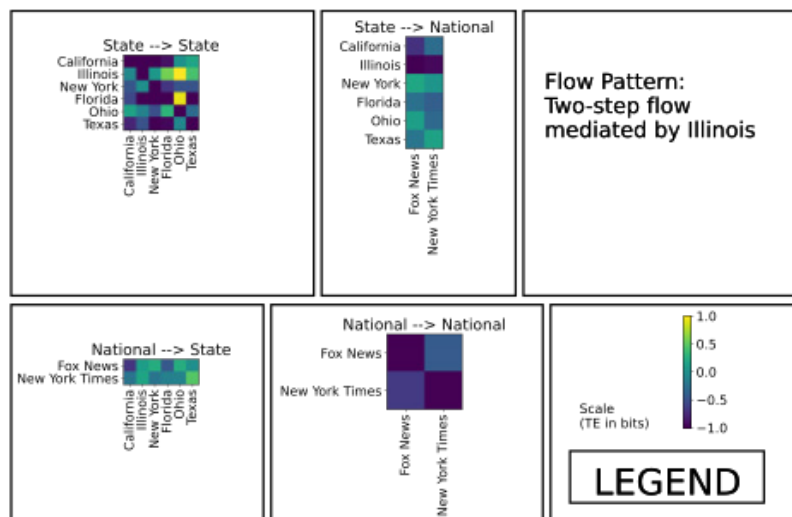


Figure A12. Empirical flow pattern for Topic 13

Transfer Entropy: Transgender Montana house representative Zoey Zephyr

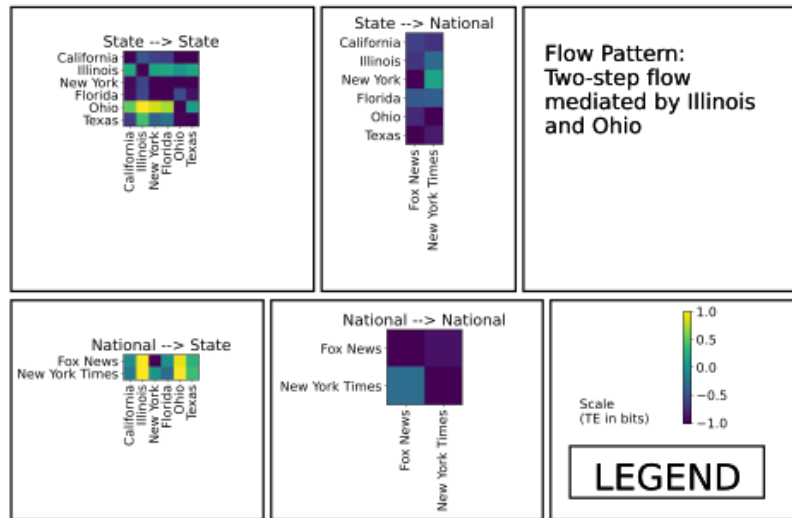


Figure A13. Empirical flow pattern for Topic 14

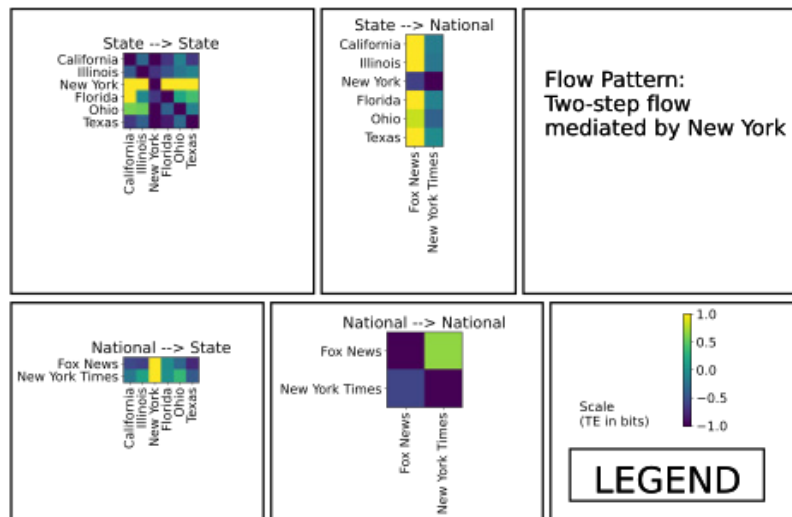


Figure A14. Empirical flow pattern for Topic 15

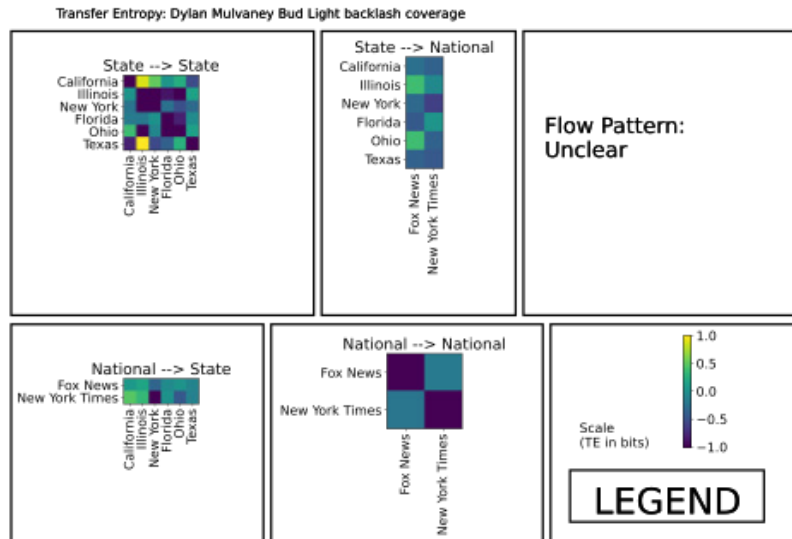


Figure A15. Empirical flow pattern for Topic 16

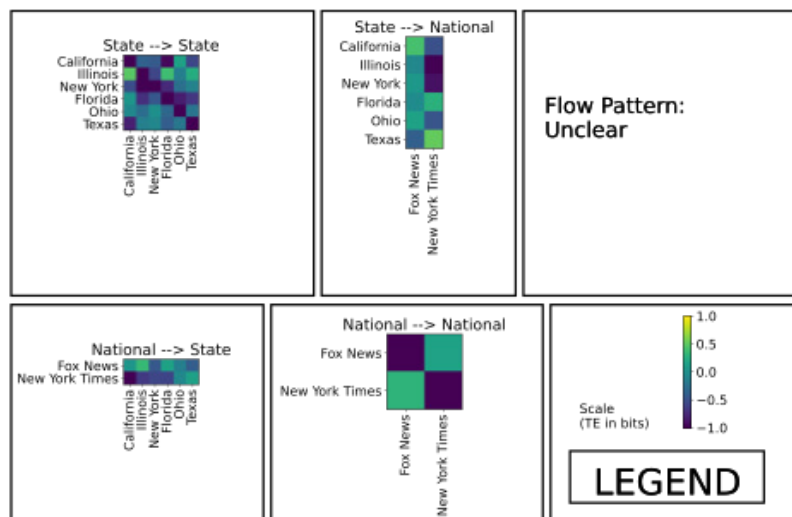


Figure A16. Empirical flow pattern for Topic 17

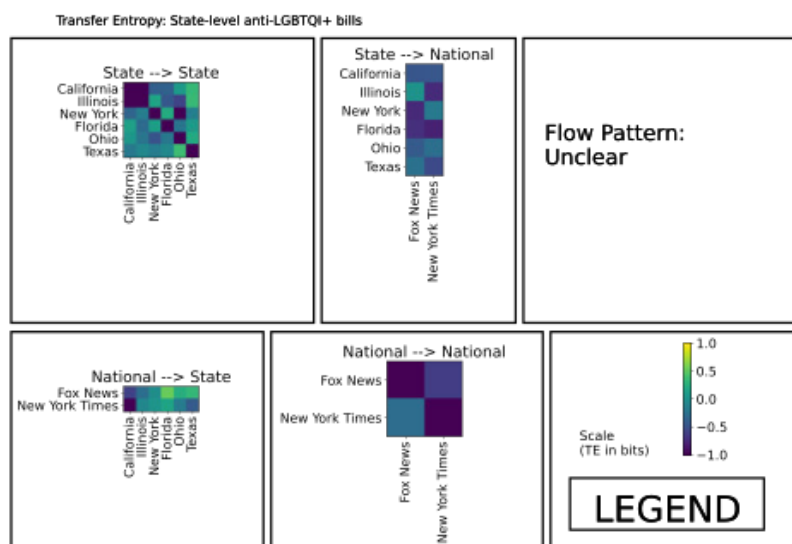


Figure A17. Empirical flow pattern for Topic 19

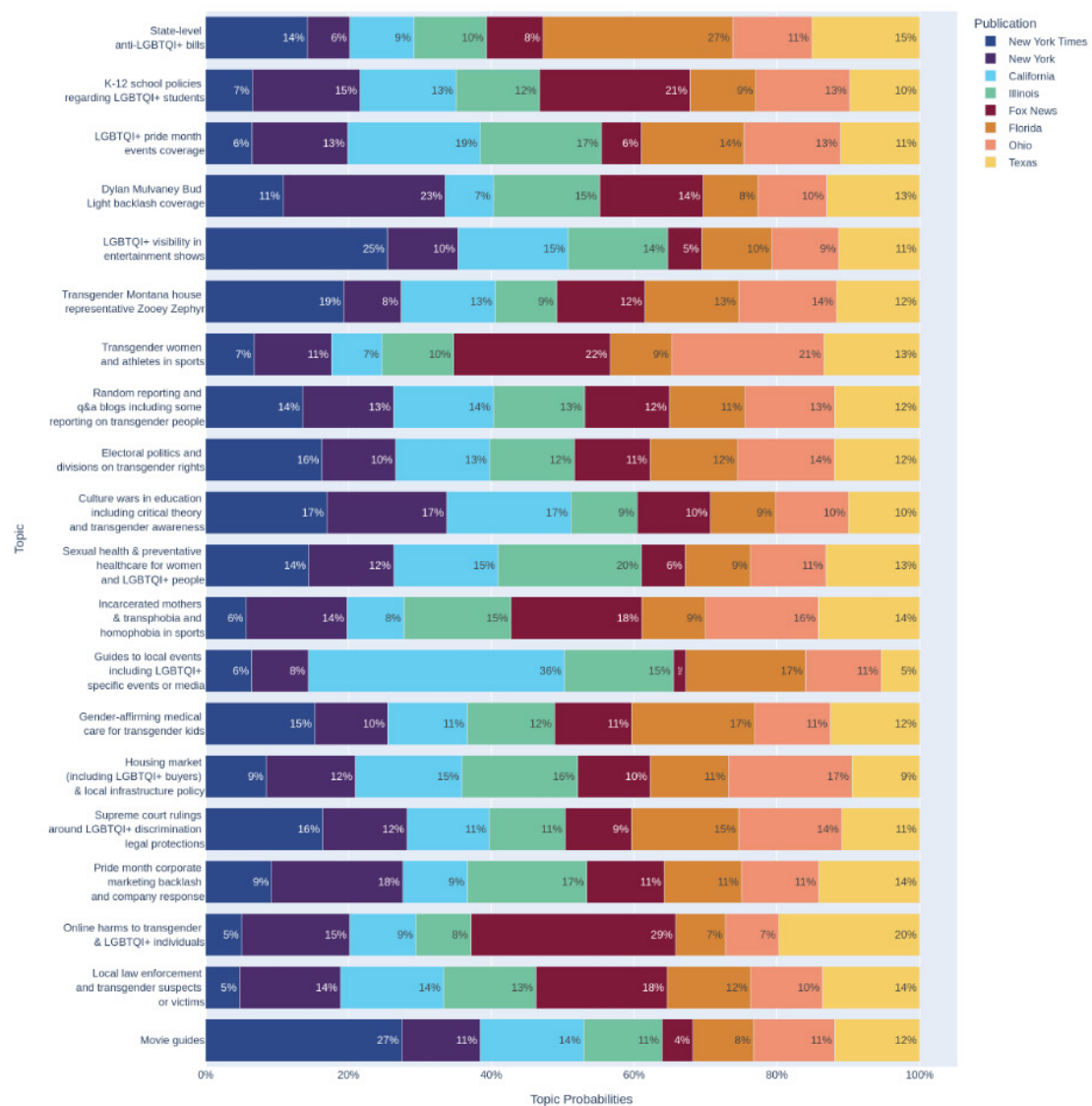


Figure A18. Topic distribution per media collection in our dataset. This stacked bar graph shows the relative contribution of each publication outlets or state for each topic. Each topic is represented by a horizontal row. Each row has six bar segments representing each outlet's topic contribution in percentages

Cyber Trans Panic: Chinese Trans-Antagonistic Feminism and the Transnational Circulation of Transmisogyny on Social Media

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Trans-antagonism and transmisogyny have gained increasing visibility on social media globally. In this article, we explore how trans-antagonism and transmisogyny have developed among Chinese feminist communities, called *jijin nüquan* (“radical feminists”) on Chinese social media. We argue that the trans-antagonism and transmisogyny displayed on Chinese social media must be understood through a historical and transnational lens in order to gain a more comprehensive understanding of it. We contend that the increasing policing of queer feminist organizations has confined all feminists to social media spaces where misinformation and disinformation are widely circulated, contributing to the trans-antagonistic views widely held by *jijin nüquan* feminists. Using case studies from Douban, one of the primary social media platforms used by *jijin nüquan* feminists for mobilization, we examine how the politics of translation—specifically, the histories of translating the concepts of sex, gender, and trans into Chinese—have contributed to *jijin nüquan* feminists’ trans-antagonistic views. Finally, we investigate how the trans-antagonistic trope of trans women invading women’s bathrooms has localized trans-antagonism into a particular form of transmisogyny. Through this analysis, we call for a rethinking of the process of transnational knowledge production and the political coalition between trans, queer, and feminist movements in contemporary China.

KEYWORDS trans-antagonism; TERF; transmisogyny; social media; China

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On June 6, 2020, British author J.K. Rowling retweeted an op-ed piece that discussed certain COVID-19 measures concerning “people who menstruate.” In the tweet, Rowling mocked the phrase “people who menstruate” and implied that the author of the article must have forgotten the word “women” (Rowling 2020b). When faced with criticism from users on X, formerly Twitter, she continued to assert that using trans-inclusive language to discuss menstruation equates to “erasing the concept of sex” (Rowling 2020a). In a later tweet, Rowling claimed that her defense of “women” was rooted in a response to male violence. She stated that while transgender people¹ are “vulnerable in the same way as women—i.e., to male violence”—(cisgender) women like herself “think sex is real and has lived consequences” (Rowling 2020c). Thus, she places cisgender women in a position of “real” and “consequential” vulnerability, arguing that they cannot escape male violence because of their “real” sex, thereby implying that trans women do not have a real or consequential womanhood.

Rowling’s tweets and stance sparked widespread debates in Anglophone media. The controversy gained even more attention when actors associated with the *Harry Potter* franchise, such as Daniel Radcliffe (2020) and Emma Watson (2020), voiced their support for trans people. Many trans activists, internet users, and authors directly addressed Rowling’s misinformation and trans-antagonistic attitude.² Drawing from Florence Ashley’s (2018, 4) work, this article defines trans-antagonism as a more broadly applicable term than transphobia, referring to how cisgender normative “beliefs and attitudes generate an opposition toward trans people while refusing to cast them as necessarily irrational or hateful.” Additionally, we use the term transmisogyny to refer to what Jules Gill-Peterson (2024) describes as the “targeted devaluation of both trans femininity and people perceived to be trans feminine.”

Rowling’s trans-antagonistic position and the surrounding debates have spread beyond the Anglophone world. In June 2020, on Chinese social media, *Harry Potter* fans and other social media users rose to defend Rowling against “transgender political correctness” and “cancel culture.” On *Weibo* (微博, “micro-blog”) and *Douban.com* (豆瓣网, “Douban-net,” Douban henceforth), two of the most influential Chinese social media platforms for user content production, most Chinese social media users agreed with Rowling and the articles that support Rowling were the ones most frequently translated into Chinese. Meanwhile, the robust responses from the trans community in the Anglophone world have hardly been mentioned, let alone translated or introduced into the Chinese-language debate.

Due to language barriers and limited internet access, it was indeed difficult for Chinese social media users to get a comprehensive view of the debate in the Anglophone

1 In this article, we use “transgender people” and “trans people” as the umbrella term for people whose gender is different from or does not fit comfortably with the sex they were assigned at birth. Trans people may use a variety of other terms to describe themselves, including nonbinary, genderqueer, etc.

2 For example, UK-based transgender activist group Mermaids (2020) urged Rowling to “[not] speak about trans children, unless you’ve listened to them first,” and US-based YouTuber Natalie Wynn (ContraPoints, 2021) made a video explaining, among other things, how the “sex is real” rhetoric denies trans people’s identities while implying that trans people are ignoring or rejecting science or facts.

world. Accessing these debates and translating them into Chinese requires extensive labor, often performed voluntarily by some social media users. However, what was translated disproportionately favored the trans-antagonistic perspective, with a majority of the subsequent trans-antagonistic comments and tweets coming from users identified as feminists. Over the past decade, China has witnessed a significant feminist mobilization and growing consciousness on social media, with many individuals taking up the label of *jijin nüquan* (激进女权, “radical feminists” or “radical women’s rights”) to identify themselves.³ Meanwhile, the activities and visibility of feminist and queer non-profit organizations have significantly decreased, following accusations from state-affiliated institutions and media labeling both feminism and LGBTQ+ activism as the “invasion of Western ideology.” Feminists on Chinese social media, particularly those identified as *jijin nüquan*, have increasingly exhibited explicit trans-antagonism and especially transmisogyny in recent years.

Though there are many studies on trans-exclusionary radical feminism and the “gender critical” movement in the Anglophone world, a transnational approach that incorporates the mutual influence of translation and local political practices is still largely absent (Bassi and LaFleur 2022). Moreover, there is little research on trans-antagonistic discourses and politics in Chinese context, despite Sinophone trans studies have gained scholarly attention as an emerging field in the last decade (Chiang 2012). Existing monographs and edited volumes are more strongly rooted in historical and literary studies, often mediated by decolonial theories (Chiang 2012; Sommer 2020; Stryker 2012). This scholarship contributes to the epistemological project of constructing an Asian transness outside the West’s modernizing framework of “transgender” as a self-claimed identity. It also critiques the singularization of Chinese trans bodies in the context of China while overlooking Taiwan, Hong Kong, and Asian diasporic spaces. While the works categorized under what Chiang (2020) calls “transtopia” bring important insights to the field, trans studies—when named after the geographic-linguistic formation of the Sinophone—have had limited application to contemporary Chinese trans issues. This has, in some ways, obscured the evolving trans identities, cultures, and discourses burgeoning in Sinophone societies in recent years (Hu and Wang 2024). This gap is even more pronounced in the cross-cutting field of feminist media studies, where there is a noticeable lack of published academic work on Chinese trans-antagonistic feminism, particularly in comparison to feminist mobilizations beyond Sinophone societies. However, our research does not merely seek to fill these gaps by treating Chinese social media as an incidental case. Rather, our focus on translation provides an epistemological framework for analyzing trans-antagonism and transmisogyny in a transnational context, accounting for the interplay between linguistic hegemony and the politics of translation. We argue that this framework is crucial for understanding the rise of fascist “gender-critical”

- 3 Only some feminists in China take up this label of *jijin nüquan*, and its usage is primarily on social media. While the majority of *jijin nüquan* feminists online do not actively claim a shared lineage with the radical feminism in the Anglophone world in the 1960s, they share some beliefs with and consciously learn from the more recent trans-exclusionary radical feminism in the Anglophone world. We hope to shine some lights on the complicated relationship between *jijin nüquan* feminists, other feminists in China, and Anglophone radical feminism in this article.

movements on a global scale.

As our research question, this article explores how and why transmisogynistic discourses have become prevalent among many *jijin nüquan* feminists on Chinese social media. Considering the spaces where *jijin nüquan* feminists mobilize, we use case studies and discourse analysis as our methods, as analyzing representative cases and their discourses can efficiently foster a holistic understanding of cultural systems of action without the need to present numerous examples (Tellis 1997). After identifying Douban as the primary Chinese social media platform used by *jijin nüquan* feminists, we search for articles and posts using keywords such as *kua xingbie* (跨性别, “transgender”), *luo lin* (罗琳, “J.K. Rowling”), and *kua nv* (跨女, “trans women”). The rationale for choosing these keywords is twofold. First, it is based on our experiences as long-time Douban users who have observed the popular terms used by both pro-trans and trans-antagonistic users. Second, it directly responds to our research questions on how and why transmisogynistic discourses have become prevalent among *jijin nüquan* feminists on Chinese social media. Douban consists of two primary user groups: those who post in “Douban groups” and those who use the “timeline broadcast” feature. While *jijin nüquan* feminists, who are predominantly Douban group users, rarely engage directly with broadcast users, exceptions occur when a post or article trends on Douban. In such cases, it appears in the timeline of Douban group users even if they do not follow the original poster. Based on this rationale, we identified one trending article and one trending broadcast, both posted by pro-trans users—one a translation, the other an original personal testimony, that attracted a significant number of trans-antagonistic comments from *jijin nüquan* feminists.

Through analyzing the content and comment section of these two posts, we find that both the politics of translation and the circulation of the image of “trans women invading women’s bathrooms” have significantly played part in generating transmisogynistic backlashes. We argue that trans-antagonism is perpetuated through the spread of false images of trans women as threats to the safety of cisgender women and this image has gained cross-cultural popularity in part due to the current feminist emphasis on biological vulnerability as a discursive mobilizing tool in contemporary China. Our article calls for transnational solidarity against the circulation of harmful transmisogynistic images and discursive elements and contributes to the scholarly effort to rethink queer and trans feminist futures in China.

GLOBAL BACKGROUND ON TRANS-ANTAGONISM AND TRANSMISOGYNY

To understand how trans-antagonism emerges and circulates in China, we situate it within three lines of inquiry: the origins of trans-antagonism, particularly transmisogyny, in the Anglophone world; the politics of transnational information circulation and translation; and the history of feminism in contemporary China.

In the Anglophone world, the last two decades have witnessed a global rise in antagonism toward trans individuals, particularly transmisogyny against trans women, among those who identify as lesbians, feminists, and otherwise politically progressive. Similar anti-trans antagonisms occupied feminist politics in the 1980s, as exemplified by Janice Raymond (1980) and Mary Daly (1990), who portrayed trans women as delusional and a threat to cisgender women. However, the recent resurgence of such antag-

onism calls for special attention and necessitates new analyses. Scholars have examined the Neo-Fascist roots of the “gender critical” movement around the globe (Bassi and LaFleur 2022; Butler 2021; 2024), particularly in their dangerous political vision of population control. From an intersectional perspective, scholars have highlighted a long tradition of the cult of femininity, the mid-19th century US extolment of Christian, domestic, white women as embodying “true womanhood,” while Black women were denied womanhood under the regime of gendered white supremacy (Snorton 2017; Spillers 1987). The current TERF objective of gatekeeping “femininity” as a category with a fixed meaning and standard is rooted in anti-Black racism and the depiction of white femininity as innocent and vulnerable. In terms of historical antagonism against trans women, Jules Gill-Peterson (2024) argues that transmisogyny is a global phenomenon that converges with the imperial regimes of the UK and the US to dominate local populations.

When we investigate the contemporary global trans panic, one particularly notable phenomenon is the circulation of misinformation and disinformation, especially online, where much trans-exclusionary content is generated and spread. The harm caused by misinformation and disinformation about transgender people is evident in health-care practices, policies, legislation, and public opinions about trans individuals (Billard 2024; Lockmiller 2023). Scholars in critical misinformation and disinformation studies suggest that we focus more closely on the ideological context and political consequences of such content (Billard 2023; Kuo and Marwick 2021). Rather than treating misinformation and disinformation as mere glitches in an otherwise clear and transparent system of information circulation, we must examine the underlying power struggles and how historically dominant groups use misinformation and disinformation to advance their political aims.

We are particularly interested in the translation and transnational, translingual circulation of misinformation and disinformation. When we discuss transmisogyny as a global phenomenon, it is crucial to emphasize the critical role of translation and cross-lingual practices. Translation does not occur between two perfectly independent languages in a vacuum; rather, it operates within unequal power structures. Therefore, in subsequent sections, we will closely examine an example of the politics of translation, exploring which images are highlighted and how the translation and vernacularizing of terms contribute to a trans-antagonistic understanding of gender.

In our analysis of the Chinese translation of transmisogynist content, we identify the “trans women invading women’s bathroom” narrative as what Patricia Hill Collins (1999) would call a controlling image, one that targets a group of people and marks them as morally wrong, thereby justifying their oppression. To examine the formation of such a controlling image, we will first contextualize trans issues within the historical context of Chinese feminism from the 1990s to the present. Then, by focusing on the politics of translation, we will explore the inherent crisis within the Chinese translation of trans-related lexicon and attempt to answer the question of how this controlling image has gained such a powerful hold on the imaginations of Chinese trans-exclusionary feminists. On this basis, we will further discuss the ideological foundations behind this mobilization and how they facilitate the transnational and translingual dissemination of the misinformation and disinformation about trans women.

CONTEXTUALIZING TRANS ISSUES IN CHINESE FEMINIST MOVEMENTS

The collective identity of *jijin nüquan* and the broader Chinese feminist consciousness on social media must be understood within its historical, political, and socio-economic context. Following the 1995 World Conference on Women in Beijing, mainstream feminist activism involved collaboration between civil society, government, and other institutions pushing for more research and the implementation of legal and social changes. This in turn fostered a relatively robust environment for the growth of NGOs and feminist activists. Since 2000, feminist activism has increasingly shifted away from government collaboration toward NGOs, community-based organizing, and individual activism. This shift has been accompanied by growing visibility of feminist activism, thanks to the rise of social media and a vibrant urban, educated youth population with internet access. Wang (2018, 264) suggests that the new generation of urban young women differs from their predecessors, as they are more “self-assertive, rebellious, and bolder than previous generations in pursuing career expectations.” Ye (2021, 93) also observes that this generation of feminists use a global grammar of protests, such as human rights and individual freedom. However, institutional and political organizing in the more formal sense remain underdeveloped.

It is worth noting that during this period of robust work by NGOs, informal community organizing, and individual activism, queer and trans women played an important role. LGBTQ+ feminist activists displayed “open defiance of heterosexual normativity” and maintained a “strong focus on body politics” (Wang 2018, 266). Within NGOs, trans activism gained significant support and resources from Lala (拉拉, a local term adapted from transliteration of “lesbian”) activism.⁴ For example, one of the most famous Lala organizations, *Tongyu* (同语, “Common Language”), provided legal support for China’s first transgender employment discrimination case in April 2017. Activists from *Tongyu* also largely contributed to work that led to the founding of Trans Brotherhood China in 2018 to serve trans masculine people. It was common for queer feminist activism and feminist NGOs in China during this period to include, support, and empower trans activism.

Feminist activism led by queer women, which has generally been trans-inclusive, experienced a significant decline over the last decade as freedom of speech became increasingly restricted. In 2015, the arrest of the “five feminist sisters” in Beijing marked the end of most offline feminist activism (Wang 2015). The Law on the Administration of Domestic Activities of Foreign NGOs, which came into effect in 2017, stipulates that NGOs receiving funds from abroad must undergo a double-approval registration process or face penalties, including fines and arrests. Since no LGBTQ+ NGOs have been officially recognized by the Chinese government, they are considered “illegal” and have struggled to secure any funding. In this context, queer and trans NGOs and community organizing efforts, even if still operating offline or within small circles, tend to keep a low profile on the internet to avoid further crackdowns by the government. This has contributed to an already heavily censored internet environment, where liberal human

4 Lala is a term used for sexual minority and gender-nonconforming women and people assigned female at birth in Mainland China. See Engebretsen (2014) for an ethnographic study of Chinese Lala’s activism and their political subjectivity formation. Notably, Lala as an identity term is inclusive of trans people, as Huang (2015) points out.

rights discourse, LGBTQ+ discussions and expressions, and social issue discussions are often viewed by the government as social unrest that needs to be suppressed.

Without NGOs or activists maintaining an online presence or engaging in public education, feminist discourse has become fragmented. The feminist consciousness of the emerging class of urban young women more often comes from news-related posts on Chinese social media rather than from feminist and queer theory, which is absent in publishing and higher education. Moreover, with the rise of social media, this new generation of feminists mostly turns to individual influencers and online communities to explore feminist issues. While these online communities can be empowering and inspiring, they can also become homogenous and susceptible to state propaganda, misinformation, and disinformation, thereby marginalizing queer and trans voices.

It is within these feminist social media spaces that a politically radical group, *jijin nüquan*, has become increasingly vocal. They are identifiable as a group through their presence across various social media platforms, particularly Douban and Weibo. Though there are individual differences, the most common principles of *jijin nüquan* include *buhun buyu* (不婚不育, “no marriage no offspring”) and *dannü huzhu* (单女互助, “single women mutual aid”).⁵ Our observation of these discussions shows that *jijin nüquan* have adopted a strategy of mobilization that emphasizes cisgender women’s bodily vulnerability and that transmisogyny has become a popular attitude—sometimes even a central principle—among this group of feminists.

POLITICS OF TRANSLATION AND THE TRANSNATIONAL CIRCULATION OF TRANS-ANTAGONISM

Compared to the large volume of translations supporting Rowling, opposing views were much less frequently translated and, when they were, often received disproportionate backlash. To better understand how the harmful image of “trans women invading women’s bathrooms” and misinformation and disinformation from Anglophone social media influence Chinese-language debates, we will closely examine two cases on Douban. Both involve content posted by trans authors, with the majority of comments coming from *jijin nüquan* feminists. Analysis shows a series of linguistic translation failures plays a crucial role in facilitating the transnational circulation of trans-antagonistic misinformation.

In the first example, Douban user Enlightening published a trans advocacy article on July 8, 2020, in the midst of the Rowling debates. The article was their translation of a video transcript by English YouTuber Jammidodger (2020), which explains why Rowling’s position and writings on trans people are erroneous and harmful. This post sparked a heated and long-lasting debate in the comments section,⁶ where many com-

5 The political principles of *jijin nüquan* have been influenced by Korean feminist movement (see Sussman 2023).

6 Enlightening had 11,625 regular followers. This translation received 687 likes and 1,526 favorites, and it was reposted 667 times, which made it the most-viewed post arguing against Rowling’s transphobic views on Douban. Over 350 comments were posted from the day of publishing to December 2022, two and a half years after the original post was published https://www.douban.com/note/769986412/?_i=4657274uTAE_To. Numbers retrieved on January 13, 2023.

ments focused on bathroom access. One comment stands out as representative of the most common rhetoric:

1a. Sex relies on comparison, which builds upon real sexual difference, not mind! In the reign of mind, having nothing to do with real sexual characteristics, gender identity exists. But for the private spaces, only real sexual characteristics matter, especially like toilets and bathrooms. These spaces must acknowledge real sex. (Douban user Tao Jiang)

In this comment, the user was less focused on acknowledging the legitimacy of gender identity by distinguishing between sex and gender, and more on framing gender in contrast with sex, with the latter being understood through an ambiguous notion of “sexual difference.” The distinction between “sex” and “gender” as that between “body” and “mind” frequently appears in these trans-antagonistic comments. When making this distinction, some users employed the Chinese translations of “sex” and “gender,” while others insert the English words “sex” and “gender” into their sentences written in Chinese. This semantic distinction and the use of English terms alongside Chinese calls for a more detailed examination of these concepts and their translation, circulation, and localization in the Chinese language. Why are the terminologies of sex and gender perceived this way in Chinese, and how does the formation of these meanings lend itself to a trans-antagonistic politics?

In the transnational circulation of trans-antagonism, the role of translation is not a transparent process that converts original texts into translated ones. Instead, as Liu (2019) points out, translation is a practice that actively engages with gender politics. The selection of texts for translation, potential appropriations, and methods of interpretation may all carry ideological imprints. Reviewing the genealogy of these translations is essential for understanding how the keywords that constitute much of the trans-antagonistic content on Chinese social media have gained meaning and merged with the local understanding of gender in Chinese society. The trans-antagonism we observe on Chinese social media often relies on rhetoric that delegitimizes gender identity as a concept. We argue that this delegitimization is partially due to what we call the unfinished work of translating both “sex” and “gender.” These failures are the result of both global trans-antagonistic politics and localized knowledge, as mediated by gender politics within the Chinese context.

The first aspect of the politics of translation we will examine is the genealogy of the Chinese translation of the terms “sex,” “gender,” and “transgender,” and their connotation of a binary biological essentialism—the belief that a person’s social role is determined by their reproductive organs and biological makeup (Fausto-Sterling 2000).

Prior to the 1990s, “sex” had been translated as *xingbie* (性别) in Chinese. Since *bie* in Chinese means “difference,” *xingbie* addresses the differentiation between different sexes. When the concept of “gender” was first introduced to Chinese readers in the early 1990s, an academic debate arose over its translation. Some scholars proposed that “gender” should simply be translated as *xingbie*, adhering to the feminist stance that biological sex does not determine one’s social roles, and hence the “difference” itself is a social one. In this view, “gender” would represent the differentiation in social roles that is conceptually separate from biological sex. However, other scholars argued that since *xingbie* was already used to translate “sex,” a new term was needed to avoid confusion, and they suggested *shehui xingbie* (社会性别), where *shehui* means “social.” Thus, the lit-

eral meaning of “gender” became “social sex” or “social sexual difference.” In this translation, “gender” and “sex” appear to have a clear distinction—one is social, the other not. Min (2003) points out that this translation has its drawbacks: translating “gender” by adding “social” to the common understanding of *xingbie* as “sexual difference” could reinforce the sexist belief that the “sexes” are inherently different by nature, thereby justifying the unequal social positions between women and men. “Social sexual difference” does not constitute a powerful challenge to biological essentialism, making it difficult for Chinese feminists to view *shehui xingbie* as a legible category for advocating for social equality. The repetition of “sexual difference,” or *xingbie*, in both translations of “sex” and “gender” (rendered as “social sex”) further essentializes “sexual difference” as natural and as the foundation of any social difference. This semantic naturalization makes it challenging to argue that sex has always been socially constructed.

Given the unfinished project of translating “gender” without relying on and naturalizing “sex,” the translation and interpretation of the term “transgender” in Chinese has encountered even more difficulties.⁷ In Taiwan, Josephine Ho’s (2003) edited volume *Kua Xingbie* (跨性别) collected original essays and translations, including essays by Leslie Feinberg and Minnie Bruce Pratt. This volume first established *kua xingbie* (跨性别) as the Chinese translation of “transgender,” a term going around with multiple translations in the community at the time. In China, Bornstein’s 1994 semi-autobiography *Gender Outlaw*, translated by Aiwan Liao and published in China in 2013, further popularized *kua xingbie* as the common term for “transgender.” “*Kua*” in Chinese means “to go across,” much like “trans-” in Latin.⁸

These terms, along with the incomplete localization of gender, contribute to the ongoing rhetoric of biological essentialism found in trans-exclusive feminism. Translating “gender” as “social sexual difference” can lead to two implications: 1) “Sexual difference” already delineates the distinctions between women’s and men’s experiences in the world, rendering “gender” superfluous; and 2) Since “gender” is considered “social,” it only refers to interpersonal aspects and cannot be a legitimate category for an individual—only “sex” is real. As observed in comment 1a, a person’s “gender” identity is perceived as something “in the mind” and therefore lacks the “realness” of “sex.” This comment reflects the belief that gender is not a distinct category or conceptually different from sex, but rather something superfluous and unreal. Consequently, a person’s gender

7 When without an official translation, trans people were more often referred to by their English abbreviation as “T,” “TS,” “TG,” and other regional stigmatizing appellations such as *yao* (妖) or *eryizi* (二椅子) (Chow, 2018).

8 As for the global background, the word “cisgender” was not added to the updated version of the Oxford English Dictionary until 2014, though it had been in circulation in newspapers and academic journals since the mid-1990s. The translation of cisgender as *shun xingbie* (顺性别) in Chinese was first observed on Weibo in 2014 when a few Chinese graduate students studying in the US launched a discussion of the term. Meanwhile, the late emergence of *shun xingbie* also owes to the fact that the visibility of trans and gender-nonconforming people did not significantly increase until 2016 in China. Today, the concepts and translations of transgender and cisgender have become quite popular and largely recognized both in academia and on the Internet in China.

identity is not afforded the same “realness,” particularly in sex-segregated public spaces.

The second aspect of the politics of translation that we examine here involves the questions of “what texts are chosen to be translated” and “the chain of events that may happen after translation” in the specific information environment of the Chinese internet today (Liu, 2019). Under authoritarian control, internet censorship serves the state’s interests in maintaining social stability. Given the disproportionate amount of trans-antagonistic content compared to pro-trans content being translated from English to Chinese on social media, it is significant that most Anglophone content appears on platforms like X (formerly Twitter), Facebook, and YouTube—all of which are unavailable in China due to governmental restrictions on Chinese users’ access to the “foreign internet” (*waiwang*, 外网). Only a minority of people can afford to pay for a VPN to access these websites and acquire the language skills to navigate them. Those who undertake the work of accessing, translating, and transferring content from foreign social media platforms rarely face challenges regarding the accuracy, comprehensiveness, or objectivity of their translations, as the majority of their audience relies on them for a glimpse of the “foreign internet.” As a result, these translators do not need to worry about fact-checking the content they translate or interpret, and they are rarely held accountable for any mistakes and biases.

In this way, misinformation and disinformation can travel from Anglophone social media to Chinese social media with little challenge. When *jijin nüquan* feminists locate and translate trans-antagonistic content from Anglophone social media to Chinese social media, their audience has limited means to fact-check the content or to even know that refutations exist on the same Anglophone platforms. Given the uneven access Chinese internet users have to the original platforms where trans-antagonistic misinformation and disinformation are posted, it is easy to get the impression that these trans-antagonistic contents represent the majority opinion.

Overall, the two facets of the politics of translation that we have examined demonstrate that the current trans-antagonism among Chinese feminists on social media is not merely a direct import of Anglophone trans-antagonistic misinformation but the outcome of a complex transnational dynamic of information circulation. The unfinished translation and localization of the concepts of “gender” and “transgender” have contributed to the increased emphasis on biological makeup in feminist politics.

TRANSMISOGYNY AND THE MOBILIZATION OF VULNERABILITY AMONG JIJIN NÜQUAN FEMINISTS

The second example concerns the sharing of a personal experience by a young trans woman living and working in urban China instead of a translated Western media text.

Describing herself as “MtF / translesbian/feminist / gender critical/orthodox Marxist” in her profile, Philokimia is very active on Douban, frequently posting on feminist, queer, and trans issues, with almost weekly updates. On March 11, 2022, Philokimia published a lengthy post detailing her experiences as a trans woman in China, particularly her rare use of public bathrooms. She described her job as a lawyer in a major city in central China, providing context for her everyday life. As an educated, young, urban professional, her lifestyle is otherwise typical and similar to that of the majority of Douban users and *jijin nüquan* feminists. Below, we highlight parts of Philokimia’s post that

directly address her experience of using public bathrooms in her office building:

The only time I went to the bathroom at work in the past six months was when I worked overtime until the office was empty at night and then sneaked into the men's room. Even so, when I entered the men's room, I first observed at the door to make sure there was no one there and then rushed into the innermost stall, locked the door, and listened nervously to the outside noise while using the toilet. A large part of my daily life revolves around going to the bathroom. These details don't matter to a cisgender person, but for me, they all require careful calculation. Why do I still choose to do so? Because compared to the great uneasiness I feel when I go to a public restroom, these meticulous calculations are nothing more than a trivial inconvenience to me.

Philokimia wrote this post in response to the already rampant trans-antagonistic arguments circulating among online feminist groups on Chinese social media. In her post, she describes the extreme caution she takes in arranging her daily life to avoid using public bathrooms as much as possible—a concern that is common in the lives of many trans people. The only time she uses a semi-public bathroom is when she knows no one is around, where access is limited to employees, and she is only out as a trans woman to some colleagues. She opts for the men's room out of a greater fear of being outed in the women's room. In sharing this narrative, Philokimia powerfully refutes the image of trans women “invading” women's bathrooms and the underlying transmisogyny. By expressing her concerns for her own safety, she effectively turns the argument around, implying that she poses no threat to cisgender women or gender-segregated spaces; rather, these spaces may pose a threat to her safety by potentially revealing her identity to the transmisogynist others. It is also worth noting that Philokimia did not reveal any medical details about her body in response to the unreasonable demands to prove her “womanness” in the comments made under her post. In this way, her account could be seen as what Lingel (2021) calls “dazzle camouflage,” a negotiation of boundaries in the face of policing, surveillance, and the trans-antagonistic gaze by making some parts of her life hyper-visible while keeping other parts opaque, thereby both challenging online transmisogyny and protecting herself.

This post immediately caught the attention of many *jijin nüquan* feminist users. Large amounts of transmisogynistic speech soon took over the commentary section.⁹ We translated two representative comments here:

2a. Don't just say, “I have a dick, but I think I'm female, so I should be accepted by women to enjoy everything that women have,” and then overlook the damage you cause to the safe environment for women. Don't choose the easier target simply because patriarchal society oppresses you! Oops, he's bullying me, so how about I squeeze into the women's

9 This post received about 180 comments, 489 likes, and 499 reposts. Douban allows sub-comments, and some early comments have 50 or so sub-comments; thus, we estimate about 400 comments and sub-comments in total. The last comment was posted on August 5, 2022, concluding an active debate of five months under this post. Numbers retrieved on January 13, 2023. The original post and comments can be accessed at https://www.douban.com/people/46979882/status/3793219716/?_dtcc=1&_i=3147100Z--oMpc.

room? This makes women feel really unsafe! You should safeguard other women if you have the self awareness of a woman. You will never be a woman unless you have the courage to complete the surgery. (Douban user “Zoo horticulturist”)

2b. You’re not a woman, so you can say women who have this fear are trans-misogynists; you’re not a woman, so you condemn women who are terrified of sexual assault as being duped by patriarchy; you’re not a woman, so you think our worry is excessive. You don’t go through all the pains of growing up and living as a woman but still want to call yourself a woman, that is okay; but you despise and deny these pains and still think you’re a woman, then I think you’re shameless, cunning, selfish, and indifferent, and you make real women angry. (Douban user “nireiko”)

Most of these comments come from self-identified feminists and *jijin nüquan* feminists. Three points in Philokimia’s personal narrative particularly stand out to commenters and receive the most responses: 1) Philokimia’s claim to be a woman; 2) her description of her difficulties and concerns, which seem to ask for sympathy and understanding from cisgender women; and 3) her assertion that cisgender women’s fear of trans women invading women’s bathrooms is unfounded. However, many of the comments on Philokimia’s post, as exemplified by these two cases, go beyond the content of the post and project onto her an image that is not present in her original narrative. The comments accuse Philokimia of being aggressive and of taking away the hard-earned rights of cisgender women, despite her clear statement that she very rarely uses any public bathroom and used the men’s room on the rare occasions. We suggest that the comments on Philokimia’s original post are so off the mark because the real “target” of these comments is the harmful controlling image of trans women invading women’s bathrooms—a narrative imported from the Rowling debates and other Anglophone trans-antagonistic discourses. The stereotypical mischaracterization of trans women as an aggressive, sexually threatening presence in women’s bathrooms is a familiar talking point for those who have followed the bathroom debates on Anglophone social media. These narratives are so powerful in their transnational and translational circulation that they shape the rhetoric in these comments, overshadowing the deeply personal and local voice in Philokimia’s post.

These comments reinforce assumptions about cisgender women’s vulnerability and existence in a constant state of being threatened. Being assigned female at birth, and specifically not having a penis, is considered the determining factor of womanhood, thus cis womanhood is being reduced to physical vulnerability to all others. Meanwhile, because of the public’s narrow understanding of rape only as the non-consensual penetration of the vagina by the penis, trans women are falsely imagined to be free from sexual violence. In this imagination, trans women are associated only with the role of the perpetrator and never as victims of sexual violence. In the bathroom debate, trans-misogynistic feminist views emphasize certain aspects of cis women’s vulnerability, framing these aspects as the essential features of “being a woman,” while simultaneously invalidating the vulnerability of trans women and further excluding them from the category of women. In other words, “gender-critical” discourse seeks to juxtapose a vulnerable and silenced homogenous group of “real women” against pathological individuals

who are perceived as neither authentically female nor male. As Bassi and LaFleur (2022) suggest, in transmisogynistic ideology, both trans and cis womanhood are rendered in highly ideological ways: the former as an example of perverted and deviant individual behavior, and the latter as an ontological state whose normativity derives from its supposed naturalness.

In the comments, we also observe two conflicting views on acknowledging the gender identity of trans women. Comment 2a asserts that only genital surgery will make a trans woman a woman, indicating that gender identity is not valid without a biological (read: genital) basis. Comment 2b, on the other hand, suggests that a trans woman's gender identity may be valid ("you want to call yourself a woman, fine"), but it is considered superfluous, unimportant, and unrelated to lived experience. The comment implies that "real women" have fears because of their innate vulnerability, based on a biological essentialist understanding—something that trans women do not have, did not grow up with, and therefore can never fully understand or sympathize with. Echoing the two implications of translating "gender" as discussed in Section 3, these two comments view gender identity as either unreal or superfluous.

CONCLUSION

The politically mobilizing force of the vulnerable female has animated *jijin nüquan* feminists on Chinese social media. Facing the challenging political landscape and the impossibility of building coalitions with queer and trans activism, many *jijin nüquan* feminists are politically motivated to defend women's rights but lack the means of building a community with other women across differences because of their narrow focus on essentialist understandings of sexed bodies. Their understanding ultimately stems from a cisgender matrix that links men's social positions of privilege and physical strength with their sexual characteristics, rather than adopting a more nuanced and intersectional understanding of the social construction of both sex and gender that would allow them to recognize the vulnerability of trans women. Building on our earlier discussion of the history of Chinese feminist movements and the politics of translation, we argue that the mobilization around the concept of women's vulnerability and the scapegoating of trans women are rooted in pre-existing mainstream feminist discourses that center middle-class urban women. The recent history of feminist mobilization online, the uneven access to information, and the politics of translation have all contributed to the perception that only certain bodies are vulnerable, while others pose threats to the vulnerable status of the former.

In this article, we examined the phenomenon of emerging trans-antagonism, particularly transmisogyny against trans women and trans feminine individuals, on Chinese social media. The rise of trans-antagonistic and transmisogynist discourses, fueled by misinformation within online feminist groups, is especially concerning as they engage with the global "gender-critical movement" and neo-fascist politics, while also being deeply rooted in the histories of feminist and queer activism in China and the translations of sex and gender. Therefore, we identified the modality and typology of transmisogyny in contemporary Chinese social media by tracing and analyzing the politics, histories, and emerging formations that contribute to such ideology. Further studies are needed to explore other forms of coalition and division within trans and queer

communities, as well as with emerging feminist communities in China. Additionally, it is important to investigate how these relationships have evolved over the years and what social and political factors have contributed to these changes.

We adopted a transnational approach to explore the discursive formation of transmisogyny among Chinese trans-exclusionary *jijin nüquan* feminists on social media from three major aspects. First, we examined how *jijin nüquan* feminists have increasingly dominated online spaces following the increased policing of queer feminist activists and LGBTQ+ NGOs since 2015. While *jijin nüquan* feminists have successfully mobilized a larger number of feminists online and garnered widespread grassroots engagement, they also import and actively produce homophobic and trans-antagonistic misinformation to create a sense of political urgency. Second, we analyzed the unfinished project of translating sex, gender, and transgender terminology into Chinese from the Anglophone-dominated knowledge production circulation. This unfinished translation project can reinforce biological essentialism, which, in the current political context, can easily be used to justify trans-antagonism. Lastly, by identifying the vulnerability of cisgender women as a central mobilizing strategy among *jijin nüquan* on social media, we argue that transmisogynistic ideology is mobilized by framing trans women as a threat to the imagined security of urban middle-class cisgender women, whose essentialist conception of womanhood is perceived as being particularly endangered by trans women. This essentialist conception of vulnerable womanhood is further reinforced by deploying the linguistic choices in translation, while the politics of translation often remains unexamined in such usage.

We acknowledge that the unique characteristics of transmisogyny on Chinese social media—borrowing from the Anglophone world but also localized in contemporary China—are the result of the entanglement between a global right-wing politics of imagined threats, misinformation on social media, and national historical contexts. However, despite the political setbacks and the continuing expansion of authoritarian policing, the emerging trans activism and the vibrant conversations between various feminist communities in China still hold promise. To make the future less harmful than it appears now and to ensure the flourishing of both trans activism and feminist communities in China, we call for a radical rethinking of the process of transnational knowledge production, a concrete and localized vision of queer and trans feminism, and the formation of transnational alliances among these movements.

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Astro-TERFs: LGB Alliance's Role in the UK Media's Anti-Trans Moral Panic

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In the backlash against trans rights in the UK since the late 2010s, the LGB Alliance has been implicated as a leading exponent of the new moral panic, typified by its newspaper campaign against GRA reform, "Self-ID Gives Predators the Green Light." My article analyses evidence of the LGB Alliance's pattern of anti-trans campaigning, before demonstrating via a content analysis and close textual reading of four national newspapers how outlets in the UK legacy media have been boosting its public profile, at the expense of larger, more established LGBTQI+ charities such as Stonewall. My findings reveal how the UK legacy media coverage reflects the "strong hegemony" model conceptualized by Gitlin, in which the legacy media undermines already-disempowered social movements and portrays them as a danger to the public, a dynamic exemplified by the contrasting coverage of the groups that support and oppose trans rights. This "strong hegemony" model in turn reflects UK-based political structures in which the advocacy groups of disempowered communities must struggle for influence against counter-groups like the LGB Alliance, which represent "social movement(s) from above... seeking to defend or enhance dominant power structures" (Aked 2023, 16).

KEYWORDS transphobia; astroturf; trans rights; strong hegemony; LGB Alliance

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This research is intended to complement my study on the impact of the anti-trans moral panic on trans-advocacy organizations, *The Stoning of Stonewall During the New Trans Panic* (Gwenffrewi 2021). The findings in that report revealed UK legacy media outlets running intensified negative coverage against Stonewall over the latter's advocacy of trans people's rights, in reflection of the broader anti-trans coverage of UK legacy media over the same period (Faye 2021; Folan 2023). My follow-up research here examines a "gender critical" organization that came into existence in 2019, the LGB Al-

liance, and their interaction with the same UK legacy media, to compare and contrast how the media coverage differs with that targeted at Stonewall.

AN OVERVIEW OF THE LGB ALLIANCE

I have selected the LGB Alliance (henceforth “the LGBA”) from among the “gender critical” organizations because it has been presented by the legacy media as Stonewall’s ideological antithesis (Hurst 2019; Jackson 2021). Notably, some of Stonewall’s founding members and associates, such as Simon Fanshawe (Hurst 2019), contributed to the LGBA’s creation, in response to Stonewall’s decision to extend its pro-LGB remit and advocate for trans rights circa 2015 (Jackson 2021). Yet those who associate with the LGBA include individuals with a record of anti-LGB campaigning, including Baroness Emma Nicholson and Graham Linehan (O’Connor 2022). Nicholson’s record includes supporting anti-LGB legislation Section 28 in the 1980s (Stone 2022), being publicly shamed by a lesbian rights group in 1995 over her opposition to a United Nations Year of Tolerance declaration that included sexual orientation (Lesbian Avengers 2021), and later being boycotted from chairing a prestigious book prize in 2020 over her cumulative anti-gay rights record, which by 2020 included opposing same-sex marriage legislation passed in 2013 (Flood 2020). Linehan, meanwhile, is recognized for his online “groomer” slurs against trans people, as well as against cisgender gay men, typified by his “Fuck off, you sweaty groomer” tweet against a high-profile cis gay film director (Linehan 2024).

Thematically and in terms of its composition and alliances, the LGBA appears to be less representative of LGB people than of those committed to what Leah Owen (2022, 487) describes as “attacking the social, legal, and institutional infrastructure that trans people depend on to exist as *trans* people.” This hostile, trans-focused mode of campaigning is indicated in the LGBA’s ultimately successful bid for charity status, with the Charity Commission (2021, section 37) observing, “some evidence of social media activity (information that was posted or re-posted on social media) by LGB Alliance and [we] considered that some of the language used may be regarded as *inflammatory and offensive* ... the activity appeared to involve, at times, *demeaning or denigrating* the rights (recognised by law) of others” (my italics). Underlining the connection between the LGBA’s media output and its policy campaigns, Helen Clarke (2024, 7) highlights the LGBA’s condemnation of LGBTQI+-awareness-raising “Relationship and Sexuality Education” and its compulsory status in UK schools, with the LGBA “advocat[ing] for parents to remove their children from these lessons, citing concerns about how gender identity is taught and the inclusion of non-normative models of sex/gender.” As my analysis of the LGBA website reveals later in this article, the example of the LGBA’s campaign to undermine LGBTQI+-inclusive education for the sake of denying the validation of trans identity in schools is typical of its overall actions. Pro-LGB rights and initiatives are *de facto* subordinated for the perceived “greater good” of undermining trans people’s rights and validity.

The LGBA’s actions of “demeaning or denigrating the rights ... of others,” namely those of trans people, has concerned LGBTQI+ groups not only for the multi-faceted harm it causes trans people, but also because of its scorched-earth implications in undermining LGBTQI+ rights more generally. This is exemplified by the legal ap-

peal brought by trans youth charity Mermaids, supported by several LGBTQI+ groups including LGBT Foundation and the Consortium for Stronger LGBT+ Communities (LGBT Consortium), against the LGBA's charity status. LGBT Consortium stated:

the LGB Alliance's real purpose is the denigration of trans people and the destruction of organizations that support them, in particular through political lobbying and campaigning for changes to the law ... Ever since it was established in 2019, LGB Alliance has repeatedly targeted registered LGBT rights charities including Mermaids, Stonewall, LGBT Foundation, GIRES and others... Further, the LGB Alliance has ... Called for a Parliamentary investigation into Mermaids ... Lobbied the Equality and Human Rights Commission to open a statutory investigation into Stonewall ... Campaigned to stop LGBT charities from advising schools and government bodies on transgender rights ... Campaigned to deprive LGBT charities of funding and/or to divert their donations and grants. (Consortium for Stronger LGBT+ Communities 2021).

The seemingly paradoxical function of the LGBA campaigning to damage other LGB-focused charities, as noted by LGBT Consortium, can partly be understood by seeing the LGBA as a trans-exclusionary astroturf group. According to the Good Law Project (2023), “astro-turfed” groups are “fake grassroots organization[s] whose function is to mask the real actors who have a vested and often financial interest in the message they sell.” In terms of evidence of an agenda behind the claims to advocate for LGB rights, the LGBA's address at 55 Tufton Street (Colbert 2023; Stone and Hurley 2022) suggests that the LGBA's alliances are not with other LGBTQI+ groups but with conservative organizations with a record of anti-LGBTQI+ activities. Various investigations (Barwise and York 2020; Geoghegan 2020) have highlighted 55 Tufton Street as the property of the Conservative businessman Richard Smith, which Patrick Barwise and Peter York (2020, 103) describe as the home of a “network of right-wing ‘research’ groups, lobbyists and ‘astroturf’ organizations.” A characteristic of the right-wing astroturf and lobby groups, according to Barwise and York, is their “strong links to their American right-wing counterparts.” These include the Heritage Foundation and the Witherspoon Institute, which campaign against LGBTQI+ rights as well as women's reproductive rights, as typified by the Heritage Foundation's policy blueprint for a second Trump administration, titled Project 2025, in which, “whenever LGBTQ+ rights are mentioned, it is to say there should be fewer of them” (Leingang 2024). The LGBA's co-founder Bev Jackson has publicly acknowledged the necessity of collaborating with the anti-LGB rights' Heritage Foundation to oppose trans rights, such as her 2019 tweet with its euphemism of “gender” for trans identity: “The leftwing silence on gender in the US is even worse than in the UK. This story explains why working with the Heritage Foundation is sometimes the only possible course of action” (Jackson 2019). Beyond the strategic alliances with anti-LGB groups, Jackson has publicly declared opposition to the legitimacy of trans identity as the LGBA's *raison d'être*, when stating, “We're applying for charitable status and building an organization to challenge the dominance of those who promote the damaging theory of gender identity” (Jackson 2020). Similarly, the LGBA co-founder Kate Harris claimed that the LGBA was formed “to prevent the dissemination of the lie of gender identity” (Gentleman 2022).

THE LGBA'S POSITIONALITY AS AN ASTROTURF GROUP

My interest in studying the interaction between the LGBA and the legacy media has implications beyond the transphobia of UK media coverage, to a broader understanding of how structures of power in the UK police minoritized people's lives. In his analysis of systems of discipline, Michel Foucault (1991, 209) identifies two historical "extremes," one recognizable as the authoritarian police state, based on "a schema of exceptional discipline," the other representing "a design of subtle coercion for a society to come." Foucault writes about surveillance as the new mode of enforcement, but I am interested in the "subtle coercion" by institutions, refined for that society to come, which in fact is happening now. To see how the blueprint of the authoritarian regime resides in liberal democracy, a glance at the military states of Latin America between the 1960s and 1980s reveals both differences and similarities with the contemporary UK. Within such regimes of prohibition in Latin America, there was no need to hide the mission of repression behind "astroturf" structures when policing sexual and gendered minorities. Yet in terms of ideological guidance, integrated within the regime's structures were "non-state organizations" that promoted "moralistic ideas" (Cowan 2019, 12), what Benjamin Cowan (2019, 13) calls a "moral technocracy" involving "the coalescence of a self-appointed cadre of scientific and cultural authorities ... who successfully brought their concerns about sex and subversion into national conversations." In those national conversations, Othered minorities or political enemies are variously portrayed as "bestialized" (Cowan 2019, 203) or disparagingly "gender-troubled" (Cowan 2019, 153). They are framed as "threats to tradition, family, gender, and moral standards, and conventional sexuality" (Cowan 2019, 8). The political response by the Brazilian regime in Cowan's (2019, 26) study was an "emphasis on eugenics and hygienism, combining anticommunism, pathologization, and moral panic."

In more liberal-democratic-structured states, the narratives of pathologization, eugenics and moral panic against othered minorities have required more careful negotiation and application, including via a predecessor of the "astroturf" organization, namely "false front" organizations. Writing on the moral panic orchestrated by the German government against the presence of Black soldiers in the French army positioned in post-WWI Germany, Melvyn Stokes (2023, 228) references the role of "false-front organizations claiming to be the result of local civic initiatives," including "the Rhenish Women's League ... founded in May 1920 within the German Ministry of the Interior." Its disseminated literature included a pamphlet "Coloured Frenchmen on the Rhine: German Women's Cry for Help," which contributed to how "Black French soldiers were represented as beasts, incapable of controlling their strong sexual desires; as rapists and assaulters of the virtues of white German women; as major threats to the purity of the white race" (Stokes 2023, 226). Such fear-inciting predator/bestial tropes evoke not only the "moral technocracy" of more authoritarian regimes, but the LGBA's campaign language to obstruct or repeal trans rights, for example its media campaign against GRA reform in which it declared "Self-ID gives predators the green light" (TSN 2020), or its broader tweeted warning, "Adding the + to LGB gives the green light to paraphilias like bestiality" (Maurice 2021).

The idea of an anti-LGBTQI+ "moral technocracy" constructed by the UK Conservative Government in recent years has resonance. In the LGBA's contemporary setting in the UK, Hil Aked (2023, 16) contrasts grassroots social movements "from below,"

“organized by subaltern social groups ... to disrupt power structures,” against a “social movement from above ... seeking to defend or enhance dominant power structures.” These “social movements from above” benefit from “superior access to economic, political and cultural resources” and “privileged access to state power” (Aked 2023, 16). In development of Aked’s analysis, I am interested in the interplay between the LGBA and the establishmentarian gatekeeping function of the legacy media (Malik 2020), and how this contributes to our understanding of the UK legacy media’s interaction with, or delegitimization of, disempowered groups and their advocates.

THE POST-2019 POLITICAL CONTEXT IN THE UK AND ITS IMPACT ON EQUALITIES POLICY

For contextual evidence of the LGBA’s relevance within an emerging anti-equalities “moral technocracy” constructed by the Government, the timeline of 2019–2024 is revealing. Between 2016 and 2018, the Conservative Government under Prime Minister Theresa May and its then-Women and Equalities minister Penny Mordaunt declared its intention to improve the lives of trans people by introducing GRA reform (Government Equalities Office 2018). May’s subsequent resignation in the aftermath of unsuccessful Brexit negotiations and diminished General Election results produced a Conservative Government in 2019 led by Prime Minister Boris Johnson, special advisor Dominic Cummings, and Equalities ministers Liz Truss and Kemi Badenoch. Conservative policy and rhetoric were reoriented against trans people (Maddox 2024; Tapsfield 2024; Wilcock 2024), in alignment with that of the right-wing press’s intensifying anti-trans moral-panic coverage (Pearce, Erikainen, and Vincent 2020), itself drawing on an emerging, reactionary “gender-critical” movement against trans rights. The Government suspended its proposed legislation of GRA reform in 2020. A parliamentary inquiry by the cross-party Women and Equalities Committee (WEC) into the failure of GRA reform between October 2020 and December 2021 produced a report highly critical of both Conservative Equalities ministers and the Government’s recalibrated equalities watchdog the Equalities and Human Rights Commission (EHRC). The inquiry concluded:

We are deeply disappointed by the approach taken by both the Government Equalities Office and the Equality and Human Rights Commission to this inquiry ... We condemn the negligible engagement with our inquiry by both the Government Equalities Office Ministers and the EHRC, and the delay in response to the consultation which further polarised and toxified the debate. (Women and Equalities Committee 2021, 73–75)

The inquiry’s criticism of both Equalities ministers, the “gender-critical” aligned Liz Truss and Kemi Badenoch, as well as the EHRC, underscores how the LGBA are part of a larger picture of institutional recalibration under the Conservative Government since 2019. This translates as an already authoritarian Government (Fowles 2023) adopting a more hostile, “culture wars” approach to its equalities commitments (Forrest 2023). Typifying this broader development is the Government’s response to the surge in support for the Black Lives Matter movement in 2020 following the murder in the USA of George Floyd by a police officer. The Johnson Government’s Head of No. 10 policy unit,

Munira Mirza, established the Commission on Race and Ethnic Disparities (a.k.a. the Sewell Report), chaired by Dr Tony Sewell, despite both Mirza and Sewell having a background of denying the existence of institutional racism (Easton 2021; Sewell 2010; Walker, Siddique, Grierson 2020). The findings of the Sewell Report were published in 2021 and claimed there was no evidence of institutional racism in the UK. These findings were rejected by the UK's leading race equality think tank, the Runnymede Trust, as well as by numerous politicians and high-profile activists (Matiluko 2023), with criticisms of the Report including its "spurious claims to objectivity, the erasure of racism and the inadequacy of its recommendations" (Tikly 2022, 857).

Similarly reflecting the shift in policy against social-justice issues is the EHRC's altered role, from equalities watchdog to attack-dog against equalities, as a pattern of controversies at the time indicate. The EHRC is ideally independent of Government but also funded by it, and its Commissioners are appointed by the Minister for Women and Equalities. Its current head is Kishwer Falkner, appointed by Truss and Badenoch's office in December 2020. Falkner has since been accused in whistleblower claims and investigative journalism stories of presiding over a hostile workplace climate for trans people and people of color (Hunte 2023; Siddique 2023). Internal EHRC investigations into Falkner's behavior, which included eye-witness accounts of her ridiculing trans women with transphobic statements, were suspended in 2023 by Badenoch's office (Walker 2023).

The recalibration of the EHRC as effectively an "anti-equalities" equalities organization is a useful parallel for understanding the LGBA's capacity to develop networking connections with the UK's Conservative Government during the same period. Between 2019 and 2020, the British Government withdrew from Stonewall's Diversity Champions scheme (Milton 2021). In March 2021, three members of the Government's "LGBT Advisory Group" resigned in protest at the resistance of Equalities Ministers (i.e. Truss and Badenoch) to work constructively for LGBT+ rights (Allegretti 2021). Consultation on broader LGBTQI+ issues with Stonewall and other pro-trans LGBTQI+ organizations effectively ended in 2021 (Hatton 2024). During this period, Badenoch instead met representatives of anti-trans groups including the LGBA (Hatton 2024; Provost et al. 2021). This is in spite of the LGBA's lack of record of any pro-LGB initiatives (Consortium for Stronger LGBT+ Communities 2021; O'Thompson 2023) and their unpopularity with the broader LGBTQI+ community (Ramsay and Bychawski 2022). In April 2022, the Conservative Government cancelled its "Safe To Be Me" conference celebrating LGBTQI+ people in the UK, after the conference was boycotted by over 100 LGBTQI+ organizations, over the Government's policy shift to exclude trans people from a conversation therapy ban (Consortium for Stronger LGBT+ Communities 2022; Wait 2022), a policy advocated for by the LGBA. The Conservative Government's record since 2019 has been one of intensifying hostility towards the LGBTQI+ community, and this is reflected in changes to its institutional networks. It is with this context that we see the LGBA's emergence as a lobby group enjoying access to the Conservative Government and favorable coverage from an anti-trans press. Other anti-trans-rights lobby groups to have filled the void in Government consultations on trans rights include charity and right-wing think tank Policy Exchange, whose "Judicial Power Project" is described by Sam Fowles (2023, 47) as being "particularly effective at dressing up increasingly authoritarian ideas in the guise of democracy ... [with] Judges who force the

executive to obey the law or rules that empower parliament or citizens at the expense of the executive ... portrayed as frustrating the 'will of the people'." Policy Exchange's (Moore 2023) policy document "Asleep at the Wheel," with its foreword by "gender critical" politician Rosie Duffield—herself a speaker at an LGBA conference (Young 2021)—accuses UK schools of "increasingly becoming influenced by gender ideology." In its executive summary, a recommendation for teaching guidance is that "[d]iscussion about gender-critical beliefs should be included" (Moore 2023, 13), and that "[n]o school should facilitate a child's social transition," in spite of social transitioning being recommended as beneficial for trans people generally by the global medical authority on trans health, the World Professional Association for Transgender Health (2024, 52).

One may argue that the UK Government's new orientation towards anti-LGBTQI+ policy since 2019 ought to have become the focus of legacy media investigations. While liberal/left-of-center press like *The Guardian* and *The Independent* have produced some critical coverage, legacy media investigations have tended to contribute to the anti-trans reorientation of the Government and its "moral technocracy" of think tanks and lobby groups. A new BBC Director General, former Conservative councilor Tim Davie, was appointed by the Conservative Government in 2020—the same year as Falkner's appointment to the EHRC—and has presided over a similar re-orientation towards a more critical mode of coverage about trans people, leading to accusations of "institutional transphobia" in an open letter from public figures from the LGBTQI+ community (Parsons 2020). The BBC's programming during this time has focused on producing exposés of pro-trans charities such as the anti-Stonewall series *Nolan Investigates* (2021), and the challenging of the legitimacy of trans healthcare (Barnes and Cohen 2020).

To further deconstruct the UK legacy media's role in relation to a conservative "moral technocracy," it is worth noting the Sutton Trust's Social Mobility report in 2019 highlights the elite composition of the UK media's commentariat. Of columnists, 44% attended just one of two universities—Oxford or Cambridge (Sutton Trust 2019, 40)—while only 19% attended a comprehensive school—the latter attended by approximately 90% of people educated in the UK. Nesrine Malik (2020, 210–11) observes that the result of the elitist composition of the London-centered legacy media is a uniform "world view that is ideologically establishmentarian, unlikely to question the status quo and overly respectful of the offices of power." Wealth and power, and the interests of those that have much of both, consolidates itself in the media; in other words, particularly at the level of commentariat and the editorial line. In thinking about Aked's analysis of "social movements from above," and its recent intensifying nature under the Conservative Government into a form of "moral technocracy," there is value in confirming the "strong hegemony" model of the legacy media. Given the ideological alignment of the Conservative Government, its "moral technocracy" of right-wing, policymaking think tanks and lobby groups, and the legacy media's composition, there are implications for those disempowered groups targeted by the monolith of these powerful, ideologically aligned institutions in terms of the current state of British democracy and its accessibility for all. The legacy media's coverage of the LGBA provides one source of data on these potentially harmful relationships for minorities, in this case the trans community.

METHOD

In studying the interplay between the LGBA and major outlets of the UK press, this research addresses two contesting frameworks that appear to reflect current differences between UK and US legacy media engagement with social justice organizations. The first of these is the “strong hegemony” model conceptualized by Todd Gitlin (1980), in which legacy media institutions assert establishmentarian or outright hostile gate-keeping when framing stories about the social-justice agendas of minoritized groups. Or, as TJ Billard (2024, 55) writes, “[m]ass news media would never carry social movements’ critical messages about the dominant order, but rather would always marginalize them and portray them as dangerous.” This framework has been challenged by those observing a “dialogic model” involving “sustained patterns of collaborative interaction among social movement actors and mass media actors that form movement-media relationships” (Billard 2024, 55). Billard (2016; 2024), for example, states that the “dialogic model” is more reflective of their study of the interplay between the trans advocacy organization the National Center for Transgender Equality (NCTE) and the US legacy media. Given the findings of my research on the UK legacy media’s systematically hostile coverage of trans advocacy organization Stonewall during the anti-trans moral panic, my analysis of legacy media coverage assumes a continuation of Gitlin’s “strong hegemony” model. From this deductive position, my research questions are:

RQ1: Is there sufficient, publicly accessible evidence to indicate that the LGBA is primarily an anti-trans-rights campaign group?

RQ2: In reflection of the “strong hegemony” model, do UK legacy media outlets boost the LGBA while undermining trans-advocacy groups such as Stonewall?

To answer these questions, I have conducted a mixed-methods content analysis of articles featuring the LGBA by four major UK press outlets. This is to ensure both the identification of broader patterns through statistical data, as well as case studies in the form of in-depth close reading. These outlets are among the top 10 best-selling UK newspapers and represent broadsheet or middle-market outlets with significant presence in UK political and cultural discourse. They are the *Daily Mail/Mail on Sunday* (conservative, middle-market), *The Times/The Sunday Times* (conservative, broadsheet), *The Telegraph/The Sunday Telegraph* (conservative, broadsheet), and *The Guardian/ObsERVER* (liberal/left-of-center, broadsheet-style content within a middle-market format). A fifth news outlet, based solely in Scotland, namely *The Scotsman* (broadly liberal, middle market), is included for comparison and context in the statistical analysis, given the recurring anecdotal evidence by some high-profile journalists critical of the “group-think” character of the London-based UK national press (Edwards and Cromwell 2018; Malik 2020; Novara Media 2023), typified in the latter case by journalist Glenn Greenwald’s (2015) observation, “I’ve never encountered any group more driven by group-think and rank-closing cohesion than British journalists.” To research the archives of these outlets, I used the specialist media search engine Nexis Advance UK. To align the study with my research paper on Stonewall (2022), I used the same timeline of 1 January 2020 to 31 December 2022. Articles were identified through the keyword “LGB Alliance.”

DEFINITION OF TRANSPHOBIA: “ORGANIZED TRANSPHOBIA”

In referencing anti-trans media coverage and campaigning, this article dispenses with the kind of attitudinal-focused definition of transphobia such as that used by the UN: “Any form of prejudice or hostile attitude towards transgender people, including denying their gender identity or refusing to acknowledge it” (UN Free & Equal 2024). As noted by Fran Amery and Aurelian Mondon (2024, 5), this individualized approach to analyzing transphobia in relation to “prejudice” “would allow said actors to claim plausible deniability... More importantly, it would remove the focus on wider trends, power relationships and the impact of such politics, which is where ... structural oppression lies.” With the focus of this research on the LGBA’s value to structures of oppression, this article instead uses the UK-centered definition of “organized transphobia” used by Amery and Mondon. This definition involves:

the elite production of essentialising discourse and politics regarding trans people to construct them into an homogenous group incompatible with “our” “normal” and “good” society... [T]his discourse does not occur at random or in isolated events, but rather is being generated and promoted by a highly organized social movement in a top-down manner. (Amery and Mondon 2024, 5)

There is a significant overlap between this definition used by Amery and Mondon, concerning “a highly organized social movement in a top-down manner,” and the function of anti-trans astroturf groups that reflect, in Aked’s (2023, 16) words, a “social movement from above ... seeking to defend or enhance dominant power structures [that enjoy] superior access to economic, political and cultural resources” and “privileged access to state power.” Organized transphobia, in this sense, can also be measurable by the legacy media’s contrasting coverage of anti- and pro-trans organizations.

PUBLICLY AVAILABLE EVIDENCE OF THE LGBA’S SYSTEMATIC TRANSPHOBIA: THE LGBA’S WEBSITE

The LGBA is regarded among national and international LGBTQ+ organizations, such as LGBT Consortium and ILGA Europe (2022), as being an anti-trans campaigning group. In order to highlight the publicly accessible record of such campaigning, this article presents an analysis of arguably the most publicly accessible point of information about the LGBA’s anti-trans actions, namely the LGBA’s website, from 2022. This analysis serves to underscore that the legacy media’s positive engagement with the LGBA, to the degree of boosting the LGBA’s public visibility and status as a legitimate organization, occurs within full view of the LGBA’s record of anti-trans campaigning.

The LGBA Website (December 2022)

In an analysis of the LGBA’s website, a key finding is the gradation of anti-trans hostility that occurs. The rhetoric-based sections addressing Vision, Values, and Mission statement make minor references to trans people’s legitimacy. However, regarding the LGBA’s actual campaigning, “Resource” and “Campaign” sections devote 100% of their content to challenging the legitimacy of trans people. This gradation indicates that separate to its liberal-aligned corporate messaging, at the level of its actual campaigns, the LGBA is primarily an anti-trans campaign group.

Vision (anti-trans = 0%), Mission (anti-trans = 11%), Values (anti-trans = 14%)

The LGBA's Vision statement declares, "Lesbians, gay men and bisexuals living free from discrimination or disadvantage based on their sexual orientation." The Mission section displays nine objectives. With similar liberal-orientation, it declares, "We do not condone, endorse, or encourage any abusive or discriminatory behaviour towards any group or individual." By contrast, another objective implicitly associates trans identity with brain-washing and false-consciousness: "We work to protect children from harmful, unscientific ideologies that may lead them to believe either their personality or their body is in need of changing."

In the Values section, one of the seven "values," titled "individual freedom," mis-genders and caricatures trans people as pressurizing cis lesbians and cis gay men into having sexual relations: "We stand with lesbians in rejecting pressure to accept as sexual partners, or admit into lesbian spaces, males who define themselves as women. We stand with gay men in rejecting pressure to accept as sexual partners, or admit into gay men's spaces, females who define themselves as men."

Campaigns (anti-trans = 100%)

This section displays seven campaigns, all recognizable as anti-trans. I categorize these under four headings: campaign against trans-affirming care for trans youth; campaigns against trans-advocacy charity Stonewall UK; campaigns against laws that legitimize trans identity in Scotland; and campaigns that delegitimize trans identity in Wales.

Campaigns against trans-affirming care for trans youth

The LGBA's "Gay Teens Aren't Sick" campaign describes the "scandal" that "young people referred to gender clinics and subsequently prescribed puberty blockers are same-sex attracted." No reference to the agency of these trans youth is made. No supporting data is provided for the LGBA's claim inferring LGB youth being passively led into transitioning. Available data omitted by this section reveals an increase in the number of LGB youth (ONS 2021). The LGBA references trans identity as a process of eradication in its hashtag associating transitioning with lesbian/gay erasure: "Children are the main victims of the controversy surrounding gender identity. The evidence shows, and this is coming out in the Sonia Appleby case, that homophobia often plays a role in the unnecessary & harmful medicalisation of lesbian & gay teens. #StopTransingTheGayAway" (LGBA 2021).

The "End Conversion Therapy" campaign supports ending conversion therapy for LGB youth but continuing it for trans youth. The "Schools Campaign" displays the names of twelve trans-supportive or trans-advocacy organizations that provide trans-affirming information to trans youth and families, including the organizations Stonewall UK, Mermaids, Gendered Intelligence and LGBT Youth Scotland. They are introduced: "We attach links to the websites of the various groups along with a few quotations from them. We see their '*teachings*' as potentially harmful propaganda." These references appear to confirm the Charity Commission's own concerns, as well as those of charities such as LGBT Consortium, of the LGBA's direct attempts to undermine LGBTQI+ charities.

Campaign against trans-advocacy charity Stonewall UK

One LGBA campaign centers a lawsuit by one of the LGBA's associates, Allison Bailey, against the UK's largest LGBTQI+ charity over the latter's advocacy of trans rights. Titled "Justice for Alison [sic]," it is promoted by Bailey in her crowdfunding with the title "I'm suing Stonewall." Via the LGBA's re-tweet, trans women are presented in Bailey's campaign without supporting evidence as predators and exponents of male violence, as part of what Bailey describes as "the new trans activism":

I was horrified (and terrified). I wanted to look away, to pretend that I had not seen it; that it did not reveal the worst woman-hating, lesbian hating, misogyny that I have ever come across in my lifetime ... Thanks to brave women who have come before me, such as the late, great, Magdalen Berns, whose courage and no-nonsense approach to calling out the new trans activism as the men's rights movement it so clearly is, gave me courage. (Bailey 2020)

Bailey's framing shares the LGBA's veneration of anti-trans campaigner Magdalen Berns. Berns's pattern of crude, delegitimizing abuse of trans women on social media is typified by her tweet in 2016: "You are fucking blackface actors. You aren't women. You're men who get sexual kicks from being treated like women. fuck [sic] you and your dirty fucking perversions. our [sic] oppression isn't a fetish you pathetic, sick, fuck" (Montgomerie 2020). In 2022, the LGBA commemorated Berns's death with a tweet that references her activism in relation to the caricature of trans women as predators using sexual coercion against cis lesbians: "Today marks three years since Magdalen Berns died, far too young, at the age of 36. She stood up bravely against the erasure and coercion of lesbians, and was a fiercely inspirational voice to so many. She is sadly missed" (LGBA 2022). The LGBA's veneration of Berns contradicts its liberal-oriented Mission claim: "We do not condone, endorse, or encourage any abusive or discriminatory behaviour towards any group or individual."

Campaigns against laws that legitimize trans identity in Scotland

The LGBA's fifth and sixth campaigns oppose Scotland's "Gender Recognition Act Reform" and "Hate Crime Bill (Scotland)." The LGBA's fear-invoking against GRA reform (passed as law by the Scottish Parliament in 2022, then blocked by the UK Conservative Government in 2023) can be illustrated by its "Self ID gives predators the green light" campaign in the press and on social media. The Hate Crime Bill (passed as law in 2024) is designed to protect a range of minorities with protected characteristics against hate speech, including sexual minorities—the very LGB people meant to be championed by the LGBA. This subsection claims the Hate Crime bill fails to "protect free speech and will not prevent a chilling effect on women's ability to discuss their rights or partake in debates on reform of the Gender Recognition Act." The LGBA's opposition to hate crime legislation designated to protect LGB—as well as trans—people indicate their prioritization of obstructing legislation that benefits trans people, regardless of the cost to the LGB people who would also benefit from that legislation.

Campaigns against laws that legitimize trans identity in Wales

In this sub-section, the LGBA provides a link to the website of the ideologically aligned anti-trans campaign group Merched Cymru (translated: Girls/Women of Wales), which

includes blogs focused on challenging trans rights in Wales. The LGBA's website in 2022 also provided links to seventeen of these blog posts on the Merched Cymru website. All seventeen of the blog posts are trans-centred and are hostile to the Welsh government for LGBTQ+ advocacy that includes advocating for trans rights. Among these, thirteen are critical of the Welsh Government's (2023) "LGBTQ+ Action Plan" which commits Wales to supporting LGBTQI+ rights and making Wales "the most LGBTQ+ friendly nation in Europe." One of these posts is written by the LGBA co-founder Bev Jackson, accusing the LGBTQ+ Action Plan of being "a blueprint for imposing gender identity dogma." Another post by activist Helen Staniland reflects on what Staniland sees as the meaninglessness of the phrase "trans rights are human rights." Two other posts criticize the Welsh government for supporting the annual Pride festival because of its inclusion of trans rights, and for promoting sports which are inclusive of trans people. Overall, these posts reveal how the LGBA's anti-trans campaigns are amorphous but dedicated consistently to obstructing trans rights. As in Scotland with the LGBA's opposition to the pro-LGB Hate Crime legislation, the LGBA reveals how obstructing pro-trans initiatives, such as their campaign against the Welsh LGBTQ+ Action Plan—despite its overwhelming benefit for LGB people—is the LGBA's priority.

LEGACY MEDIA: LGBA AND THE MAINSTREAMING OF ANTI-TRANS CAMPAIGNING

The previous section's analysis of the LGBA's website reveals that there exists substantial evidence of the LGBA's campaigning involving its opposition to pro-trans legislation and initiatives rather than promoting LGB rights—the latter frequently being sacrificed for the former. The following data reveals how the legacy media largely omits this anti-trans campaigning and frames the LGBA as a force for good, in contrast to its negative coverage of LGBTQI+ charities.

The media's legitimizing of the LGBA is evident in the discourse of the press coverage in Table 1. The LGBA is primarily referred to as an "LGB rights group" rather than an anti-trans-rights group, despite its campaigning record. As Table 1 also shows, the LGBA is frequently presented as a safe and sensible alternative to Stonewall, indicating its function as a best-practice model contrasted against trans-inclusive LGBTQI+ charities and groups, in spite of the LGBA's sole record of outputs being anti-trans campaigning. While some coverage does refer to the criticism of the LGBA, this is included in articles that portray both pro- and anti-LGBA perspectives.

Table 2 reveals the scale of support of the right-wing press for the LGBA in terms of frequency of affirming representations, compared to representations of pro-trans organizations. Over 90% of articles by right-wing papers legitimize the LGBA as either an LGB-rights group and source of expertise on LGBTQI+ rights, or as a model of good LGBTQI+ activism when compared with the "bad" model of Stonewall and other trans-inclusive organizations. The left-of-center *The Guardian* replicates anti-trans hostility but at a reduced rate. The majority (60%) of *The Guardian* articles use a legitimizing frame for the LGBA, and a majority (54%) of their articles delegitimize pro-trans LGBTQI+ organizations when referencing the LGBA. Taken together with the news coverage of the other outlets, the result is that the LGBA is legitimized and mainstreamed for liberal and conservative audiences alike. The frequency of *The Scotsman's*

Table 1. Legacy Media’s Legitimizing Descriptions of the LGB Alliance via Linguistic Markers

Description of the LGB Alliance	The Daily Mail (n = 30)	The Guardian/ Observer (n = 24)	The Times/ Sunday Times (n = 36)	The Scotsman (n = 7)	The Daily/Sunday Telegraph (n = 83)	Total (n = 180)
Described as an LGB rights group (or variation thereof)	12	5	4	0	18	39
Described in ideological opposition to Stonewall	5	1	5	0	17	28
Described via quoted criticisms (e.g., “is accused of ‘mas-querading’”)	2	1	5	1	7	16
Described in relation to its critical stance on “gender ideol-ogy”	2	3	2	0	6	13
Described as campaigning for those “whose rights in law are based on sexual orientation not gender identity”	0	3	3	0	0	6
Described as a “gender-critical” group	0	4	0	0	1	5

Table 2. Frequency of UK Legacy Media’s Coverage of the LGB Alliance, 2020–2022

Newspaper	Stories Involving LGBA (n)	LGBA Legitimized (%)	Pro-Trans Orgs Delegitimized (%)	Pro-Trans Orgs Legitimized (%)	LGBA Delegitimized (%)
The Daily Telegraph / Sunday Telegraph	83	97	66	0	9.7
The Times / Sunday Times	36	93	96	5.6	2.8
The Daily Mail / Mail on Sunday	30	97	93	1.7	3
The Guardian / Observer	24	60	54	27	23
The Scotsman	7	57	29	43	43

coverage of trans-related stories that reference the LGBA is more consistent with pre-2014 levels of the UK media coverage of trans issues, namely the era prior to the moral panic. This reflects observations of a London-centered “groupthink.”

In stories that reference the LGBA, the top three most frequently recurring source of stories focus sympathetically on anti-trans campaigner and barrister Allison Bailey’s attempt to sue Stonewall over the latter’s advocacy of trans rights in the workplace; articles that denigrate Stonewall generally; and articles that portray anti-trans campaigner and academic Kathleen Stock as a victim of trans activism and on-campus anti-free speech campaigns. With the top two most frequently recurring type of articles attacking Stonewall, it is notable that the fourth, fifth and sixth most commonly recurring articles focus on delegitimizing the UK’s second most high-profile trans-advocacy charity, Mermaids. The LGBA is referenced in all of these articles as an expert community voice and best-practice model that views trans people and their rights as a social problem. Overall, the thematic pattern of frequency reflects Owen’s (2022, 487) analysis of how institutions of power in the UK are “attacking the social, legal, and institutional infrastructure that trans people depend on to exist as *trans* people,” in this case the organizations that defend, protect and advocate for trans people and their rights. The rest of the high-frequency stories report on the absurdity and/or threat of initiatives that attempt to publicly legitimize trans people, including the language that can be introduced to accommodate them.

In summary, the high-frequency stories that reference the LGBA almost completely depict trans people’s existence and their rights as a form of public threat or harm. This is in spite of the LGBA being—by their own definition as well as the Charity Commission’s requirements—unqualified to speak on trans issues. A notable tendency in the most frequently produced stories referencing the LGBA is the stories’ delegitimization of trans-advocacy groups. The LGBA appears to function in these stories as a best-practice model, by its opposition to trans people’s rights and legitimacy. Given the LGBA’s record of campaigning against initiatives that benefit LGB people, such as Scotland’s Hate Crime Bill and Wales’ “LGBTQ+ Action Plan,” it could be argued that the LGBA are the establishment’s best-practice model because they oppose any further progress on LGBTQI+ people’s rights generally—a majoritarian check on minority empowerment, in other words. This indication is further apparent regarding the LGBA’s aforementioned record of associations with anti-LGBTQI+ organizations in the U.S.A. and its association with the conservative, right-wing networks of 55 Tufton Street.

CASE STUDIES: FOUR ARTICLES FROM THE DATA

These case studies show the legacy media reference the LGBA in order to delegitimize trans people and their advocates. The four examples reflect the high-frequency stories captured in Table 3. Three explicitly address trans identity, while the other implicitly undermines an established LGBTQI+ charity over its support for trans rights. The articles include legitimizing references to the LGBA while (1) condemning trans-affirming initiatives, (2) condemning trans-rights activists, (3) condemning trans-advocacy organizations, and (4) omitting coverage critical of the LGBA’s anti-trans campaigning.

Table 3. Common Themes in UK Legacy Media's Coverage of the LGB Alliance

Theme	<i>The Daily Mail</i> (n = 30)	<i>The Guardian/Observer</i> (n = 24)	<i>The Times/Sunday Times</i> (n = 36)	<i>The Scotsman</i> (n = 7)	<i>The Daily/Sunday Telegraph</i> (n = 83)	Total (n = 180)
Allison Bailey's lawsuit against Stonewall	3	5	4	0	14	26
Criticism of Stonewall's stance on "gender ideology" or claims it is unfit for purpose	3	0	5	0	13	21
Kathleen Stock "cancellation" or "silencing" (+ other anti-trans figures)	2	3	5	0	8	18
Coverage of the LGBA vs. Mermaids Charity Commission case	0	5	2	1	4	12
Broader Mermaids controversies (youth inquiry, binder investigation, etc.)	3	2	1	0	5	11
Coverage of Mermaids CEO Susie Green's resignation	2	1	1	0	4	8
Boris Johnson praising the LGB Alliance / LGBA presence at Tory conference	1	1	1	0	2	5
"Mother" removed from NHS terminology by LGBT activists	0	0	1	1	3	5
Ridicule of Genderbread person diagram used in trans education	1	0	1	0	2	4
Claims that TikTok/online influencers encourage youth gender transition	2	0	0	0	2	4

Article 1: “Prove World Cup Will Be Safe, England LGBTQ+ Supporters’ Group Tells Qatar” (Ingle 2022)

This *The Guardian* article by sportswriter Sean Ingle—one of *The Guardian*’s four “gender-critical”-aligned journalists who spoke against trans rights at a *The Guardian/The Observer* Sex Equality Group meeting (Hurley 2023)—omits any reference to the LGBA’s reputation and record of anti-trans campaigning. It quotes the LGBA’s managing director Kate Barker as a primary source of authority on sports-related LGBTQI+ issues, in implicit recognition of the LGBA’s authority. It omits to mention Barker’s public record of anti-trans output. Between December 2021 and February 2022, for example, Barker tweeted a series of statements that pathologize trans identity or associate it with the oppression of others (LGB Alliance Watch 2022):

- (a) “How is it right that companies like @Zara leave [young shop assistants] to manage adult AGP men performing their fetish without support? What is the position of @UsdawUnion?”
- (b) “So many lesbians my age (50s) say that if they were 12 today, they’d be lobbying their parents for drugs and surgery in a bid to ‘become’ a boy. All of them, without exception, say it would’ve been a horrific mistake. My heart breaks for girls caught up in this homophobic cult.”
- (c) “A Cambridge college has refused to fly the Pride flag because it’s a symbol of everything ugly about the pernicious, creeping ‘queer’ movement. LGB people have been too willing to tolerate the poisoning of our community. Time to reassert our pride in being same-sex attracted.”
- (d) “The baby fetishists, sports cheats, furies and blue-haired Tik Tok straights crying about rising violence to ‘queers’ will opt out of their ‘identity’ when things get tough. LGB people, who’ve been force-teamed with them as they trash our community, don’t have that luxury.”
- (e) “LGB people are being force teamed with people who believe they are cats, babies and eunuchs. Ridiculous as it sounds, that’s where we are now. My campaign is to show that LGB people don’t share these crackpot, bonkers ideas in a bid to stop us being dragged into the delusional swamp.”

In this *The Guardian* article, Barker is quoted in relation to an area that the LGBA appears, according to its own website, to have no previous campaign involvement, namely sports: “Football has also been urged to do more by the LGB Alliance’s Kate Barker, who said that some of its campaigns to support gay rights at the World Cup, such as captains of national teams wearing a OneLove armband, risked appearing ‘performative’ when there was still so much uncertainty over safety.” Further down in the article and signifying its lesser importance, Stonewall is referenced and quoted as an additional, secondary source of expertise on LGBTQI+ issues, in spite of Stonewall’s history of campaigning on LGBTQI+ inclusivity in sports, including in relation to football and its ‘rainbow laces’ campaign, in which, “Since Rainbow Laces kicked off in 2013, over a million [people] have laced up in support of LGBTQ+ inclusion in sport, fitness and physical activity” (Stonewall 2023). By this inclusion and prioritizing of the LGBA, the article can be said to be contributing to the more general, incremental media campaign of relegating and delegitimizing the pro-trans LGBTQI+ charity as punishment for its advocacy of trans rights, while boosting at its expense a minor, newly-created organization with no campaigning connection to sports and which is primarily involved in anti-trans campaigning.

Article 2: “Sainsbury’s Trans T-shirt for Children Aged Three” (Ryan and Aitchison 2022)

This *The Daily Mail* article excludes Stonewall as a source of expertise and replaces it with the LGBA. The latter’s reputation and record of anti-trans campaigning is omitted. The LGBA is instead described according to its self-definition of defending “the rights of lesbians, gay men, and bisexuals.” The article implicitly constructs a “groomer” narrative in its coverage of a supermarket chain’s sale of an LGBTQI+ inclusive t-shirt to children suitable from three years and above. The article evokes the public shaming and boycotting of supermarkets selling pro-LGBTQI+ products that have recently characterized anti-LGBTQI+, “anti-groomer” campaigns in the USA (Bernstein 2024).

The t-shirt, which displays the LGBTQI+ symbol of a rainbow and a chicane/heart in the colors of the trans flag, features the LGBTQI-affirming words “You Are You.” The t-shirt’s message of LGBTQI+ inclusion and affirmation is framed as representing “a damaging and misogynistic ideology” unsuitable for children. The article says, “Kate Barker, managing director of the LGB Alliance which defends the rights of lesbians, gay men and bisexuals, said the range ‘promotes a damaging and misogynistic political ideology that neither the supermarket nor the children understand.’” The LGBA’s position as experts in a trans-related intervention is notable given its disconnection from trans issues and its charity status being partly conditional on not being involved in delegitimizing trans identity. Given the image of the universally known LGBTQI+ rainbow symbol, the LGBA’s contribution here also consolidates an anti-LGB groomer narrative.

Article 3: “Campus Activists Defend Anonymous Crusade to Oust Trans-Row Professor” (Ball 2021)

This *The Times* article exemplifies one of the three most popular recurring news stories across the UK legacy media in 2020–2022 that references the LGBA; namely, the on-campus campaigning by students at the University of Sussex calling for the dismissal of anti-trans academic, Kathleen Stock. The LGBA is briefly referenced in association with Stock, who is described as an LGBA trustee. The article represents a trans-inclusive activist who is campaigning against Stock’s anti-trans campaigning, in a way that both undermines the activist’s argument and reiterates the LGBA’s claim to being an LGB-rights organization: “[Trans-rights activist] Jacques said that Stock’s trusteeship of the LGB Alliance, a charity that advocates the rights of lesbian, gay and bisexual people, aligned her with the ‘far-right.’” Via this false framing of the LGBA, defined by its sanitizing corporate rhetoric rather than its 100% anti-trans campaigning record, a form of reputation-laundering occurs for the LGBA, while the reputation of the trans-inclusion activist is reiterated as irrational, intolerant and anti-LGB.

The article’s omission of key details about Stock’s record of anti-trans campaigning is notable. To highlight some examples of what is not said, in one magazine interview, Stock describes trans women as fetishists who masturbate in women’s spaces (Bindel 2021); in her book *Material Girls* (Stock 2021) she calls for the rescinding of trans women’s rights by having women-only spaces exclude trans women; and she has signed the gender-critical Declaration on Women’s Sex-Based Rights (Women’s Declaration International 2019) which repeats many of the aforementioned narratives and denies the legitimacy of trans identity. Deborah Shaw (2023, 771) has noted Stock’s

invalidating analysis in which trans identity is portrayed as existing within an “immersive fiction” similar to “playing video games and acting.” These kinds of outputs, which provoked the on-campus campaign calling for Stock to be dismissed during a period of rising anti-trans hate crime (Home Office 2022), are omitted in the coverage, contributing to the narrative of Stock as the innocent victim of an irrational and aggressive trans activism (Shaw 2023). Typifying the scale of this type of coverage in a different outlet is *The Guardian*’s framing of the situation with the headline “Kathleen Stock says she quit university post over ‘medieval’ ostracism” (Adams 2021) and a sympathetic accompanying profile article “Kathleen Stock’s departure shows universities can’t cope with argument” (Cooke 2021).

Article 4: “Allison Bailey Was Unlawfully Victimised for Opposing Stonewall’s ‘Trans Extremism’, Tribunal Rules” (Bodkin 2022)

This *The Daily Telegraph* article, about anti-trans-rights lawyer and the LGBA co-founder Allison Bailey and her claim of victimization against the UK’s largest LGBTQI+ charity Stonewall, reports on two of the three most frequent trans-related stories across the UK media between 2020–2022 that reference the LGBA. The Bailey article covers the barrister’s unsuccessful attempt to sue Stonewall, a campaign promoted by Bailey on social media titled “I’m suing Stonewall” with the accompanying hashtag #StonewallOut.

The first striking aspect of the headline is that it gives the false impression that Bailey has won her case against Stonewall. Its sub-heading consolidates this framing, “Barrister hails decision as victory against attempts to replace biological sex with notions of self-identified gender identity.” The article accomplishes this frame by referencing Stonewall in the headline and accompanying first, second, fifth and sixth paragraphs in accompaniment to references to a Bailey victory. Contributing to the narrative of Stonewall’s defeat, the article omits naming Garden Court Chambers in these opening sections, Bailey’s then-employer against whom Bailey was awarded damages of £22,000 for injury to Bailey’s feelings—i.e. the source of Bailey’s actual victory. The overall effect is aided by how only in the sixteenth paragraph does the article report that Bailey’s case against Stonewall has failed: “Alongside her action against Garden Court, Ms Bailey also sued Stonewall, alleging that the charity had induced the chambers to discriminate against her. However, this was rejected by the tribunal.”

The article legitimizes the LGBA in two ways. Firstly, it frames Stonewall in such denigrating terms to effectively imply that Stonewall is unfit for purpose in representing LGB people. Secondly, the article replicates the trend evident in the coverage of *The Daily Mail*, *The Guardian*, and *The Times* of approaching the LGBA for comment as experts on LGBTQI+ issues. The quoted comment by Kate Barker combines a fulsome tribute to Bailey with a dehumanizing condemnation of trans-rights advocacy: “Allison’s bravery and steadfast focus on truth and justice has profound implications for women and LGB people who will not be cowed by the pernicious poison of extreme gender ideology.” The “extreme gender ideology” that Barker describes as “pernicious poison” is evidently Stonewall’s acceptance of the legitimacy of trans people. The article’s first and second paragraphs also reference “Stonewall’s ‘trans extremism’” and how “Allison Bailey was victimised for expressing ‘gender critical’ beliefs and for her contention that Stonewall’s advocacy of gender self-identity made it complicit in threats

against women.” With the addition of comments by Barker and Bailey, the latter quoted as describing the exonerated Stonewall as operating like a “criminal protection racket,” the article’s overall message appears to be that anyone who publicly supports trans people and their rights is guilty of spreading poison and harm against women into UK society. Given the scale of *The Daily Telegraph*’s hostile coverage of trans issues in its the LGBA-referenced stories—it produces double the amount of trans-centered stories by *The Times* and nearly triple the amount published by *The Daily Mail*—the relentlessly delegitimizing coverage appears to confirm a commitment to invalidating trans people in public life.

CONCLUSION

This article began with the context of an already authoritarian Conservative Government’s reorientation since 2019 towards anti-trans policymaking and rhetoric. Its staffing of the senior management of the EHRC and BBC has resulted in a similar anti-trans shift in those organizations’ outputs, while policy-making over trans rights has shifted from consulting with trans-advocacy organizations such as Stonewall to anti-trans think tanks and lobby groups such as Policy Exchange and the LGBA, as well as the now-anti-trans EHRC. Consolidating this anti-trans hegemony is the legacy media coverage, which boosts anti-trans groups such as the LGBA while relegating or omitting trans-advocacy groups. Owen (2022, 487) has noted the apparent goals of anti-trans campaigns that are responsible for “attacking the social, legal, and institutional infrastructure that trans people depend on to exist as *trans* people.” The media coverage contributes to these campaigns by using the LGBA as a primary quoted source of expertise on trans- and broader LGBTQI-related issues. This is in spite of—or perhaps because of—the LGBA’s well-documented campaigning record since 2019 as an anti-trans and broader anti-LGBTQI+ group.

The LGBA may be said to influence UK Government policymaking and legacy media coverage. Since the LGBA’s meetings with Government officials circa 2021—during the same period when the Government no longer met with pro-trans organizations—the Government has changed its policy on conversion therapy in order to continue the practice against trans people. Yet the rapid development of the LGBA’s access and influence has been enabled by its ideological alignment with an anti-trans-oriented government. As Amery and Mondon (2024) say of organized transphobia, it involves “the elite production of essentialising discourse and politics regarding trans people to construct them into a homogenous group incompatible with ‘our’ ‘normal’ and ‘good’ society.” Since 2019, the ideological confluence of Government, moral technocracy, and legacy media transphobia underscores how the new anti-trans discourse “does not occur at random or in isolated events but rather is being generated and promoted by a highly organized social movement in a top-down manner” (Amery and Mondon 2024, 5). One solution would appear to be a change of approach in the Government and legacy media, away from the politics of majoritarian domination—shaped by elites—which replicates totalitarian characteristics of authoritarian regimes, including the production of a “moral technocracy.” There needs instead to be the recognition of the expertise and knowledge of grassroots networks that represent vulnerable minorities as an integral part of policy-making and democratic politics, not least as a vital form of checks

and balances performed by the disempowered. As Lewis Raven Wallace (2019, 175) says of the illusion of media objectivity, including on trans issues, “How we understand power structures—as either inevitable or constructed, natural or learned, consensual or forced—matters a great deal to the questions we ask about race, class, gender, and identity in this era.” Wallace calls for a more collaborative, dialogic, less “extractive” relationship between those that control mainstream media narratives and write about minorities, and the minority communities themselves. Given the current nature of the “strong hegemony” of the UK legacy media, and how it relates to the media’s elitist composition, this may be either a good-faith appeal or wishful thinking. Regardless, the current monolith of anti-trans decision-making and representation congealed at the level of legacy media, government and policy-advice, is not only life-destroying for one of the UK’s most vulnerable minorities, but also a failure by those with power to appreciate the functioning of democracy and the role of civil society and minority networks in democratic empowerment and enfranchisement.

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“I Took a Deep Breath and Came Out as GC”: Gender Critical Storytelling, Radicalization, and Discursive Practice on Ovarit and Mumsnet

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Following the closure of the anti-trans subreddit r/GenderCritical, gender critical (GC) internet users have migrated to more obscure, invite-only spaces. A side-effect of this GC dispersal is that activity in online anti-trans spaces has become increasingly obfuscated and insular. In this project, we provide an overview of the current landscape of GC activity on social media as it exists in the post-r/GenderCritical era and analyze how GCs are radicalized in forums online. Using computationally-assisted discourse analysis, we examine how users on two anti-trans community forums—Ovarit and Mumsnet's Feminism: Sex and Gender board—condition members to interact with trans people and reshape their own identities. The study is presented in two parts. First, we expose how GCs discursively position themselves as victim-aggressors, framing GC ideology as a marginalized identity while deploying far-right language and rhetoric. Second, we demonstrate how GC forum users narrativize their own lives through anti-trans storytelling practices, appropriate the language of queer identities through “coming out” narratives, and encourage anti-trans abuse through dramatized “encounter” stories. Through these disciplined discursive practices, we argue, GC forum posters remediate anti-trans ideology as personal and epistemic, further entrenching them in organized transphobia and rendering them increasingly dependent on GC communities.

KEYWORDS gender critical; anti-trans radicalization; extremism; Ovarit; Mumsnet

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In June of 2020, the subreddit r/GenderCritical (r/GC)—one of the most active “gender critical” (GC) spaces on Reddit, with over 60,000 members—was banned alongside thousands of other hateful communities as Reddit contended with notoriety for platforming extremist groups (Milton 2020).^{1,2} Following the closure of r/GC (alongside other high-profile, transphobic subreddits including r/ActualWomen, r/GenderCriticalSociety, and r/truellesbians), GC Redditors migrated to more obscure spaces across the web, including invite-only, regional, and alternative platforms. Much like Parler, Patriots.win, and Truth Social used by the alt-right in the US, new online spaces were established by and for GC users: Spinster.xyz, private Discord servers, the short-lived Giggle app, subforums on UK parenting website Mumsnet, and Ovarit (an invite-only forum imitating Reddit’s architecture run by former r/GC moderators).

While we might celebrate the closure of openly hateful communities on major social platforms, a side-effect of the dispersal of GC internet users is that activity in anti-trans spaces has become increasingly obfuscated and insular. Much research on anti-trans internet subcommunities has focused on public and algorithmic social networks: YouTube, TikTok, Instagram, Tumblr, Twitter/X, Twitch, and Facebook (Baker, Ging, and Andreasen 2024; Haimson et al. 2021; Lu and Jurgens 2022; Thach et al. 2024). Yet amid an international wave of political and physical violence against transgender people, it is imperative that we attend to how, despite increased insularity, GC-run social media still shapes public discourse and radicalizes users.

This study is a part of a multi-year investigation into anti-trans forums and is the first of two publications of our findings. Our analysis suggests that GC community forums are not isolated zones of anti-trans sentiment but culturally diffusive centers wherein users learn, practice, and proliferate anti-trans discursive habits. These forums represent more than a source of transphobic disinformation—they are sites where inflammatory content reinforces a conditioned GC identity through anti-trans mythmaking, autonarrative habitus, and in-group media literacy practices. Across two studies, we attend not only to *what* transphobic content these spaces circulate but seek to understand *how* GC subcommunities shape members’ media literacy and discursive practices as part of their radicalization. In a forthcoming publication, we explore how GC subcommunities rely on fandom and an information literacy model we call the “gender critical feminist book club” to condition participants to interpret

- 1 Content Notice: This article contains quotes, excerpts, and images that feature anti-trans extremist language, including use of transphobic slurs and disparaging descriptions of transgender people. Additionally, there are brief references to sexual assault, partner/child abuse, and self-harm.
- 2 We adopt “gender critical” (GC) rather than “trans-exclusionary radical feminist” (TERF) to emphasize GC ideology as an extremist, anti-trans position. Our use of “extremist” likewise highlights how GC subcultures radicalize individuals, shaping identity around anti-trans beliefs and encouraging harmful behaviors. While we recognize scholarly critiques that the term “extremism” is over-used and risks reinforcing neoliberal norms as apolitical and can obscure anti-trans violence within mainstream cultures, we use the term deliberately to challenge GC rhetoric of victimization and underscore the danger these groups pose to trans lives. For more on the contestation of “extremism” as a conceptual frame, see Thurlow (2024), el-Ojeili and Taylor (2020), and Tetrault (2022).

media, human bodies, and even their own lives through gender- and sex-essentialist ontologies (that is, to *read like a GC*).

In this study, however, we excavate what it means to *write like a GC* by analyzing how GC forum users rely on reactionary language and deploy storytelling practices in ways that calcify their anti-trans ideologies as personal and natural while rendering transgender people as anti-feminist, dangerous, and monstrous. To identify how GC groups perform political mythmaking and construct extremist identities, we undertook a computationally assisted discursive analysis of two popular GC forums: Ovarit and Mumsnet's "Feminism: Sex & Gender" board (abbreviated to "FSG"). Through comparative platform discourse analysis, we analyzed over 80k posts and comments scraped from Ovarit and over 60k posts and comments scraped from Mumsnet (Burgess and Matamoros-Fernández 2016; Lewis and Marwick 2017). Following extant scholarship on GC and anti-trans rhetoric (Billard 2023; Vincent, Erikainen, and Pearce 2020), post-truth mis/disinformation (Cloud 2018; Rieger et al. 2021; Sawyer 2018; Tripodi 2017), and research into far-right and extremist groups (Baker, Ging, and Andreasen 2024; Daniels 2018; Ging 2019; Rogers 2020), we explain how GC users discipline one another to interact with trans people and remediate anti-trans disinformation as epistemic (that is, personal and grounded in lived experience). Specifically, we examine 1) the semantic characteristics of GC discourse, which reveal GC poster's vacillating language of victim and oppressor and proximity to far-right rhetorical strategies, and 2) the emergent life writing genres that proliferate on GC forums—particularly "peak-ing," "coming out," and "encounter" narratives. Ultimately, we argue that through disciplined rhetorical framings and emergent social practices, GC forum users become further entrenched in organized transphobia and mobilized towards anti-trans political violence.

OVARIT AND MUMSNET IN CONTEXT

Ovarit and Mumsnet exist within a broader ecology of anti-trans communities online. GC forums exist alongside public platforms such as YouTube and TikTok, which scholars have found algorithmically network anti-trans content (Billard 2023; Bassi and La-Fleur 2022). There is crucial ongoing work in extremism studies regarding the rise of anti-trans influencers on algorithmic platforms, and their connections to anti-feminist, far-right, and male-supremacist/manosphere ecosystems (Abondio 2024; Baker, Ging, and Andreasen 2024; Czerwinsky 2024). Here, we attend to the rise of GC-specific alternative social platforms. For anti-trans Redditors displaced by the closure of r/GC, several anti-trans alternative platforms emerged, including Spinster.xyz, Giggle, Discord servers, and Ovarit. Spinster.xyz is a GC-specific iteration of Twitter/X and alt-right platform Gab, and Giggle, which claimed to be a "female-only" social application, attracted controversy at its launch for its use of racist and problematic "selfie verification" technology (Berge 2024). In the years following r/GC's closure, Spinster.xyz failed to capture a sizable audience and Giggle—which lost a landmark discrimination lawsuit in 2024—has largely been offline following its rocky launch and legal inculcation.³

3 *Tickle v Giggle for Girls Pty Ltd* (No 2) [2024] FCA 960 (Austl. Fed. Ct., August 23, 2024), <https://www.fca.gov.au/publications/decisions/tickle-v-giggle-for-girls-pty-ltd-no-2>.

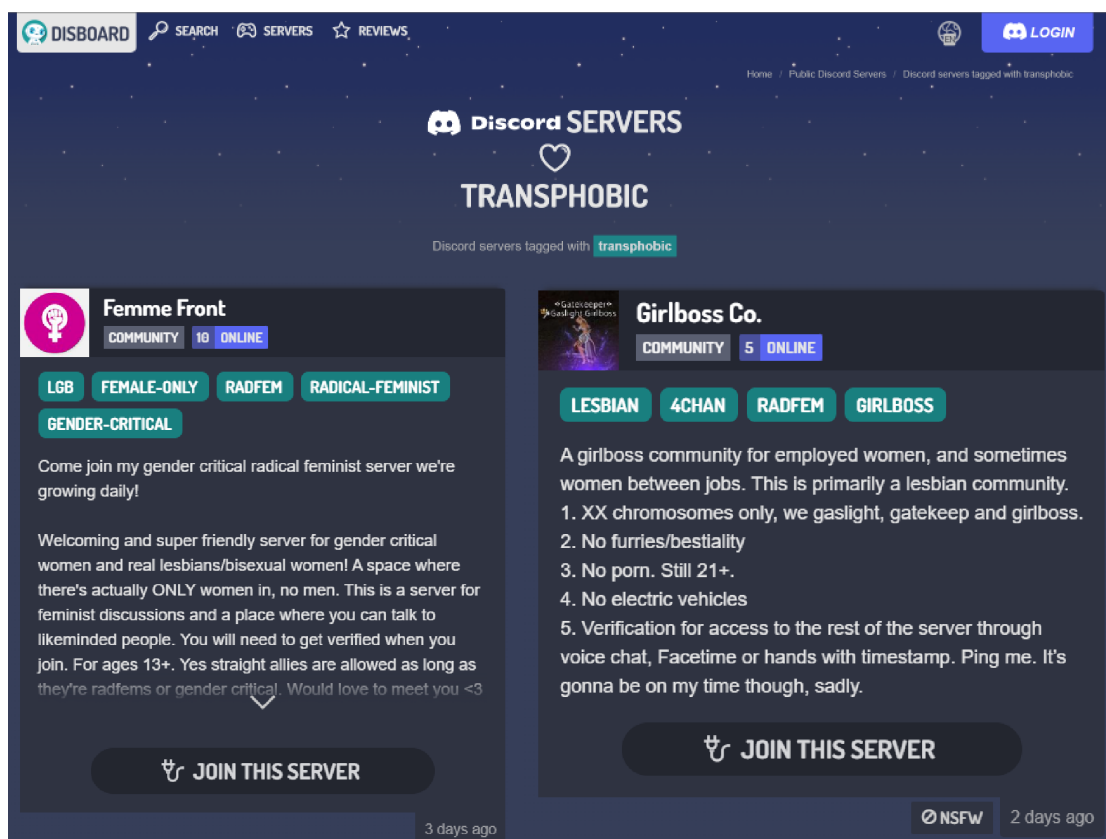


Figure 1. Public invitation listings for “radfem” and “transphobic” Discord servers advertised on bulletin site Disboard as of June 2024

Yet other GC-specific platforms persisted, and anti-trans activity in these spaces have been amplified by and contributed to recent legislative and political violence against trans people internationally (Alsott et al. 2024; DuBois 2023; McLean 2021; Thurlow 2024; Willem, Platero, and Tortajada 2022; Williams 2020). While not central to our study here, scholars have found that servers on social community application Discord are also common gathering sites for GC communities (Heslep and Berge 2021; Thach et al. 2024). This is borne out by our findings. Throughout our datasets we found that users on both Mumsnet and Ovarit circulated hundreds of links ($n_{\text{Ovarit}} = 221$; $n_{\text{FSG}} = 23$) to private, GC-specific Discord communities and social servers that, as one poster phrased it, “know what a woman is.” In one instance, users on Ovarit curated a list of two-dozen “Local and Regional Radfem Discord Servers” intended to help organize GC community members across countries. Prospective invitees were instructed to reach out to designated community managers for approval to access these private servers. With Ovarit announcing its imminent closure in 2025 (which we discuss at length in the conclusion), users began widely circulating private Discord server links. These servers were advertised as protected by strict voice and photo verification methods. This follows patterns in other extremist spaces on Discord; in their study of the platform, Heslep and Berge describe how hate groups often insulate their servers from moderation with additional verification methods, and they note that anti-trans groups

www.judgments.fedcourt.gov.au/judgments/Judgments/fca/single/2024/2024fca0960.

were prominent on Discord (Heslep and Berge 2021). We likewise found that Discord servers remain a popular venue for anti-trans users: as of June 2024, server bulletin site Disboard (which allows Discord users to publicize their servers) still advertises, indexes, and networks multiple public servers overtly tagged as “transphobic,” “rad-fem,” “LGB,” and “anti-LGBTQ” (Figure 1). Alongside Discord, links to anti-trans Tumblr posts, YouTube content from transphobic influencers, and GC resources hosted on Google Drive characterized the dataset, highlighting the inter-platform dynamics of these communities.

There remain an abundance of accounts, channels, personalities, and sites across social media and the web broadly dedicated to anti-trans activity, including many that don’t universally align themselves with GC groups (such as Kiwifarms and communities on 4chan), yet we have found forums to also be active and politically engaged spaces for organized transphobia. Invite-only and regional platforms, like these forums, are not algorithmically governed, but rather are sites where anti-trans users congregate and mobilize after being “peaked” (GC poster’s self-description for radicalization). This is to say, while anyone can be presented with anti-trans content on TikTok, YouTube, or Twitter/X, forum users on Ovarit and Mumsnet’s FSG board have deliberately embedded themselves in anti-trans communities. As we discuss below in our analysis of GC posters’ “peaking” stories, members often characterize themselves as having sought out anti-trans community spaces following their radicalization. In the post-r/GC era, anti-trans forums are insular but continue to shape anti-trans activity across the web. With this context laid out, let us now clarify how Mumsnet and Ovarit, respectively, fit into this ecosystem.

Mumsnet

Mumsnet is an internet forum established in 2000 dedicated to UK parents. Notably, Mumsnet has a longstanding reputation for being an overwhelmingly white, middle-class, and (at times) heteronormative space, yet a fixation on transgender people and opposition to trans rights has emerged over time (Baker 2022; Galpin, Gwenffrewi, and Stokoe 2023; Jensen 2013). Discussions on Mumsnet have historically centered around resources and advice for raising children, but they also took a feminist and political bent, tackling topics such as the division of household labor, the politics of pornography, and abortion rights. In the early 2010s, these were the topics that tended to dominate the “Feminism: Sex and gender discussions” (FSG) talk topic (a highly active subforum). Amid the UK government’s 2017 review of the 2004 Gender Recognition Act, the FSG boards shifted to almost exclusively discussing transgender rights amid public media coverage (McLean 2021). The FSG board became so toxic that site founder, Justine Roberts, put forth unique moderation policies in 2018 for discussing “gender identity and sex” in an attempt to “stand in solidarity with vulnerable or oppressed minorities” while also staying “committed to freedom of speech” (Roberts 2018). In effect, these moderation policies did little more than cut down on the use of overt transphobic slurs; the climate of the board remained mired in transphobia allowed under the pretense of protecting GC users’ “free speech.” Such handwashing policies are often used by platforms to mitigate accountability for users’ behavior and site content (Gillespie 2010, 2018). During this time, the FSG boards served as a site for political organizing where users circulated petitions, links to anti-trans organizations, and information for contacting representatives about repealing the GRA.

When r/GC closed, Mumsnet was poised to take on the influx of GC users as it had established a climate friendly to anti-trans forum users.⁴ The FSG boards overlap with the broader audiences of Mumsnet and British internet users generally, as it is a more public-facing site than other anti-trans networks. Instances of confrontation and context collapse, where posts by GC users are seen and engaged beyond the intended audience, are more common on FSG than other forums. Importantly, the dynamics of the FSG board are fundamentally different from, albeit entangled with, the culture of Mumsnet at large. Mumsnet hosts many subforums, and we will use the term “FSG” through the remainder of the paper to refer to the FSG boards specifically. This is done both for clarity and because, while Mumsnet is—as a platform—affiliated with anti-trans movements, our data is limited to the activity of the FSG boards. That said, it is important to remember that FSG remains entangled with Mumsnet generally and the politics of UK nationalism, colonialism, and British white supremacy (Evang 2022).

Ovarit

While FSG, over time, has become a cultural hub for GC users and dominated by anti-trans extremism, Ovarit emerged directly in response to the closure of r/GC and has maintained an emphasis on anti-trans community-building and mobilization since its founding. While FSG users are predominantly located in the UK, Ovarit users appeared to be primarily located in the US and demonstrated preoccupation with American events and issues. Much like other Reddit-clones created by far-right movements (including Voat and patriots.win), Ovarit imitates Reddit’s architecture by dividing posts across topical hierarchies sorted by most recent, “top,” and “hot.” From the site’s name (a pun on “ovaries”) to its subforums (called “circles,” e.g. include o/ItsAFetish and o/SaveWomensSports), Ovarit actively positions itself as an anti-trans rallying point online. One of Ovarit’s developers, M.K. Fain (also a co-founder of Spinster.xyz), admitted in her magazine *4W* that a clear “us vs. them narrative” is integral to the site’s design and a necessary evil that is “effective in building and mobilizing communities” (Fain 2020).

While much of Ovarit is dedicated to anti-trans causes, the site also hosts a variety of subforums for general interests, including o/movies, o/books, and o/games. A former r/GC and current Ovarit moderator who goes by the handle Womenopausal claims in an interview that Ovarit’s goal is not to be “the new r/GenderCritical” but rather “to be the new Reddit... on a smaller scale, and with a very different culture naturally” (Fain 2020). Thus, administrators are not suggesting Ovarit has ambitions to grow to Reddit’s scope, but rather that Ovarit might eclipse Reddit’s role in users’ daily activity online. Womenopausal goes on to claim that Ovarit has two functions: 1) to become a hub for discussing and teaching about radical feminism and 2) “to provide a woman-centered space for discussion of everything that interests women.” Community members’ broader interests, then, become an onramp and site of retention within

4 This timeline is supported by the writings of Sarah Pedersen, particularly in her book *The Politicization of Mumsnet*. Pedersen’s work, however, uncritically celebrates Mumsnet’s rise as a “safe space for gender criticals” (Pedersen 2020: 158) and Pedersen herself has made proclamatory anti-trans statements in her work.

the closed ecosystem of Ovarit. As we discuss further in forthcoming work, this proximity to media and daily life is precisely what makes Ovarit such a dangerous vehicle for anti-trans extremism and disinformation.

Notably, as we were finalizing this manuscript, the site administrator announced that Ovarit would be shutting down on April 27th of 2025. We reflect on this announcement in the conclusion to this article, but it is notable that—at time of writing—Ovarit remains one of the most crucial platforms for organized transphobia and GC community building online.

PRIOR LITERATURE

Our study draws from the work of media scholars who have documented the unfurling of anti-trans disinformation and transphobia in online extremism. Fran Amery and Aurelien Mondon document how organized transphobia intersects with reactionary political movements online and relies on rhetorics of moral panics and populism to create “othering” narratives (Amery and Mondon 2025). TJ Billard’s (2023, 237) research clarifies the types and effects of various forms of disinformation circulated by GC communities, including *othering narratives*, *essentializing narratives*, and *authenticating narratives*, which all undermine trans identity and “reify the [cultural] hierarchies that privilege cisgender TERFs.” While our study explores specifically *how* GC posters condition one another and catalyze such disinformation, these categories of “identity propaganda” are deeply rooted in the data we present. Media researchers have explained how social media plays a role in promoting trans survival, resource-building, and community while simultaneously making trans people hypervisible and fostering conditions for anti-trans congregations to form. For example, Moya Bailey (2021) and Jackson, Bailey, and Foucault Welles (2020) have documented the ways that social media has created activist communities of resilience and vulnerabilities for trans people of color in the US as demonstrated by campaigns like #FreeCeCe and #GirlsLikeUs.

The rhetorical traditions of GC and TERF discourse have also been thoroughly discussed by scholars (Awkward-Rich 2017, 2022; Keegan 2020; Lewis and Seresin 2022; Libby 2022; Stone 1992; Stryker 2004). Cristan Williams (2020, 57) provides an overview of how GC sex-essentialist ideologies build upon the rhetorical and moral constructs of early anti-trans feminists and that “it is the need to defend an ontological woman rooted in sex-essentialism that morally animates TERF rhetoric and behaviors.” Other scholars have argued that the political alliance between conservative Christian nationalists and GC groups is not, as is often described, unlikely (Careaga-Pérez 2016; Graff, Kapur, and Walters 2019; Libby 2022). As C. Libby (2022, 438) notes, both groups rely on affective rhetoric that positions “cisgender women and evangelicals, not transgender people [as] sympathetic, endangered, and subject to injury.” Our findings reinforce this understanding: GC posters on both forums demonstrate savvy understanding of personal writing and emotional storytelling that obscure their politically violent contexts. Other research—particularly Gill-Peterson’s work on GC mothers in the UK—have centered on anti-trans political mobilization against trans youth (Gill-Peterson 2024).

While our instinct as researchers might be to contest GC forum members’ circulation of anti-trans disinformation, such corrections do little to deter the political

mobilization of the anti-trans mythmaking apparatuses at work in these spaces. Information scholars have documented this at length: our traditional understandings of “radicalization” problematically flatten user-media relationships and do not account for the role of affect and epistemology (Marwick, Clancy, and Furl 2022; Tripodi 2017). Marwick, Clancy, and Furl (2022), drawing on Marwick’s extensive research on QAnon conspiracy theorists (Marwick and Partin 2022), argue that extremists often demonstrate savvy yet conditioned media literacy strategies and that their beliefs are ultimately shaped by the “intertextual, interpretive practice[s]” learned in these communities. Thus, they argue, researchers must attend both to how extremist communities online are structured and how they shape participant epistemology. Dana Cloud (2018) similarly argues in *Reality Bites* that informational counternarratives to extremist practices are fundamentally insufficient when extremism has been internalized as part of one’s epistemic frame (that is, one’s core sense of self and the world). Cloud instead argues for the practice of “frame-checking”—a means of “evaluat[ing] the narrative and other meaning making that couches information in context” (Cloud 2018, 188). Cloud’s framework examines the ways that a community’s doxastic beliefs (a culturally constructed “common sense”) become remediated through social practices as epistemic (that is, personal and experiential). This understanding of extremism is crucial to the design of our study: we are ultimately interested in understanding how and where GC communities encourage members to internalize gender-essentialist doxa as personal belief. In this same vein, our study explores how the discourse and storytelling practices of GC extremists on Mumsnet and Ovarit couch anti-trans disinformation in personal narratives.

Despite the public criticisms of Ovarit and FSG for circulating anti-trans extremist content (Edie Miller famously noted that “Mumsnet is to British transphobia more like what 4Chan is to American fascism”), both FSG and Ovarit have received little academic attention in extremism scholarship. While these platforms are insular and niche, what GC forum users do in private has dire consequences for trans people and the project of trans liberation. We found that GC forums are politically mobilized, as indicated by regular links to petitions, events, and ballot measures appearing on FSG and Ovarit. However, while users on these sites encourage legislative interventions and other forms of anti-trans protesting, they are also likewise pedagogical, inculcating users to adopt specific discursive practices and epistemic frames. Our study is less concerned that extremist sites like Ovarit and FSG exist or even with what anti-trans disinformation and political activism that is circulated within them. Rather, we seek to excavate how these communities shape the media literacy practices and political identities of GC users. By attending to the ways that users post in GC forums, we analyze how social media platforms shape and reinforce extremist epistemology and argue that media and information literacy practices are at the heart of anti-trans mobilization.

METHODS

Data Collection

This study relied on a computationally-assisted discourse analysis of data collected from FSG and Ovarit using Python notebooks developed by one of the authors.

Data from each platform was collected and analyzed separately, using the means below.

Ovarit

Given Ovarit's overt focus on GC issues, we found it prudent to survey as much of the site as possible. To gain a representative sample of ongoing conversations, we scraped (up to) the top 25 threads from each of Ovarit's 20 publicly-listed circles (subforums), resulting in a total sample of 2,223 thread posts as well as 84,232 user comments. Notably, these were the 25 "Top" threads in each circle, meaning that the most-upvoted posts were collected. For each post, we collected the text, thread URL, vote score, post type (comment or thread post) and username of the poster. Data was collected in six consecutive batches across two days in November of 2023. The subforums included were: o/Activism, o/Announcements, o/Books, o/Canceled, o/FeministBooks, o/FeministEvents, o/FeministVideos, o/Games, o/GenderCritical, o/GoodNewsForWomen, o/Movies, o/Ovarit, o/Radfemmetry, o/SaveWomensSports, o/ItsAFetish, o/STEM, o/Television, o/TerfsASlur, o/WomensHistory, and o/WomensLiberation.

Mumsnet

Mumsnet posts within the FSG board are organized in a single feed. While Ovarit has forum subcategories (circles), FSG is a subforum itself, and does not have subcategories. Given that the discussion on FSG regularly involves trans- and gender-related subjects, it was likewise important to grab a wide sample. We scraped the most recent 3,767 threads and an accompanying 57,791 comments.⁵ In each case, the text, username, datetime, post type, and thread URL were collected. Data was collected in April of 2024.

Analysis

Following established practices in cross-platform social media analysis, data was computationally and manually analyzed using a mixed-methods, recursive process (Burgess and Matamoros-Fernández 2016; Makhortykh et al. 2022; Massanari 2017). The data was initially reviewed through two means: 1) close review of the most-active threads from each dataset and 2) examination of post text across each dataset using Python and digital humanist tools for the purposes of identifying patterns and outliers (see Appendix A for details). From this initial review, the authors developed several possible themes and patterns which were then computationally evaluated against the full dataset. Our procedure was recursive: as we evaluated patterns, our analysis generated new themes and further directed our review of specific threads and posts. For example, in our manual review of forum data, we noted two threads dedicated to "coming out" stories. We then used concordance tools to identify every other appearance and variation of "coming out" posts across each dataset, which we reviewed comparatively in context—thereby demonstrating the broader scope of this practice across the dataset. This procedure was repeated for each finding presented here.

5 FSG threads were scraped according to recency because Mumsnet's boards have neither an upvoting system, nor a way to sort posts by activity or popularity.

In our findings, we present qualitative analyses of user posts that demonstrate how these discursive practices are deployed by GC users alongside quantitative data (which we note by token count in each dataset: n_{Ovarit} and n_{FSG} , respectively) that contextualizes the prevalence of each pattern. Where token counts are presented, these represent the number of appearances in post/comment text across each dataset. Other metadata, including URLs, poster usernames, and votes, are not included in token counts, but were consulted by the authors for context. Token counts only include direct appearances and conjugations, unless additional variations are noted. We have chosen this approach because it allows us to illustrate narrative practices while still providing a longitudinal view of trends in anti-trans discourse. User data presented from the dataset is generally anonymized (except for site founders and administrators publicly affiliated with these platforms) to reduce searchability.

In the following two sections we describe key findings from our review of the dataset. Firstly, we extend the work of previous scholars by demonstrating how the discourse of GC forum posters shares a telling proximity to the language of far-right movements. We then turn to three genres of anti-trans storytelling GC “peaking” stories, “coming out” narratives, and the transphobic “encounter” narrative (dramatic retellings of mundane run-ins with trans people). Through attention to the specific language and storytelling practices of users, we demonstrate how GC community members discursively create isolated communities and escalate extremist positionality through autonarrative habitus.

GC DISCURSIVE PROXIMITY TO FAR-RIGHT EXTREMISM

Over the last five years, crucial research has emerged linking the political mobilization of GC, anti-trans, and anti-gender groups with far-right and neofascist movements (Balci et al 2023). As Tudor (2021, 243) writes, “transphobic feminists not only copy the language of the far right but are also part of far-right discourse.” Our findings here echo this previous scholarship, rearticulating a persistent overlap in the discursive practices of GC posters and other far-right groups. Overall, we found that GC rhetoric was characterized by four key similarities with far-right rhetoric: an emphasis on 1) self-victimization, 2) “wokeism,” 3) “cancel culture,” and 4) a denigration of sex-workers.

Constructing Victim Ideologies

Much like alt-right and ultraconservative groups in the US, users on Ovarit and FSG framed themselves as experiencing righteous backlash from a monolithic “queercult” ($n_{\text{Ovarit}} = 303$, $n_{\text{FSG}} = 274$) and its allies. Posters also repeatedly described themselves as being silenced and rejected by “mainstream” culture, friends, family, and colleagues. Feminist scholars have previously noted this shared rhetorical strategy, arguing that “trans-exclusionary feminisms deploy the rhetorical flashpoints of victimization and endangerment as part of an ongoing effort to forge and consolidate a new vision of cis womanhood” (Bassi and LaFleur 2022, 325; see also Lewis and Seresin 2022; Vincent, Erikainen, and Pearce 2020). This construction of womanhood, according to Tudor (2021, 241), “uses the same vocabulary and logics as right-wing anti-gender argumentation” and reinforces racialized hierarchies and white plasticity. Evang notes

that anti-trans discourse in Europe often centers the vulnerability of white women and children:

the malleability that white, civilized subjects are imbued with can back-fire; it is what makes white women and children particularly susceptible to being perverted and exploited by “gender ideologues” and “racialized others.” (Evang 2022, 381)

Accordingly, both datasets were inflected with colonial and nationalist framings of political events.

Ovarit and FSG users performed “transvestigations” of athletes and celebrities from outside Europe and North America. More generally, discussion of gender diverse people of color from outside the US and UK was levied to reinforce the local oppression of GC posters themselves. For example, one user on FSG shared an *Independent* article titled “How climate change is hitting vulnerable Indonesian sex workers” with the caption “Is this the most woke headline ever?” In the 80 responses to this thread, users not only accused the journalist of “farm[ing] oppression points” and “TRA [Trans Rights Activist] propaganda,” but suggested that the article was, itself, a harm to white UK women, as the article performed a racist exclusion of white people and that such a “specific” focus meant that “women’s sports, changing rooms, toilets, free speech, being utterly ignored by politicians as if women are invisible” [FSG]. As one user noted: “The key takeaways are that there are too many white people in the countryside... (with the unspoken assumption here that the subject would prefer that there were more people like her there)” [FSG]. This reframing of oppression is not incidental but reflects the ways that the GC users discursively assert their position as victims by courting a “longer genealogy of racialized plasticity” (Evang 2022, 378). This vacillating position of victim-aggressor is foundational to the rhetoric found in GC forums and is—as we demonstrate through the remainder of this article—further evidenced by their storytelling practices.

Opposing Wokeism

The discourse carried strong animosity towards political progressives and liberals exemplified by the widespread invocation of “wokeness.” “Woke” has long history in American Black communities stretching back to the 1920s, however the term entered the broader public’s vernacular in 2014 after the police murder of Micheal Brown in Ferguson, Missouri (Romano 2020). The term has been used to signal an opposition to and vigilance against anti-Black violence, in particular police brutality, but has morphed into a catchall term used by conservative reactionaries to denigrate left leaning political commitments generally. Variations of “woke” (especially “people” and “agenda”), “wokeists,” “wokies,” “wokesters,” and “Wokerati” appeared hundreds of times across both sites ($n_{\text{Ovarit}} = 942$; $n_{\text{FSG}} = 516$). “Woke,” and its variations, were used—as they are in other reactionary subcultures—as oppositional labels targeting neoliberal political institutions and progressive individuals (Asen 2024). The flexibility of the term was crucial to its use: “woke” was generally used as a way of lumping trans people, their allies, and progressives into a homogenous political target—often framing them as ignorant, selfish, or misogynist/anti-feminist:

soothing the hurty feelings of some self-obsessed woke twats is given more priority than burglary, assaults, murders, rapes etc. [FSG]

You did NOT deserve this. You are NOT a transphobic liar. And don't let the woke misogynists convince you otherwise. [Ovarit]

More often, “woke” was simply used as a shorthand for the political antipode to GC ideology. For example, one FSG poster politically grouped their children under the labels of “gender critical” and “woke” based on their support of trans rights:

My 3 eldest dc [dear children] are gender critical, they are 33, 31 and 25.

My younger 2 are full on woke at 20 and 15. [FSG]

On Ovarit specifically, GC posters also used the term woke to distinguish between the “libfems” (progressive individuals warped by trans ideology) and “radfems” (another term for GCs).

Lamenting Cancel Culture

In the same way that far-right groups describe themselves as maligned and slandered by the “mainstream media,” GC users likewise lamented being “silenced” and “canceled”—a term widely associated with the deplatforming of far-right figures (Boehme and Scott 2020; Isom, Tonique, and Boehme 2021; Munn 2019)—by mainstream media outlets and women’s/queer communities. This echoes previous arguments by Lavery (2019, 127) that GC feminists often rely on “the framing of trans lives as case studies in an ongoing conversation about free speech.” In our data, GC posters demonstrated a discursive preoccupation with the threat of being “canceled,” appearing hundreds of times across both data sets: “cancel culture” ($n_{\text{Ovarit}} = 544$; $n_{\text{FSG}} = 746$), “silencing” ($n_{\text{Ovarit}} = 342$; $n_{\text{FSG}} = 401$), and “censorship” ($n_{\text{Ovarit}} = 324$; $n_{\text{FSG}} = 244$). In Ovarit’s case, one of its most popular circles, o/Canceled, is set up to “catalog the attempts... to silence those who speak out against the TRA/gendercult” (Figure 2). This preoccupation with cancel culture reflected GC posters’ investment in positioning themselves as a countercultural movement, and their antagonism was often directed at press outlets, namely “mainstream media,” “mainstream news,” and “mainstream feminist” publications ($n_{\text{Ovarit}} = 357$; $n_{\text{FSG}} = 235$).

Antipathy Towards Sex-Workers

Much like manosphere and incel groups that denigrate sex workers and exhibit a puritanical concern with sexual deviance (Devries, Bessant, and Watts 2021; Monea 2022; Phipps 2021), GC users’ rhetoric consistently disparaged, targeted, and demonstrated enmity towards sex workers, who were referred to as “prostitutes” ($n_{\text{Ovarit}} = 509$; $n_{\text{FSG}} = 371$) and accused of proliferating the “porn addicted” and “pornsick” ($n_{\text{Ovarit}} = 1,350$; $n_{\text{FSG}} = 482$) conditions under which gender ideology allegedly proliferates. Denigration of sex workers is an established component of GC ideology. As Phipps writes, the grouping of trans people and sex workers as political targets stems from the way GC groups police gender according to white, bourgeois imaginaries of womanhood (Phipps 2020). Both sex workers and trans people are denied personhood because of their deviant relationships with sex, gender, and labor. Importantly, these deviant acts are rhetorically positioned as impinging on “women’s safety,” something that was foundational to discussions on FSG and Ovarit. Accordingly, we found that the rhetorical blurring of trans identities, kink, sex work, and pornography under a catchall of “sexual deviancy” underscores GC discourse. One Ovarit poster directly summed up these preoccupations

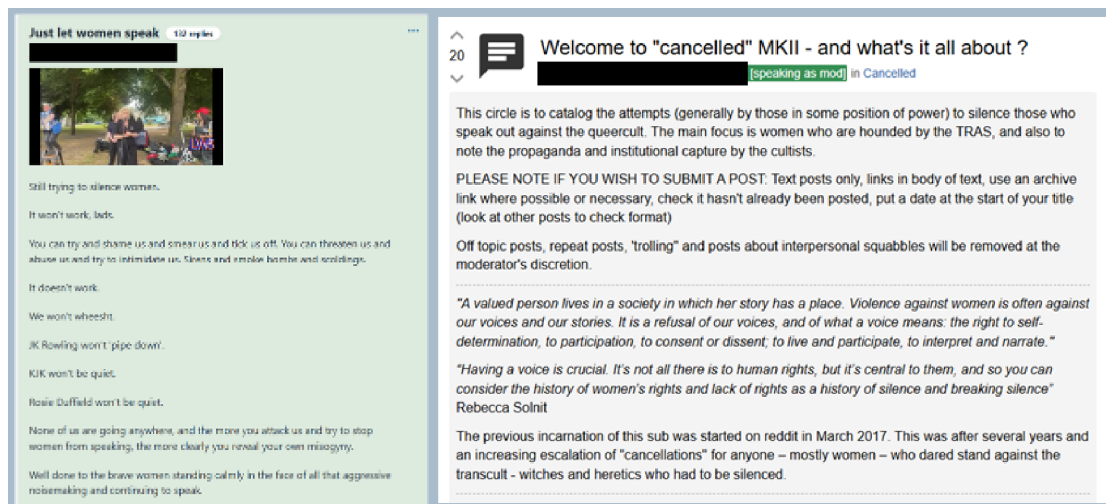


Figure 2. Example posts from FSG (left) and Ovarit (right) referencing “cancel culture” and alleged silencing of GC voices

by listing the most major problems they had with the “American left,” which included support for “prostitution, surrogacy and porn, along with gender ideology.” Posters regularly moved between these labels and would link discussions of trans identity with pornography or sexual perversion:

A lot of the male ones [trans women] are pornsick and obsessed with looking like a cute uwu anime girl. [Ovarit]

In my experience, any man who labels himself as a male feminist tends to be a misogynistic tosser. I’ve known a few like that and they all had extensive porn habits and actually didn’t cope that well when they had female bosses telling them what to do. They then turned into TRAs, predictably. [FSG]

While I think it’s important to put aside bias over sex or race and choice of partner, obvious signs of abnormal sexuality should not be ignored. There’s good reason why many people view inappropriately dressed men with suspicion and it’s not bigotry. [Ovarit]

By linking trans identities to a broad label of sexual deviancy, GCs seek to invalidate trans individuals and sex workers vulnerability and recenter a white, cisgender femininity. Connections with other anti-sex and anti-sex-worker spaces, is both discursive and infrastructural: Ovarit dedicates an entire circle, o/AntiKink, that hosts anti-sex and anti-pornography discussions. In this way, these forums and platforms are positioned to recruit and network members invested in anti-sex politics.

A Fraught Alignment

These overlaps are ultimately unsurprising: previous scholarship has suggested complex political entanglements between GC groups online and alt-right groups (Lewis and Seresin 2022; Tudor 2021; Vincent, Erikainen, and Pearce 2020). We wish to both echo and further clarify this understanding through our findings: GC groups indeed

signaled coalitional proximity to far-right groups and emulated their specific discursive practices. GC posters were, however, overtly conflicted about their proximity to far-right movements. On the one hand, some users openly advocated for allyship with far-right groups or suggested coalitional mobilization. For example, one user noted that it was important that GC users post and spread their message within conservative spaces:

GC feminists have been crafting the catchphrases for a while... It's time to go into conservative forums and share this with conservatives.

[Ovarit]

Beyond infiltration and dissemination of information within far-right spaces, discussions of how GC communities might interface with far-right communities online were not uncommon. We found users on both FSG and Ovarit describe how they would be voting in coalitional alignment with far-right movements in regard to anti-trans legislation. A FSG poster, for instance, described the Labour party's belief that "TAWW [Trans Women Are Women]" as reason enough "to hold [their] nose and vote Conservative."

Yet other users on both Ovarit and FSG expressed frustration about or denied their political proximity to far-right movements. GC communities noted their hostility to "MRAs" (men's right activists), incels, and "femcels," even as they regularly adopted the anti-sex, anti-porn, and anti-sex-worker rhetoric commonly used in those communities. Notably, this influence is reciprocal: as Baker et al. contend, organized transphobia has, since 2020, vastly reshaped the algorithmic landscape of the manosphere in turn (Ging 2019). This vacillating position is integral to GC rhetoric on these forums: GC posters distance themselves from far-right movements by emphasizing their feminist commitments even as they imitate the specific language of and actively work alongside other anti-trans groups. Users on both forums identified themselves as being "politically homeless." This political homelessness, as they articulated, was due to the "silencing" and "erasure" they faced from mainstream media alongside their discomfort with the misogynistic and ultraconservative language of the far-right.

As organized transphobia scholars note, there have been longstanding collusions between feminist and fascist groups, and GC movements are only the most recent (and well-organized) of these ventures (Evang 2022; Gill-Peterson 2021; Lewis and Seresin 2022). What was of interest to us as researchers, however, was how GC posters maintained their anti-trans doxastic agenda amid their vacillating political discourse. We theorize that the rhetorical entrenchment of GC posters is mediated by specific, autonarrative practices: modes of personal storytelling which—to use Cloud's model—remediate doxastic political belief into epistemological truth. Through this remediation, posters are disciplined to frame their participation in organized transphobia not as ideological, but as the personal and social realization of a persecuted, endemic GC identity. By excavating these specific practices, we demonstrate how the political ideologies of anti-trans hate groups are mobilized through personal mythmaking on these forums.

GC AUTONARRATIVE PRACTICES

Recasting “GC” as an Endemic, Personal Identity

There is one further connection between the rhetoric of GC users and far-right groups that warrants particular attention: the use of in-group language to describe one’s personal narrative of radicalization. Specifically, GC forums regularly centered discussions of “peaking,” a term used to describe a dramatic, egg-crack moment in which a poster “discovered” the fraudulence of gender ideology and “realized” they were GC. This language is analogous to other group narratives of radicalization, particularly the infamous alt-right motif of “redpilling.”⁶ Information scholars have documented the alt-right’s description of redpilling as “a decisive moment of conversion, a single event that radically transforms the subject forever” (Munn 2019). While scholars of disinformation and hate movements have noted that this is a fictive depiction—internet users are, in fact, radicalized more slowly through several phases that take place following sustained interaction with extremist media and communities (Lewis and Marwick 2017; Marwick, Clancy, and Furl 2022; Rieger et al. 2021)—such narratives of peaking remain central to GC users’ own descriptions of their political identities. As we discuss in this section, in-group stories of peaking and subsequently “coming out” as GC, further reify fantasies that mainstream culture is silencing, canceling, or confusing vulnerable GC users and confusing would-be GC community members who simply haven’t peaked yet.

We examined how GC posters were performing this rhetorical positioning across both platforms. GC users regularly described their GC beliefs as an endemic identity, rooted in a doxastic framing of womanhood. This emphasis on the endemicity of GC ideology was made apparent in the way that GC users addressed other members through nominalized terms. On Ovarit specifically, GC users relied on a variety of emergent terms to hail other members. “Radfem” ($n_{\text{Ovarit}} = 412$) was used frequently on Ovarit to refer to other members and to signal anti-trans association. (i.e. “this video is a love letter to all my radfem sisters” [Ovarit], “as a radfem I barely dare to open my mouth” [Ovarit]). “Ryn” and “gyns” ($n_{\text{Ovarit}} = 51$) were used to refer to other GC users (i.e. “Love you gyns”, “Thank you GYNS!!”, and “You gyns inspire me daily”).

This said, “GC” ($n_{\text{Ovarit}} = 776$; $n_{\text{FSG}} = 2,377$) was by far the most common term used by both Ovarit and FSG users self-referentially and to address other members. While posters did use “GC” in the context of “GC views” ($n_{\text{Ovarit}} = 16$; $n_{\text{FSG}} = 140$), “GC women” ($n_{\text{Ovarit}} = 60$; $n_{\text{FSG}} = 156$), or “GC feminism” ($n_{\text{Ovarit}} = 24$; $n_{\text{FSG}} = 92$), “GC” was often used as a nominalized term and as a standalone identity marker:

there are a few people GCs/RFs [radfems] need to be aware of. [Ovarit]

I’m fed up with the Twitterverse GCs. [Ovarit]

- 6 It’s worth noting that the term “redpilling,” used by alt-right groups is likewise co-opted from queer communities, as the term draws from *The Matrix*, which has been widely lauded as a landmark work in trans cinema in which the red pill and blue pill represent an analogy for HRT and awareness of the malleability of gender. For further context, see Keegan (2018) and Munn (2023).

I'm GC but not very bothered about the pronouns issue. [FSG]

100% Labour - and I'm GC. Our country shouldn't be in this state. [FSG]

Across both datasets, users relied on "GC" not only as a descriptor for their views or a subject for discussion, but as an identity marker in itself. Within these groups, "GC" is seen as something that one *is*. GC users maintained a clear group-identity, which they established as innate to the "gyns." That is, within the framing of GC rhetoric, people can *be* GC, but people are misled by "TRAs," short for "Trans Rights Activists," and "gender ideology." As we illustrate below, this idea that one "is" and "becomes" GC is a key discursive practice that enabled posters to craft personal narratives in which their radicalization is framed as a personal discovery, realization, or "coming out."

The suggested endemicity of GC extremism is especially important, and becomes starker, given the way that transness is framed as an ideology separated from identity. Across the dataset, GC posters rhetorically distanced transness from lived experience, casting it as an ideology maintained by "TRAs." This is an established practice in reactionary feminist movements that has been noted by scholars that serves to erase the personhood of trans people by framing them as a monolithic, ideological group (Bassi and LaFleur 2022; Billard 2023; Williams 2020). While it is unsurprising that our datasets were riddled with unconscionable descriptions of trans people, we wish to highlight some of the most pervasive patterns in how transgender people were framed in GC discourse:

1. On both forums, discussions of "TRAs" ($n_{\text{Ovarit}} = 2,076$; $n_{\text{FSG}} = 1,464$) were nearly ubiquitous (i.e. "I find the TRA movement narcissistic and childish- but also dangerous." [FSG], "the aggressive male TRA movement which is stomping all over Twitter telling people to suck their lady cock." [FSG]).
2. "Trans ideology" ($n_{\text{Ovarit}} = 175$; $n_{\text{FSG}} = 303$) and "gender ideology" ($n_{\text{Ovarit}} = 337$; $n_{\text{FSG}} = 1,002$), as well as some additional variations, were commonly used to describe trans subject-positions (i.e. "the obvious clash between trans ideology and women's rights" [FSG], "trans ideology is just another arm of the patriarchy" [Ovarit]).
3. "Trans-identified female" and "trans-identified male" ($n_{\text{Ovarit}} = 138$; $n_{\text{FSG}} = 152$), often abbreviated as "TIF" and "TIM" on Ovarit ($n_{\text{Ovarit}} = 1,438$), were widely used as pejorative labels for trans people. While TIF/TIM acronyms are technically banned on Mumsnet,⁷ variations of "trans-identified" were still present on FSG.

Ultimately, these practices were unsurprising features of the discourse. Reactionary feminist movements often seek to invert the political landscape by framing themselves as a politically vulnerable group using the language of an "ontological womanhood," while simultaneously suggesting that trans rights are an ideological concern (Williams 2020). Yet, as we explore in the following sections, it is the autonarrative

7 "TIF" and "TIM" were banned across Mumsnet by founder Justine Roberts along with the terms "cis" and "TERF" as "many feminists are affronted by" the terms (Roberts 2018). These changes were aimed at encouraging "civil debate," exemplifying the apolitical posturing that gives lip service to free speech and open debate while allowing Mumsnet leadership to abdicate responsibility for their culpability in fostering transphobia.

practices that these discursive features enable that make GC rhetoric so personally motivated. GC posters form mythological framings of their “peaking” that reinforce their extremism as part of their political and gendered identities. At the same time, the denigration of “TIFs” and “TIMs” is wielded to render transgender people as folkloric subjects through memetic “encounter” narratives. These narrative practices build upon these reactionary discursive elements to entrench users in GC extremism by re-mediating community belief as deeply personal life stories.

“COMING OUT” NARRATIVES

The reframing of “GC” as a personal identity was underscored by our discovery that GC posters, seeking to invert the political landscape and center a narrative of self-victimization, co-opted the language of queer communities in their personal narratives. Posters regularly described their experience “coming out” as GC. In these instances, “coming out” meant disclosing their anti-trans beliefs or proximity to extremist platforms or communities. Such stories are epistemic and affective, demonstrating C. Libby’s (2022, 427) argument that “transphobia is not merely a conceptual error but also a form of affective resonance.” We documented dozens of threads across both Ovarit and FSG where GCs posters reflected on their coming out stories through narrative retellings or sought feedback on their plans to come out.

For example, one FSG user wrote that they “just ‘came out’ (as GC) to two friends” and inquired of other users whether they were similarly “out’ to their friends.” This post garnered many responses sharing methods for avoiding “rant[ing],” “shoe-horn[ing],” or “feel[ing] tinfoil-hat” when coming out to friends and coworkers as GC. In this case, the queer language of coming out was deployed to reinforce GC political alignment as an endemic, marginalized identity that risked public censure if revealed. In another example, from Ovarit’s o/Canceled subforum, several users participated in a discussion of workplace policies and navigating the risk of getting fired for violating discrimination clauses. One user took this as an opportunity to share their coming out story:

I took a deep breath and came out as GC to my boss a couple weeks ago to warn her that I am planning to refuse to comply with any such paperwork, trainings, forced use of pronouns, etc. She is not GC, I’d classify her as a libfem, but she understood and is supportive of me for now. I love my company and my boss and hope it doesn’t come to this, but I’ve thought a lot about this, and I work for a large, visible tech company, and I am prepared to fight this and get fired over it if it comes to that.
[Ovarit]

This brief anecdote is indicative of several rhetorical elements that saturate coming out posts on Ovarit and FSG. The author positions themselves as oppressed by the dystopian conformity policies of their company; despite being the one setting out to violate anti-discrimination clauses, they situate themselves as the subject of discrimination. They signal their feminist resistance to policies (“I am planning to refuse to comply”) and position themselves as speaking truth to power, risking censure and even unemployment, while noting that they are “prepared to fight this and get fired over it.” Perhaps most crucially, the post relies on a narrative richness (“I took a deep breath

and...”) that roots it in the personal, embodied, and emotional experience of the speaker. For the author and users of this forum, this is not someone mobilizing anti-trans political agendas in their workplace: this is someone risking retribution for standing by their feminist identity.

Across dozens of threads, users demonstrated how telling one’s coming out story was an important aspect of their identity as a GC. This language often moved in-step with discussions of being canceled or silenced (discussed previously). For example, an FSG user described how they “came out” to their son and husband regarding their belief that “TW [trans women] are men.” The poster mentioned that their son “gave a strong lecture” and their husband “has gone silent.” They attributed their ability to come out, despite the hostile reaction from their family, to the “bravery of MNers [Mumsnetters] in standing up to this IRL.” Another FSG user wrote: “I’m a senior HCP [Health Care Professional] and have been carefully emphasising the need to record sex medical accurately [sic] for months now, and have received... knowing looks and quietly supportive nods in return. So I’m not out out, but I am sure that people are aware of my views.” An Ovarit poster described how they “Got tipsy and ended up outing my GC views to a friend.” In a follow-up post, they discussed how their friend ended contact with them following this event and shared their emotional turmoil at the loss. These deeply personal—and at times, heart-wrenching—vignettes followed a pattern of storytelling that celebrated acceptance from family and/or coworkers or solicited sympathy for facing retribution and alienation. Other users reinforced this sentiment by lamenting that they were still “closeted” or discussing their fear of reproach if they were to come out (Figure 3).

While the irony of anti-trans extremists relying on the language of “coming out” is apparent, it’s important to note that this is a reactionary discursive tactic that reinforces the GC position as inherently vulnerable, personal, marginalized, and subject to cultural censure and violence. Even as GC extremists amass political power, celebrate legislative restrictions on trans healthcare, and erode the safety of trans people, they still describe themselves as the oppressed. What is unique to GC movements is the specific linguistic mimicry that at once borrows from far-right self-victimization rhetoric regarding cancel culture, wokeism, and silencing while simultaneously using the very language of the marginalized communities they oppress.

ANTI-TRANS MYTHMAKING AND ENCOUNTER NARRATIVES

Much like “coming out” narratives, an emergent genre central to the posting practices on both platforms was the “encounter” story: a dramatic telling of one’s encounter with a transgender person, “TRA,” or reaction bait (often referred to as “peak trans” content). Time and again, unremarkable run-ins with a trans person at a grocery check-out, in a bathroom, or at a social event were described in imposing narration as an encounter with “one of them.” As one Ovarit poster demonstrated:

There’s a TIM at the natural foods grocery where I buy a few things...
I said to him, after he rang me up, “Thanks. And I’d just like to tell you that I think it’s great that men can express themselves however they like, now!” Then I walked out with my groceries... I’m sure he went home fuming and cursing the clueless old lady. [Ovarit]

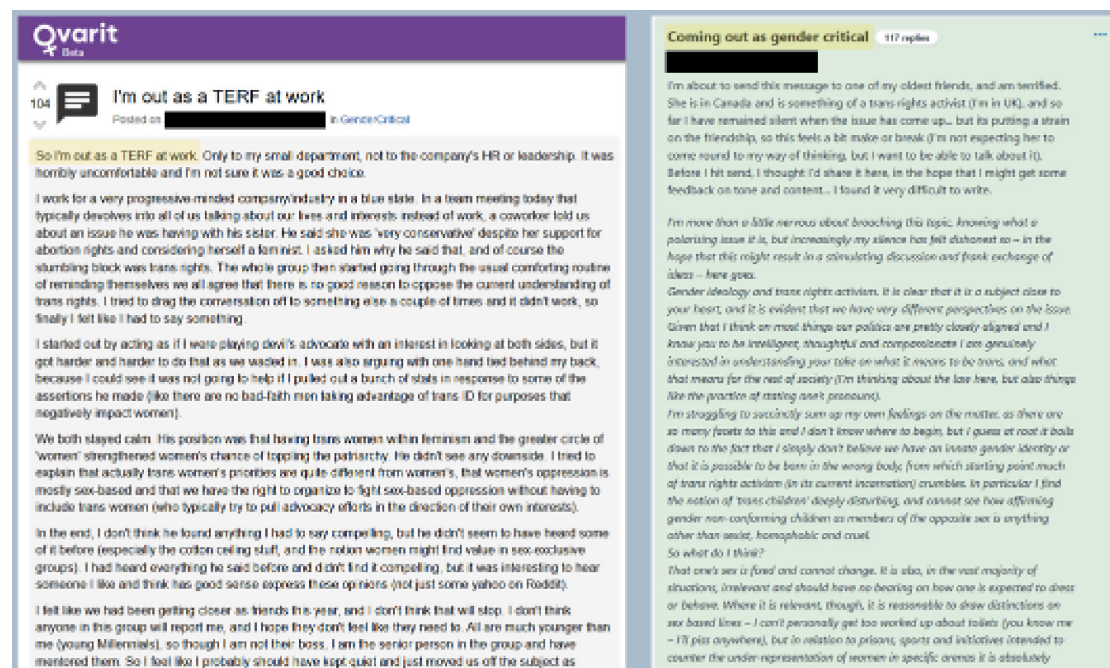


Figure 3. “Coming out” posts from Ovarit (left) and FSG (right; anonymized; highlight emphasis added)

In another such grocery store encounter, described on Ovarit, the poster details how they spotted a “TIM” working at the checkout and quickly disrobed down to their “Adult Human Female” T-shirt as they reached the front of the line. While both posts emphasize the author’s transphobic harassment as a kind of heroism (the top-rated comment to the above quoted author was “Um. I love you.”), these posts likewise portray trans people as either confused and ridiculous, or monstrous and worthy of fear or disgust. Take the following example (Figure 4), which describes the author’s run-in with an (ostensibly) transgender person in the women’s restroom of a movie theater.

“First TIM encounter...” is illustrative of the autonarrative habitus that saturates Ovarit and FSG and is worth unpacking in detail. Readers are given significant background on the author and their life to make their perspective familiar, solicit empathy, and connect with other forum members (they are a homebody, they’re pregnant, and they’re going to see *Dune*). They describe this mundane run-in as an “encounter” (as one might have with an animal) that is almost predetermined (“...it finally happened.”) and violently interrupts an otherwise ordinary, pleasant day. The post underscores the author’s shock, disgust, and vulnerability (“I should just book it out of there...”, “I stood frozen”) in a moment where time seems to stand still (at 6:40pm). The description of the (ostensibly) trans person reduces them to their wardrobe and stubble and presumes the author’s certainty of the subject’s sex and gender (“That is 100% a man...” and “this enormous man”). The telling is interwoven with rhetorical flourishes and rhythmic uses of short sentences to punctuate the drama of the situation (“That’s a man.”, and “It just wasn’t right.”). Importantly, the drama is not rooted in anything that unfolds within the washroom—the poster does not interact with the other person at all. Rather, it is the moment of the encounter that is sensationalized: a possibly transgender body is itself framed as the cause of trauma. The narrative concludes with the poster

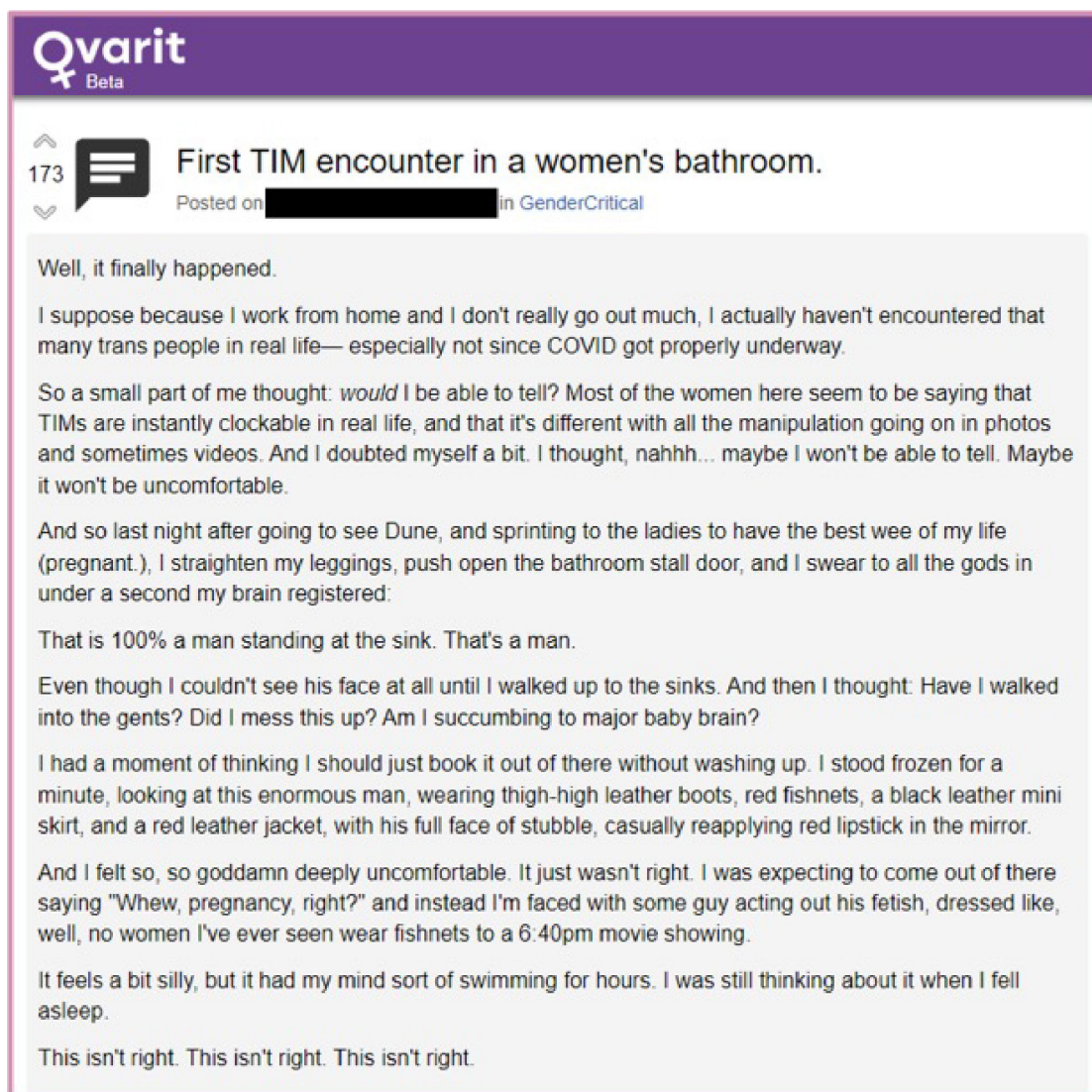


Figure 4. Ovarit post featuring a transphobic description of a stranger in a movie theatre restroom (anonymized)

struck numb, perpetually stuck in the bathroom as the shock of this moment lingers on (“I was still thinking about it when I fell asleep”), echoing rhetorically through the conclusion: “This isn’t right. This isn’t right. This isn’t right.”

The dramatic presentation obscures the ideological mobilization that permeates this telling. This is a pre-conditioned encounter: the poster claims this is the first time they have come across a trans person in public and yet demonstrates great familiarity with both the GC community (as an already an active Ovarit member) and with the emergent genre of the “encounter” post. By sharing this retelling, this user marks another moment in their “peaking.” Their imitation of this form also stands as an invitation to other users to follow suit with their own stories; indeed, in the replies to this post, several users speculate on the times they encountered “TIMs” or fret about what might happen when they “finally” do. Rhetorically, the author invites this—their self-deprecating flourishes solicit support and participation from other community members (“It feels a bit silly...”, “*would* I be able to tell?”, “Am I succumbing to major baby brain?”).

“First TIM encounter...” illustrates the ways that GC narrative genres remediate doxa and episteme: GC ideological misgivings about the dangers of trans ideology are rendered into a chilling and intensely personal anecdote after nothing more than a shared moment in the bathroom. This transphobic mythmaking is crucial to the practices of GC communities online: they reinscribe themselves as down-and-out victims stuck in the closet while portraying (ostensibly) transgender strangers as auto-fictive threats. More importantly, these practices are self-replicating, memetic, and crucial to fostering extremism: users (whether consciously or simply through exposure and imitation) learn the emergent genre of the encounter story and shape their own lived experiences to fit its form. What was an ideological belief becomes, through such mythmaking, deeply personal, affective, and community-driven. Such encounter narratives do not even require public run-ins; users described peaking in response to email signatures, having to share online “fandom spaces with TIFs,” or even reading through forum posts on these very platforms. Beyond exaggeration (if not utter fabrication), these stories are performative and pedagogical: trans people—as folkloric subjects—are culturally ossified through archetypal retellings. In this way, GC users are conditioned to narratively position trans people “in the wild” as monstrous and, in turn, retell such encounters to generate cultural capital through performance.

CONCLUSION

In March of 2025, site owner *girl_undone* announced Ovarit’s imminent closure on April 27, 2025, citing the immense labor and financial costs involved in maintaining the site. In the thousands of comments under the post announcing the shuttering, users lamented the loss of GC community, thanked administrators for their years of hard work, reminisced about their time on the forums, encouraged one another to “keep up the good fight” against TRAs, and circulated invitations to alternative spaces to organize online. These included invite-only Discord servers, personal blogs on Tumblr and Substack, niche radfem forum sites appearing on saidit.net, cekni.to, and clovenhooves.org, as well as intermittent (and contentious) suggestions to adopt overtly far-right forums like Kiwifarms. Users also discussed where to find fandom spaces outside of Ovarit, circulating “GC/radfem-friendly” fandom Discord servers and fan forums as viable alternatives. This suggests that users experienced Ovarit in much the way that site admins imagined: a place to discuss GC concerns while engaging users’ broader media interests.

In the same way that the closure of r/GC inaugurated new anti-trans communities across the web, the closure of Ovarit heralds another dispersal of GC users to further isolated platforms. We are at once relieved that one of the most pernicious sites of organized transphobia online is shuttering, yet we are also wary. These insulated spaces—particularly Discord communities—are uniquely difficult to study and monitor from without (Berryman et al. 2024; Heslep and Berge 2024). Likewise, as GC users enter openly conservative spaces like saidit.net and Kiwifarms, we might also be wary of the further amplification of anti-trans rhetoric in these spaces.

It is increasingly urgent to understand the ways that forum users become acculturated into anti-trans communities and how in-group discursive practices serve to entrench users in extremist ideology. Confirming previous scholarship, our findings

suggest a complex, accelerated entanglement between GC communities and neofascist, reactionary groups that is underscored by shared discursive practices—namely a fixation on “wokeism” and “cancel culture,” an antagonism towards “mainstream” media and sex workers, and a rhetorical inversion of victim and aggressor (Bassi and LaFleur 2022; Billard 2023; Evang 2022; Vincent, Erikainen, and Pearce 2020). Yet the most dangerous and complex alignment between anti-trans communities and other extremist groups lie in the autonarrative remediation of political ideology as personal episteme—a conditioned mode of “writing like a GC” that reinforces their perceived identity as a political victim and social outcast, and thereby their dependence on organized anti-trans movements. Across Ovarit and FSG, we encountered story after story of posters who—as they became further entrenched in GC community practices—found themselves alienated from their families, friends, and coworkers. These heartwrenching narratives intentionally confuse the axes of oppression. The tragedy of GC members’ vacillation as victim-aggressor is that GCs claim that they are the ones being oppressed even as they publicly dramatize, with pride, their harassment of strangers and coworkers and the emotional abuse of children and partners.

It’s important to note that the narrative practices we have documented here rely on a personal mythmaking that pervades the entirety of one’s epistemic frame. Receiving an email with pronouns in the signature becomes woven into one’s peak-ing story [Ovarit]. A parent alienating their trans child becomes—through autonarrative thread-posting—a tragic story in which the transphobic parent is persecuted for “coming out” as GC [FSG]. This remediation is not merely rhetorical—it is the primary instrument of radicalization. GC coming out narratives, for example, reinforced an evangelical orientation towards anti-trans ideology: such threads prompted other forum members to consider their own coming out story and confront the reasons they have not (yet) “come out.” Members who emulated this genre were celebrated for their willingness to “fight,” “[stand] up to this IRL,” or “get fired” even when it meant alienating those around them. Those who did experience alienation for their hateful behaviors were encouraged to turn back to the forums for consolation, further entrenching them in extremist communities with their fellow “gyns” who recognized their struggle. It’s particularly telling that messages posted in coming out threads often ended with a message restating a bittersweet thankfulness for the forum:

I know, same ol’ story. Thanks for the platform. It’s the only one I truly have. [Ovarit]

Thank goodness for this board. [FSG]

I guess going forward I’ll stick with my one friend who shares my views and just not mention it to any others/anyone else... it’s times like these where I really question myself, but at the same time I know all of you and many other people feel the same way I do. I think I’m in good company. It’s just rough to lose a friend. [Ovarit]

We raise this final point to emphasize that the autonarrative practices of GC forums drive members towards increased isolation and dependency on GC communities. As we have shown, the autonarrative habitus of GC forums are memetic and quickly picked up by newcomers. Posters who alleged having never encountered a transgender

person before were already predisposed to the genre of the “encounter” story, as we’ve shown with “First TIM encounter.”

Ultimately, our study presents a horizontal analysis of GC rhetoric on Ovarit and FSG to demonstrate how these discursive dynamics and storytelling practices—that is, writing like a GC—catalyze anti-trans extremism and make it personal. Our analysis has focused on several crucial elements of GC posting practices. To this end, we wish to review our most crucial findings.

First, in the post-r/GenderCritical era, GC communities online are more insular. Invite- or member-only spaces such as Ovarit, Mumsnet, and Discord seek to network GC users and capture their everyday lives and interests online.

Second, GC discourse maintains a linguistic similarity to other far-right and reactionary political movements. GC forum members are discursively preoccupied with “wokeness” and “being silenced” and rely on the redpill analogue of “peaking.” GC allyship with the right is contentious within GC communities, yet their discursive proximity reveals ideological similarities even as GC users distance themselves given their self-proclaimed feminist commitments.

Third, GC posters create and share narratives of their own radicalization (or “peaking”) to sanitize their extremism as personal and epistemic. GC posters demonstrated savvy, well-refined storytelling practices that framed their radicalization as affective and individual, further ensconcing their political identity through stories of self-enlightenment.

Fourth, GC posters characterize “GC” as an endemic, marginalized identity. GC forum members adopt the language of queer communities to fallaciously suggest that “GC” is something one *is*, rather than an ideology one adopts, as they position themselves as politically vulnerable.

Fifth, GC posters learn and adopt memetic, anti-trans mythmaking practices. GC forums discipline users towards memetic storytelling structures; users recite stock formats such as “peaking narratives” and “trans encounters,” dramatizing users’ lived experiences within anti-trans and gender-essentialist frameworks.

Finally, GC media literacy practices encourage isolationist evangelism of anti-trans political ideology. GC posters regularly described struggles with friends, coworkers, and families in response to their radicalization. Even at the cost of professional and personal relationships, members are encouraged to “stand up” and “get fired” for their GC beliefs, exacerbating their dependence on extremist communities.

In the face of such platform subcultures, we must understand that contending with the specific details—that is, the informational elements—of anti-trans disinformation is insufficient when GC extremists have been conditioned to internalize anti-trans ideologies through autonarrative habitus. Instead, it is imperative we understand how the lens through which anti-trans community members process and participate in these forums has been, from the get-go, shaped by sex- and gender-essentialist, racist, and nationalist doxa. To these ends, we must combat anti-trans disinformation not only through empirical study and corrective logics, but also through affective and epistemic approaches that directly engage the rhetorical disciplining of anti-trans communities.

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DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The authors are willing to provide the data used to conduct this study to other researchers upon reasonable request.

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“He’s Not Even Trying to Look Like a Woman”: Cisgenderist Misinformation and Conspiracy Theories in Online Talk About Transgender Women Athletes

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Contemporary gender debates have crystallized in and around sport. The discrimination of transgender people is particularly potent in sport due to the relentless male/female categorization and the consistent somatic inspection. Whilst the role of cisgenderism—that is, the systemic discrimination of transgender people—has been explored in relation to legacy media and sporting policies, little has been written on how it functions in online sports talk. In this article, online posts about transgender athletes are examined using feminist discourse analysis. The analysis highlights three important discursive patterns related to misinformation and conspiracy theories. Firstly, a “Confused Medicalization” spreads misinformation about gender-affirming care and bodily morphology, misgendering and marginalizing the experiences of transgender athletes. Secondly, a “Pseudohistory of Gender Fraud” pathologizes transgender athletes through accusations of cheating to enter women’s sport. Thirdly, these discursive patterns feed into a broader conspiracy theory about a plot to destroy cisgender women’s sport. Fundamentally, these discursive patterns function to exclude and erase transgender athletes as well as obfuscate the workings of cisgenderism.

KEYWORDS cisgenderism; sport; misinformation; conspiracy theories; online discourse

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Toni Bruce (2013, 126) notes that we are “enveloped” by sports media due to its popularity which “means that its messages reach millions if not billions of people.” Due to this “envelopment,” sports media plays a significant role in our understandings of society.

It is, therefore, unsurprising that contemporary understandings of gender and gender-diversity have unfolded, in part, in sports media. Representations of transgender athletes are germane to societal and cultural recognition of transgender people. Unfortunately, sports media, whether that be legacy, digital, or social media, more often than not portray transgender athletes in discriminatory ways.

Authors have explored the ways that transgender mixed martial artist Fallon Fox was portrayed as deviant, abnormal and other across media (Fischer and McClearn 2020; Knott-Fayle, Peel, and Witcomb 2022; Love 2019). Further, Fischer and McClearn (2020) make it clear that both racist and sexist assumptions intersect in media discourses of Fox, with suspicion over Fox's gender identity entangled with racist stereotypes of aggressive Black and Brown men threatening White women. Critical race scholars working in the sporting space have noted that the invasive policing of women in sports is premised on a Western colonial gaze designed to discipline Black and Brown bodies whilst simultaneously naturalizing, and thus obfuscating, the functioning of racism, sexism and cisgenderism in elite level sports (Magubane 2014; Nyong'o 2010). These sports media representations feed into, and are themselves sustained by, neocolonial and cisgenderist discourses and practices which impact how transgender people are (mis)recognized in society. Other researchers have illuminated the ways that transgender discrimination has crystallized in media representations of weightlifter, Laurel Hubbard—including in print media (Lucas and Newhall 2019; Scovel, Nelson, and Thorpe 2023) and in social media (Xu 2023). Hubbard, who competed at the Olympics in Tokyo in 2021, was subjected to transmisogynist scrutiny, having her gender identity called into question for not appearing conventionally feminine.

These examples are indicative of the reality that, in sports media, it is deemed legitimate to speculate on and scrutinize the identities, motives, and bodies of transgender women athletes. It is perhaps unsurprising that these discriminatory practices occur in sports media given the history of transgender discrimination in media (Billard 2016; Halberstam 2005; Schilt and Westbrook 2009; Sloop 2004). However, it is exacerbated in sporting contexts due to the racist, sexist, and cisgenderist history of sex testing in women's sport. Sporting culture has thus developed notions of fairness that are tied to binary man/woman categorizations as well as biomedical epistemic privilege which equates "scientific knowledge with knowledge itself" (Karkazis and Jordan-Young 2018, 8) rendering transgender people always already suspicious in sporting contexts. Consequently, sports media is uniquely situated in the media landscape to proliferate racist, sexist, and cisgenderist discourses about transgender athletes and people.

In this article, taking sports media seriously as a site of transgender discrimination, I build on Knott-Fayle et al.'s (2021; 2022) description of cisgenderism in sports media to explicitly understand how cisgenderism functions in online posts about transgender athletes. Whilst there is important work that explores the systemic nature of transphobia, in this article I follow research traditions that use the term "cisgenderism" to foreground "the wider social ideology that works to invalidate or pathologise self-designated genders" (Pearce et al. 2024, 47; see also Ansara, 2015; Israel & Ansara, 2021; Lennon & Mistler, 2014). Here, I expand on the relatively limited amount of research that explores depictions of transgender athletes on social media, in order to develop an analysis of how cisgenderism functions in online sports talk.

Taking a snapshot of posts from X (formerly known as Twitter) and engaging in a discursive analysis I explore how media suspicion and scrutiny of transgender people and athletes supports and sustains cisgenderist misinformation and conspiracy theories about the ostensible power of transgender people and advocates and their desire to destroy cisgender women's sport.

There is a close relationship between misinformation and conspiracy theories. Here I take "misinformation" to be "an umbrella term encompassing all forms of false or misleading information regardless of the intent behind it" (Altay, Berriche, and Acerbi 2023). Conspiracy theories refer to "a belief that two or more actors have coordinated in secret to achieve an outcome and that their conspiracy theory is of public interest but not public knowledge" (Douglas and Sutton 2023, 287). In addition, conspiracy theories attempt to explain political and social events as conspiracies which "typically attempt to usurp political or economic power, violate rights, infringe upon established agreements, withhold vital secrets, or alter bedrock institutions" (Douglas et al. 2019). In Altay et al.'s. (2023, 2) survey of experts, "most experts... also agreed that pseudoscience and conspiracy theories represent forms of misinformation." Similarly, Pierre (2020) posits that mistrust and misinformation are central pillars to the belief in and propagation of conspiracy theories. In this article, I layout the ways that misinformation and conspiracy theories interact with cisgenderist online talk about transgender women athletes.

THE CURRENT STUDY

Data and Methods

In this article I explore the discursive constructions of transgender athletes and transgender inclusion in sport in online posts on X (formerly known as Twitter). Research has pointed to a link between social media usage and the belief and propagation of misinformation and conspiracy theories (Enders et al. 2023) and X has been shown to be the most prominent social network used to spread homophobia and transphobia (Sánchez-Sánchez, Ruiz-Muñoz, and Sánchez-Sánchez 2024)—a reality that is likely to be exacerbated since the rules regarding hate speech have been relaxed following Elon Musk's takeover (Center for Countering Digital Hate 2023). As such, it is unsurprising that cisgenderist misinformation and conspiracy theories offer a salient framing for understanding talk about transgender athletes on X. This data needs to be understood as a snapshot of this specific place in the media eco-system rather than representative of all or even typical sports discourse. X continues to hold a prominent place in that media eco-system. Since Musk's takeover the number of active users on X has dropped. Globally, figures for usage of the app fell 15% from Musk's takeover to February 2024, to 174 million daily active users (Ingram 2024). Despite relative falling numbers it remains a highly used social media platform by both the general public as well as politicians, organizations, and celebrities—in 2023 Twitter/X had 353.9 million users worldwide (Statista 2024). Consequently, the data represents a concrete and significant, though specifically situated, snapshot of online discourse around transgender athletes.

Using a data-mining service, Phantombuster, I collected publicly available posts (Tweets) from X. The parameters of the posts were that they had to include the words "Transgender" AND "Sport" OR "Athlete" and were posted in the month of June 2023.

The posts that comprise the dataset were posted after Elon Musk took over Twitter in 2022 but before he changed the name to X (in July 2023)—though data collection occurred after (September 2023). In total the search parameters collected 773 posts. All posts were downloaded and examined individually for descriptive coding. Posts that were unclear, were obviously responses to other posts, or were particularly rich in data were also examined on X as part of the threads where they were posted. As is often the case with qualitative research, this required exploring “creative hunches” developed through careful and thoughtful examination of a rich dataset source (Jarzabkowski, Langley, and Nigam 2021, 71).

As the posts are all publicly available there is not necessarily a reasonable expectation of privacy. However, there is complexity involved when using public posts including the fact that some users may have since deleted their posts or not have expected them to be collected for research purposes. Consequently, one cannot apply a simplistic understanding of public data across all online research (Ravn, Barnwell, and Barbosa Neves 2020). With this in mind, despite their being no necessity to anonymize the posts, the usernames have been replaced with pseudonyms created by a random username generator. As long as they remain publicly available, the posts may be found through online searching, but this measure creates an extra degree of anonymity for the posters. This anonymization also helps to protect the author. Users are less likely to become aware that their posts are critiqued in a journal which protects the author from online hate and doxing which are both possibilities when it comes to fraught topics such as gender-identity and inclusion in sport.

Methodology

The posts are analyzed here using a feminist and critical discourse analysis (Lazar 2007; Thompson, Rickett, and Day 2018). The aim is to explore the rhetorical and discursive devices used and how they perpetuate discrimination of transgender athletes and a buttressing of cisnormative and transphobic ideology. The analytic process involved (1) labelling the posts with descriptive codes, (2) identifying recurring codes, (3) identifying discourses, (4) identifying discursive patterns, and (6) theoretically accounting for those patterns. The coding took place inductively which involves condensing raw data into codes, establishing links between the coding and the research questions and finally developing a model or theory to account for the patterns identified in the data (Thomas 2003). These descriptive codes were low inference codes designed to describe the rhetorical content of the posts, with at least one code applied to each post. For example, the following post was given the descriptive codes “Misgendering transgender athletes,” “Transgender athletes seeking an unfair advantage,” “Presenting transgender women as men seeking entry into women’s spaces,” “Presenting transgender athletes as seeking an unfair advantage,” “Presenting gender fraud as an ongoing problem in sport,” and “Depicting those who speak out as being unfairly labelled bigots or transphobes.”

“Transphobe” is a word used by people who support men cheating in sport and hanging around in girls changing rooms. What these people aren’t is transgender. They’re perverts. There’s a big difference to someone who makes the change and quietly lives their life. (MaySometimes, June 18)

The descriptive codes “Misgendering transgender athletes” and “Presenting trans-

gender athletes as seeking an unfair advantage” were grouped with other descriptive codes including “Comparing transgender athletes testosterone levels to doping athletes,” and “Presenting transgender women athletes as failed cisgender men athletes” to form the discourse “Assumptions about gender fraud in sport.” Then this discourse was grouped with other discourses including “Assumptions about gender fraud in culture” and “Pseudohistory of cheating in sport” to form the discursive pattern “Pseudohistory of gender fraud.” Table 1 shows the inductive coding process including descriptive codes that were applied five or more times, discourses and discursive patterns. The purpose of this analysis is not to give an overview of all discursive patterns but instead to theoretically account for some of those discursive patterns as forms of cisgenderist misinformation and conspiracy theory.

FINDINGS

What follows is an exploration of three discursive patterns—“Confused Medicalization,” “Pseudohistory of Gender Fraud,” and “Plotting Against (Cis)Women’s Sport.” In line with the form of feminist discourse analysis employed, this is underpinned and suffused throughout with theoretical accounting of these discursive patterns. In particular, this theoretical accounting explores how these discursive patterns can be explained as cisgenderist misinformation and conspiracy theories.

Linking these findings to frameworks of cisgenderist misinformation and conspiracy theories allows for a deepening and extending of our understandings of how cisgenderism functions in social media discussions of transgender athletes and transgender inclusion in sporting spaces. Further, in the analysis I extend the discussion to consider what these instantiations of cisgenderism do for the propagation and legitimization of transgender discrimination more broadly.

Confused Medicalization

Across the online posts there is a deployment of biomedical understandings of sex in lay terms. That is to say, this is not about the deployment of peer-reviewed biomedical knowledge (which has its own issues with cisgenderism) but instead about the way that biomedical language and (mis)understandings are utilized for rhetorical purposes by non-experts in the online posts. These posts muddle and muddy both biological and social understandings of sex and gender. In particular, (often imagined) somatic markers are deployed as convenient ways to reduce the complexity of sex and gender to one basic biological “truth.” Consider the diversity of biological markers that are presented as proof of cisgenderist (mis)understandings of sex and gender in the following posts:

Uha hum I’d say drop your drawers, you’re a man or woman. Simple test! I think I am, isn’t the correct answer. (RavenBaa, 2023, June 22)

How many female athletes have to get injured before the rules allow for a Trans Athlete category? There is no other solution. XY≠XX and never will! (BusstopVines, 2023, June 16)

Table 1. Discursive Patterns and Descriptive Codes Identified in Critical Discourse Analysis

Discursive Pattern	Discourse	Descriptive Code (n)
Confused Medicalization	Misgendering based on morphological assumptions	Misgendering based on observed or imagined musculature (46)
		Comparing images of assumed transgender and cisgender athletes (33)
	Focusing on genitalia	Making assumptions about an athlete's genitalia (25)
		Presenting genitalia as a determinant of athletic ability (14)
	Discussions of blood, testosterone, and bones	Making assumptions about an athlete's testosterone levels (17)
		Presenting testosterone as the determinant of gender (55)
		Discussions about the size and shape of the pelvis (15)
		Discussions about bone density (18)
		Presenting testosterone as the determinant of athletic ability (78)
	Comparison with doping athletes	Presenting transgender athletes as overly physically powerful (61)
		Comparing transgender athletes' testosterone levels to doping athletes (40)
Pseudohistory of Gender Fraud	Assumptions about gender fraud in sport	Presenting chromosomes as indicative of sex and gender (75)
		Presenting chromosomes as the determinant of one's athletic ability (28)
		Presenting chromosomes as easily aligning with other biological markers of sex (49)
		Comparing transgender athletes' testosterone levels to doping athletes (40)
		Presenting transgender athletes as seeking an unfair advantage (104)
		Misgendering transgender athletes (228)
		Presenting transgender women athletes as failed cisgender men athletes (82)
		Presenting gender fraud as an ongoing problem in sport (39)

Discursive Pattern	Discourse	Descriptive Code (n)
Plotting Against (Cis)Women's Sport	Assumptions about gender fraud in culture	Presenting the potential for gender fraud as a problem in sport (48)
		Hypothetical and made-up scenarios of cisgender men athletes taking part in women's sport (7)
		Presenting transgender women as cisgender men seeking entry into women's spaces (36)
		Presenting transgender women as sexual abusers (49)
		Presenting transgender women as deceitful (41)
	Left-wing/centre-left politics presented as destroying (cisgender) women's rights	Presenting gender fraud as a common historical problem (58)
		Justin Trudeau presented as attacking (cis) women's rights (14)
		Joe Biden presented as attacking (cis) women's rights (30)
		Other left-wing or liberal politician presented as attacking (cis) women's rights (5)
		Unnamed left-wing or liberal politician(s) presented as attacking (cis) women's rights (12)
		Politicians presented as actively replacing cisgender women/ athletes with transgender women/ athletes (19)
	Presenting sporting organizations as destroying (cisgender) women's sport	Sporting organizations presented as unfairly supporting transgender women athletes (29)
		Sporting organizations presented as actively replacing cisgender women athletes with transgender women athletes (31)
	Presenting companies as destroying (cisgender) women's sport	Companies presented as pandering to transgender athletes/ people (13)
		Companies presented as bowing to "woke mob" pressure (9)
		Companies presented as ignoring cisgender women/ athletes (6)
	"Woke mob" presented as destroying (cisgender) women's sport	"Woke mob" presented as attacking cisgender women (56)
		"Woke mob" presented as authoritarian (24)

Discursive Pattern	Discourse	Descriptive Code (n)
Justifying Transgender Discrimination in and through Sport	Presenting transgender athletes as attacking or hurting cisgender women athletes	“Wokeness” presented as a dangerous ideology (91)
		Sharing the story of cisgender woman volleyball player being hurt by a transgender woman volleyball player (27)
	Cisgender women/ athletes presented as being cancelled for defending (cis)women's sport	Transgender athletes presented as a threat to the safety of cisgender women athletes (78)
		Cisgender women presented as losing their jobs for speaking out (12)
		Cisgender women presented as silenced in conversations about transgender inclusion (48)
		Cisgender women presented as being attacked if they speak out (51)
	Supporting trans rights but not in sporting contexts	Sport presented as having specific safety concerns that make it a special case for transgender exclusion (92)
		Sport presented as having specific fairness concerns that make it a special case for transgender exclusion (130)
		Demonstrating general support for trans rights as legitimizing argument for transgender exclusion in sport (69)
	Arguing for transgender exclusion in certain sports	Arguing for trans exclusion in combat sports (81)
Transgender Athlete Support	Arguing for separate transgender categories	Arguing for trans exclusion at elite level but not recreational and amateur levels (19)
		Arguing there should be a transgender category (31)
	Defending transgender athlete participation	Arguing there should be an ‘open’ category (14)
		Arguing cisgender women should create trans exclusionary leagues/ competitions/ events (28)
		Transgender athletes as discriminated against and in need of support (5)
		Defending need to access health benefits of sport (6)
		Rejecting the idea that transgender women are a threat to cisgender women (10)

Discursive Pattern	Discourse	Descriptive Code (n)
Meta-Commentary About the State of the Conversation About Transgender Inclusion/Exclusion	Transgender athlete visibility	Rejecting the science around transgender athletes as a threat to fairness (15)
		Highlighting the lack of transgender representation in sports (9)
		Sharing stories of transgender athlete participation in a supportive way (10)
	Proponents of transgender exclusion presented as being silenced	Tweets from or about transgender athlete participation in a supporting way (8)
		People defending cisgender women against transgender women presenting themselves as being cancelled (83)
		“Woke mob” presented as attacking and cancelling people who argue for trans exclusion in sports (66)
	Proponents of transgender inclusion presented as being silenced	Cisgender women presented as losing their jobs for speaking out against transgender inclusion (12)
		Cisgender women presented as silenced in conversations about transgender inclusion (48)
	Cultural conversation presented as not making sense	Cisgender women presented as being attacked if they speak out (51)
		Transgender voices as silenced or excluded from the conversation (8)
	Posts that were unclear	Allies and advocates silenced or excluded from the conversation (5)
		Fluidity of words and language presented as making it impossible to follow the arguments (16)
		Ostensible obviousness of binary sex and gender presented as obfuscated and muddled by proponents of transgender inclusion (28)
Posts that were unclear	Posts that were unclear	Posts that were unclear (43)

Transgender “women” aren’t women, they are men who identify as women. Their bodies are male. Logic would tell you they don’t belong in women’s sport. Sport is solely about bodies. (LiteraryCheep, 2023, June 6)

Testosterone gives transgender women a lasting and unfair advantage when they compete in sport against ordinary women. (GripScoot, 2023, June 23)

In these posts the users refer to multiple variables including genitals (“drop your drawers”), bodily morphology (“their bodies are male”), hormones (“testosterone gives transgender women a lasting and unfair advantage”), and chromosomes (“XY≠XX”). Each of these competing discourses is presented as an irrefutable truth. Throughout the history of sex testing in sport there have been various techniques applied including naked parades in which athletes in the women’s category were paraded in front of doctors who examined their bodies and genitalia, chromosome tests, and testosterone level measurements—often it was women who failed to meet Western standards of femininity who were subjected to these tests (Krieger, Pieper, and Ritchie 2019; Cooky and Dworkin 2013; Pieper 2014). The above posts reflect this history of sex testing with each test claiming to prove once-and-for-all the dimorphic categorization of bodies. For example, the idea of the “Simple test!” of examining the genitals of an athlete to determine one’s category was implemented in the naked parades that female athletes were subjected to in the past. This post by RavenBaa, presents genital examination as a scientifically sound and rational practice in contrast to what RavenBaa deems indeterminate notions of self-identification (“I think I am, isn’t the correct answer”). However, these naked parades were discontinued as both dehumanizing but also medically unsound ways of determining an athlete’s categorization. Similarly, chromosome tests as reflected in BusStopVines’ post and testosterone measurements as reflected in GripScoot’s post have also been discontinued at different times due to their ineffectiveness at determining beyond doubt how to categorize athletes as men or women (Krieger, Pieper, and Ritchie 2019). Nevertheless, these posts each posit that there is a clear way to define and demarcate athletic bodies. Significantly, each of these posts presents a different feature of the biological mosaic as a definitive measure of one’s sex. Yet we know that these different features do not always align in cisgenderist ways (Fausto-Sterling 2000). As such, this discursive pattern entangles transgender athletes in a web of competing corporeal expectations.

This entanglement is further complicated by contradictory dictates on morphological markers of sex. For some users, like RavenBaa, the imagined existence of a penis is enough to categorize someone as a man. However, BopMotion, states:

Whichever way you look at it, men are men and women are women, because a man wears women’s clothing it does not make him a woman. Even if he has the chop, he still has the body of a man. Let transgender have their own category/classification in sport. (BopMotion, 2023, June 19)

In this case, the user uses grotesque language (“has the chop”) to refer to surgical gender-affirming care. However, in contrast to RavenBaa for whom the genitals easily map onto the male/female binary, BopMotion determines that genitals do not determine one’s sex as even without a penis a transgender women athlete “still has the body of a

man". Consequently, the internal confusion of transphobic online posts with regards to medicine and biology forms a discursive pattern full of contradictions. However, instead of destabilizing these transphobic arguments the various competing discourses create a flexibility in cisgenderist misinformation which ultimately means that transgender women athletes, regardless of the specifics of their experience of sex and gender, are disqualified not just from women's sports but from womanhood itself.

The confusion caused by this discursive pattern thus stems from the contradicting ways that bodies are biomedically defined and the resulting impossibility of transgender experiences being legitimized. Furthermore, this cisgenderist biomedical misinformation is given epistemic dominance due to a culture of sport which, as LiteraryCheep puts it, "is solely about bodies." Indeed, this reflects a broader issue in sport in which "biomedical studies are overvalued in sports policies in comparison to social sciences studies" (Canadian Centre for Ethics in Sport 2021, 6; see also Karkazis and Jordan-Young 2018) This is a position that severs sport from its socio-cultural and political contexts and consequences, which, in the case of transgender athletes, reduces their identities to cisgenderist narratives about bodily categorizations.

In addition to this objectifying dissection of transgender athletes, this confused medicalization spreads further misinformation insofar as transgender athletes are often equated with athletes who take illicit performance-enhancing drugs:

Fairness is the issue. If even a single female athlete is deprived by one transgender female having testosterone levels above reference standards then it's not fair. Did you defend Lance Armstrong having an unfair advantage over the other Tour de France cyclists? (ChordPolitely, 2023, June 20)

In this post the user asks a supporter of transgender athlete inclusion whether they defended former cycling star and infamous doping athlete Lance Armstrong when his regime of illicit performance-enhancing drugs became public. This user thus compares transgender women athletes to doping athletes. This further reflects confusion that exists in the scientific literature itself as "most studies on the effects of testosterone on sport performance involve examination of individuals who use performance-enhancing drugs" (Canadian Centre for Ethics in Sport 2021, 4), thus constructing comparability between transgender and doping athletes in the literature itself. Such comparability is based on and further perpetuates various misunderstandings about gender-affirming care, sporting regulations, and the use of performance-enhancing drugs. Although there are various types of performance-enhancing drugs, those most commonly referred to in lay talk are ones that stimulate testosterone growth. However, if a transgender woman is competing in the women's category, she will have had to reduce testosterone levels in order to align with sporting regulations. A more fundamental piece of misinformation peddled by this discourse is the idea that transgender women are seeking an illicit advantage over their competitors in the same way that doping is used. This is degrading to transgender women athletes themselves and disregards the socio-cultural, interpersonal, organizational, and physical barriers that act as obstacles to transgender women taking part, let alone competing at a high level, in sports (López-Cañada et al. 2020; 2021).

The confused medicalization that surrounds transgender athletes underpins the spread of misinformation about transgender women in sporting spaces. When trans-

gender women enter sporting spaces they are always already suspect and subjected to somatic inspection due to the misinformed link between transgender athletes and doping athletes and the broader set of contradictory corporeal expectations to which transgender athletes are subjected.

Pseudohistories of Gender Fraud

Gender fraud has a complicated history in which media discourses present transgender people as deceitful and, whilst often a pseudohistory, there is also a history of transgender people living stealth for various reasons. In the case of sport, the anxiety is not that transgender people are presenting as cisgender but that cisgender people are pretending to be transgender in order to sneak into women's sport and/or attack women. This is an idea that is underpinned by a broader media discourse in which transgender people are presented as deceptive and violence is justified as a response to this deception (Billard 2016; Schilt and Westbrook 2009). This has also been reflected in a long-standing pseudohistory of gender fraud in sport in which athletes that are suspected of being "Other," whether that be non-Western, transgender, or intersex, have their "Otherness" emphasized through sporting delegitimization portrayed as they are as men competing in women's sport (Heggie 2010; Krieger, Pieper, and Ritchie 2019; Wiederkehr 2009). The narrative in these discursive patterns view transgender women athletes as cisgender men pretending to be women to sneak into and supposedly dominate women's sport as well to attack cisgender women in the process, and even to enact sexual violence in locker rooms.

The assumption that transgender athletes are men posing as women is articulated in the online posts:

Males posing as females do not belong in female sports. (InstantlyNever, 2023, June 20)

There is no such thing as a transgender athlete.
These guys are fail-males who cheat. Despicable creeps. (HenceOuch, 2023, June 17)

OK, just like wrestling is a bunch of phony crap, so is the idea of transgender athletes, they're male athletes who couldn't make it as a man in a man's sport and they decide that cheating is OK, cheating in any sport is not OK, form your own league, but leave the women alone! (BooSlowly, 2023, June 29)

In these posts the fundamental narrative around transgender athletes that is produced is one of gender fraud—that is, "Males posing as females." This anxiety around gender fraud has existed in sports for decades despite no evidence of it occurring at elite levels (Wiederkehr 2009). Consequently, these discussions reflect an historic and ongoing myth of gender fraud which misgenders, pathologizes and denigrates transgender identities. The fact that there is a well-established anxiety about men competing as women in sport makes the cisgenderist accusations of gender fraud levelled at transgender people in society more broadly (Sharpe 2018) more sayable and accepted in sporting spaces. In other words, common cisgenderist mis-

information about transgender people as deceitful is easily (re)articulated in online sports talk.

The posts above premise their accusations of gender fraud on the notion that transgender women athletes are cisgender men who are competing in women's sport illicitly in order to win. This is accompanied by accusations of them under-performing in men's sport ("fail-males who cheat" and "male athletes who couldn't make it as a man in men's sport"). However, there are also narratives that reflect broader accusations of gender fraud which often accuse transgender people of fabricating their gender for abusive and sexual purposes:

That is not a transgender player that is a man who is pathetic and gets off hurting women in sport. And pathetic is also the team he is on for allowing him to be on their team! #SaveWomensSports he is not even trying to look like a woman! What a farse (BoomSunrise, 2023, June 29)

Conservative men don't care about gay men or lesbian women. It's transgender saying it's okay to be attracted to 8 year olds. Men identifying as women only for real women to be abused or because they weren't good enough to play mens sport but can excel in womens sport. (Time-sAwkward, 2023, June 30)

Does a transgender athlete like Lia use the same locker room as other competitors. I can picture her parading around with her/his Willi hanging out in the shower. (YippeeMostly, 2023, June 29)

Kieren Perkins is full of cult doctrine bullshit.

How dare he tell women & girls it isn't males/men entering female sport.

He sounds just like an abuser. (BeforeDuring, 2023, June 16)

These highly vitriolic posts demonstrate the articulation of misinformation around abuse and transgender athletes in these online posts. In the first three posts, transgender athletes are presented as abusers and sexual predators. They exhibit the assumption that transgender women are really cisgender men and that they compete in women's sport in order to glean pleasure from enacting gender-based violence on the sports field ("gets off hurting women in sport"). The idea that transgender people are sexual abusers and pedophiles reflects similar misinformed accusations historically levelled against sexual minorities. As with the content of the discursive pattern of confused medicalization there is a focus on genitalia ("I can picture her parading around with his/her Willi hanging out in the shower"). Riggs et al. (2016) note the obsession with transgender people's (imagined) genitals as a prominent form of transgender discrimination in the media. Notably, this focus functions to misgender and objectify as well as spread misinformation about gender-affirming care, transgender experiences, and, in this case, sport.

The fourth post above exemplifies the way that advocating for inclusion of transgender people in sport is also equated with being an abuser or complicit in abuse ("He sounds just like an abuser"). This transphobic and cisgenderist narrative requires ignoring the reality that transgender women are most at risk of violence (Klemmer et al. 2021; Lund, Burgess, and Johnson 2021; Wirtz et al. 2020) especially when forced to use

the wrong locker rooms and bathrooms and instead positions transgender women as threats to cisgender women.

The ongoing construction of gender fraud misinformation is also apparent in the online posts:

Messi will play at WWC [Women's World Cup] as transgender athlete.
(WireIce, 2023, June 28)

What was the name of the male athlete that was ranked above 400 something? Became a transgender and beat all the women. The asshoke Dem politicians think this is fair to women because they say they support women. More lying Democrat bullsht. (MinidiscCrochet, 2023, June 25)

In these posts the construction of contemporary gender fraud myths is clear. WireIce states that Lionel Messi, widely considered the greatest male footballer of all time, will play at the Women's World Cup as a transgender athlete. This post, whilst possibly an attempt at humor, betrays the historical and ongoing propagation of gender fraud myths. Messi has never expressed any transgender identity nor the desire to play as a woman in women's sports. Thus, this hypothetical and hyperbolic post further spreads discriminatory misinformation about transgender athletes—namely, either that Messi is going to compete as a transgender athlete or that this scenario is comparable to what is currently happening. Additionally, MinidiscCrochet asks the name of a male athlete who was low ranked before dominating when competing as a woman. It is unclear who the transgender athlete being reference is, if it is indeed a real story at all. This cisgenderist misinformation about cisgender men athletes suddenly switching to women's sport functions to construct and cement contemporary pseudohistories of transgender women illicitly competing in women's sport and dominating those competitions.

Similarly, LitheDrummer offers the untrue fact that WNBA player Brittney Griner is “male born” and playing as a transgender athlete:

Is Brittney Grinner Transgender? Know the Real Facts. Yes she's the 1st Male born athlete to play in women's professional basketball. Brittney Griner came out as transgender during an interview with Sports Illustrated in 2013. (LitheDrummer, 2023, June 17)

Here the entanglement of racist, sexist, and cisgenderist discourses (Fischer and McClearen 2020; Nyong'o 2010; Magubane 2014) comes to the fore with Griner, a Black woman, having her gender called into question. The Sports Illustrated article in which Griner supposedly came out as transgender does not in fact contain such a moment. Instead, Griner, amongst other things, discusses her lesbian identity. This post further demonstrates transgender misinformation in the construction of pseudohistories both at the macro-level (i.e. transgender women are dominating women's sports) and at the micro-level (i.e. the individual biographical history of Griner as transgender). Furthermore, it is representative of the ways that all women regardless of gender identity are caught up in transphobic posts and cisgenderist misinformation and the ensuing forms of trans-misogynistic and racist somatic scrutiny made available in sporting discourses. Fundamentally, these pseudohistories underpin discriminatory discourses about transgender athletes and ultimately, as I go on to explore, feed into cisgenderist conspiracy theories.

Plotting Against (Cis)Women's Sport

This cisgenderist misinformation, instantiated in the discursive patterns of confused medicalization and pseudohistories of gender fraud, buttresses a conspiracy theory that there is a large-scale, coordinated and systemic plot to destroy (cisgender) women's sport. This widespread idea is attributed across the online posts to a disparate cluster of actors including left-wing politicians, sporting organizations, a nebulous "woke" agenda, women athletes who support transgender inclusion, a liberal agenda, and colleges, along with transgender athletes.

Mirroring the White supremacist conspiracy theory of the "Great Replacement," in which it is perceived that white, Western populations are being actively replaced by non-white, non-Western immigrants (Obaidi et al. 2021), some posters argue in response to a story about a cisgender girl getting an injury whilst playing volleyball against a transgender girl that "Democrats are erasing Women and replacing them with Men" (LavaAvailable, 2023, June 18). This accusation levelled against politicians for actively attacking cisgender women and girls is not limited to the US context. For example, another poster posits the same theory in the Canadian context:

It would be great if Sport Canada would support girls and women in sport and stop throwing them under the transgender bus being driven by Trudeau. (CoffeeTop, 2023, June 17)

Here, Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau of the centrist Liberal Party, is depicted as trampling over (implicitly cisgender) women and girls. Though these posts do not always explicitly make reference to nationality or ethnicity, it is pertinent that these cisgenderist discourses map onto and connect with racist and nationalist conspiracy theories such as the "Great Replacement" theory insofar as it exemplifies the entanglement of racism, sexism, and cisgenderism. These posts exemplify the way that cisgenderist misinformation about transgender athletes feeds into and is grafted onto existing political divisions and associated conspiracy theories.

CoffeeTop's post above also shows the accusations that are levelled against sporting organizations with Sport Canada accused of not supporting (again, implicitly cisgender) women and girls. Other organizations such as the International Olympic Committee and colleges are also accused of being complicit in this plot to destroy cisgender women's sport:

How about the IOC failing to try and sort out the injustice to female athletes via their refusal to rule on the transgender issue? Trans identifying Males are destroying female participation and opportunities in sport - and you are leading the way in supporting this. #SexMatters (BellhopSio, 2023, June 19)

The key words being "as of now". Will that continue-- as it should to any person capable of rational thought? If articles I've seen are to be believed transgender athletes are being recruited by colleges. Already women are all levels of sport are being robbed of wins by men!!! (DataMessage, 2023, June 22)

There is ample evidence that transgender people are systemically excluded from sporting spaces due to discrimination, inadequate resources, inadequate spaces such as changing rooms, and exclusionary regulations (Canadian Centre for Ethics in Sport

2021; López-Cañada et al. 2020; 2021). Considering the difficulty that transgender people have participating in sport at recreational and especially elite levels (see for example Union Cycliste Internationale 2023; World Aquatics 2022; World Athletics 2023) the idea that sporting governing bodies and governments are strong advocates and allies to transgender people and athletes, let alone part of a conspiracy to oust cisgender women in the name of transgender participation, requires a particularly acute stretch of the imagination. Nevertheless, these posts present these organizations as part of the cadre plotting against cisgender women's sport.

This ostensible attack from transgender people and advocates of cisgender women athletes, it is argued in the online posts, is supported and sustained through attacks on those who speak out against it:

A rugby phrase that doesn't apply anymore for men's rugby IT TAKES LEATHER BALLS TO PLAY RUGBY, I guess they would lose their funding if they stand up against this woke agenda, not surprising given the minister of sport pushes this bs transgender agenda. (ElderlyWaterski, 2023, June 27)

We have more than 50 transgender women in the sport. And what's going on in the background is that women are just quietly walking away. They think, "Why bother, if it's not fair?" Women who speak out get cancelled, they get silenced, their jobs are threatened. It's real. (NewLocation, 2023, June 21)

Is there not a world in which one can be supportive of the transgender community and curious about the fairness of Trans athletes in sport yet not be labeled a transphobe or a bigot as we ask questions? Do we yet know the answers? And do we even want to know the answers? (SwitchHoney, 2023, June 26)

These posts demonstrate the ways that this supposed destruction of cisgender women's sport is policed. It is argued that those who challenge "this woke agenda" (ElderlyWaterski) either lose their funding (ElderlyWaterski), get cancelled, silenced and have their jobs threatened (NewLocation) or are labelled bigots (SwitchHoney). These assumptions are premised on the idea that transgender people and transgender advocates have their hands on the levers of power. That is, in this conspiracy theory, one of the most disenfranchised groups is purported to have the power and the desire to destroy cisgender women's sport and silence those who speak out.

This conspiracy theory is sustained by and sustaining of a broader cisgenderist environment. This cisgenderist conspiracy theory delegitimizes and pathologizes transgender athlete identities—and transgender identities more broadly—by misgendering transgender women as men cheating at women's sport. Furthermore, it renders transgender athletes, and transgender women in particular, as a threat to cisgender women and girls both physically, through the myth of transgender women attacking cisgender women and girls in changing rooms, and structurally, through the conspiracy theory that transgender women are ousting and usurping cisgender women and their rights. Perhaps the most important function of this cisgenderist conspiracy theory is that it masks the existence and activities of cisgenderism itself. By embellishing

the power held by transgender people, athletes, and advocates it hides the power that is asserted over them by a cisgenderist and transphobic (sporting) culture.

CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

In these findings I have highlighted the propagation of cisgenderist misinformation and conspiracy theories in the context of posts of X. Historical and ongoing suspicion and scrutiny of transgender people in elite sports underpins cisgenderist conspiracy theory that politicians, organizations, transgender athletes, and transgender advocates are plotting to destroy cisgender women's sport. This feeds into cisgenderist depictions of transgender athletes as other, duplicitous, and inauthentic. More fundamentally, it has the effect of obfuscating the reality of cisgenderism in elite sporting cultures, with transgender people and advocates instead presented as powerful and dangerous.

These findings further suggest that misinformation and conspiracy theories are an important characteristic of the proliferation of cisgenderism. If we are to take Bruce (2013) seriously when she describes the sway that sports media has on cultural understandings, then we must recognize and further explore the ways that cisgenderist misinformation and conspiracy theories in sports media, such as the belief that there is a plot to destroy cisgender women's sports, impact the recognition and experiences of transgender people in sports and society more broadly.

In order to develop this research further, future research may take a larger dataset than the one-month snapshot analyzed here. Whilst the quantity and richness of this snapshot attests to the prevalence of online talk around transgender athletes, future research may benefit from taking a longer view of this every day, digital conversation. Additionally, here I have focused on sports media but it is clear that the misinformation conspiracy theories are grafted onto and themselves taken from various non-sporting contexts. As such, further research is needed to explore the dynamics of cisgenderist misinformation and conspiracy theories as they shift from context to context.

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“You Can Always Tell”: Determining the Impact of “Transinvestigator” Visual Misinformation on Attitudes Towards Transgender People

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This study investigates the effects of visual misinformation on attitudes toward transgender inclusion. By examining how exposure to EGI (Elite Gender Inversion) conspiracy theory posts influences individuals' perceptions of transgender people and related policy opinions, the study highlights the interaction of race and gender in shaping attitudes. Utilizing a factorial design experiment, the research explores how both visual and text-based misinformation affect individuals' certainty in determining a celebrity's transgender status. The findings reveal that misinformation, whether visual or text-based, leads to increased uncertainty in determining a celebrity's gender identity, with visual misinformation having a slightly more pronounced effect on participants' certainty compared to text-based misinformation. Importantly, the race of the celebrity was found to play a significant role in moderating these effects, with participants displaying varying levels of confidence depending on the racial identity of the celebrity. This highlights how misinformation can exacerbate racialized perceptions of gender. Given the increasing visibility of transgender individuals and the growing impact of misinformation on digital platforms, this study underscores the importance of exploring how racial and gender biases intersect and shape social perceptions, contributing to transphobic assumptions and attitudes.

KEYWORDS misinformation; visual culture; social media; quantitative methods; cisgender aesthetics

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Within the study of misinformation in communication studies, scholars have focused on text-based claims circulating on social media and in news outlets. Scholars have paid less attention to visual-based misinformation, especially as it relates to issues

around transgender representation and inclusion. The significance of understanding the spread of visual misinformation is particularly relevant when considering the increased visibility of transgender inclusion in political discourse, as well as the increase in misinformation about transgender people more generally online. One conspiracy theory that relies on visual and text-based misinformation that users circulate online is the concept of “elite gender inversion” (EGI). Led by self-described “transvestigators,” these social media accounts produce content that argues many or all celebrity figures are transgender, hiding their “true” gender identity from the general public. The goal of transvestigations, then, is to “reveal” a celebrity’s sex assigned at birth through pseudo-scientific visual cues around bone structure, gait, posture, and other physical characteristics. Through YouTube videos, infographics (e.g., Figure 1), and manipulated images, transvestigators find a picture of a cisgender celebrity from an event or red carpet and highlight the visual elements of their appearance that indexes a person’s “real” sex.

Transvestigators do not have a particular orientation towards specific celebrities, though the celebrities chosen are often cisgender celebrities rather than known transgender celebrities. While not a direct attack on transgender individuals, EGI conspiracy theories circulating online function as a form of anti-LGBTQ+ identity propaganda (Reddi, Kuo, and Kreiss 2023) by normalizing debunked eugenicist understandings of science that one’s sex assigned at birth is grounded in physical characteristics; one just needs to know what to look for to find them. EGI campaigns are a form of insidious misinformation that reaffirms the internal logic of perceiving gender presentation and the false idea that transgender people are deceptively hiding some internal form of gender (Billard, 2019). The mode of misinformation that seeks to reaffirm normative understandings of gender presentation is often overlooked in studies focusing on more straightforward, “fact”-based and textual forms of misinformation. Scholars focus on connecting lineages of misinformation to earlier forms of written propaganda (Bennett and Livingston 2018; Waisbord 2018), its spread (Lu 2020; Morosoli et al. 2025), and its effects (Freelon et al. 2022; Hameleers 2023) as a means of understanding the impact of misinformation in eroding public trust and normalizing social inequalities (Kuo and Marwick 2021). However, misinformation online exists in different forms and media types, such as deepfakes (Rajagopal, Chandrashekar, and Ilango 2023) and memes (Molina 2025; Shifman 2013), each having different effects on an individual’s perception of false information (Weikmann and Lecheler 2023).

Visual misinformation is a prevalent element of digital landscapes and online engagement, with users on platforms like Twitter and Facebook sharing visual content more frequently than text-based media (Tucker et al. 2018). While studies often focus on large-scale political issues, such as electoral politics and the perception of political candidates (Geddes 2021; Yang, Davis, and Hindman 2023), there is a significant gap in literature regarding how visual misinformation influences social perception, identity, and trust, especially in relation to social and cultural norms.

Placing the conspiracy of elite gender inversion in conversation with the visual misinformation literature, the present study considers the effect of transvestigators’ use of visual misinformation on attitudes towards transgender people within the United States. Utilizing a 2 x 3 factorial experiment, the study examined whether visual misinformation, when paired with text-based misinformation, amplified negative



Figure 1. Example Infographic of Elite Gender Inversion Post

attitudes towards transgender individuals and policies affecting trans individuals, as well as the certainty of knowing a person's sex assigned at birth from visual cues. Results show participants exposed to visual misinformation were less confident in their ability to discern a person's gender or sex assigned at birth, which suggests that misinformation impacts the certainty of visual cues used to interpret gender. Rather than directly altering attitudes towards marginalized populations, the continued circulation of visual misinformation contributes to the reproduction of stereotypes and reinforces existing perceptions of gender as a visible and easily identifiable characteristic. This effect, particularly when combined with racial differences, which falls in line with other studies examining the relationship between race and transphobia (Lombardi 2009; Weissinger, Mack, and Watson 2017). These findings highlight how misinformation perpetuates a broader uncertainty about gender and sex, complicating the ways in which individuals make assumptions about transgender people and their political inclusion.

BACKGROUND

Visual misinformation remains relatively under-examined in studies of misinformation as it poses several issues around how to categorize images and their impact on an individual's perception (Swire-Thompson and Lazer 2022; Weikmann and Lecheler 2023). Scholars have started to develop a taxonomy of visual misinformation, including out-of-context text with images (Qian, Shen, and Zhang 2022), "deep fake" or doctored images (Ha, Andreu Perez, and Ray 2021), and even memes or satirical content (Peng, Romero, and Horvát 2022; Tuters and Hagen 2020). Scholars have found that social media users engage with visual misinformation more frequently than textual (Tucker et al. 2018), and often find images more credible or truthful (Steinfeld, 2023).

The current media ecosystem affords different digital actors a larger influence

on mainstream media, allowing extreme claims to reframe narratives, reorient political conversations, and propagate false information that dilutes social trust in institutions (Marwick and Lewis 2017). The primary focus within misinformation and disinformation research has been on “mainstream” issues such as health (vaccine misinformation) and electoral politics (perception of electoral candidates) rather than the influence of less objective claims that impact attitudes around marginalized populations. The efficacy of the COVID-19 vaccine (Lu 2020), election fraud (Starbird, DiResta, and DeButts 2023), and climate change (Freiling, Stubenvoll, and Matthes 2023), have a scientific or widely accepted factual grounding that allows scholars to trace the movement of accepted false information and understand how it affects the perception of (Morosoli et al. 2025; Waisbord 2018).

However, trust and credibility are not limited to social institutions but also have psychological contours that reorient how individuals relate to one another (Ecker et al. 2022; 2022; Jaiswal, LoSchiavo, and Perlman 2020). Examining how disinformation functions to amplify preconceived notions of marginalized populations becomes particularly salient when considering the social discourse on transgender topics and rights in the current political ecosystem. As a critical disinformation studies perspective makes clear, misinformation is not actually an emergent form of propaganda but rather a method for extending pre-existing ideologies on inequality that reassert normative power dynamics through the politicization of fact and identity, creating ambiguity around a concept of “truth” which gain traction within the attention-grabbing campaigns of news outlets (Kuo and Marwick 2021).

Where examinations into more objective facts demonstrate the heightened presence of misinformation, the results often depoliticize how misinformation operates to produce “facts” that harm marginalized populations (Mejia, Beckermann, and Sullivan 2018). Critical disinformation studies demonstrate how misinformation functions through structural hierarchies on media platforms (Jardina 2019), amplifies embedded racial inequalities (Freelon et al. 2022), or reasserts harmful stereotypes pushed by politicians (Flores-Yeffal, Vidales, and Martinez 2019). And these modes of reifying harmful stereotypes become paramount for individuals subject to interlocking systems of marginalization (Jaiswal, LoSchiavo, and Perlman 2020). By examining disinformation through a lens of power, scholars better understand how social dynamics that extend beyond digital media can be reaffirmed by manipulating facts online and spreading them to other users (Monsees 2023).

Misinformation to undermine credibility and produce distrust of other people becomes particularly salient for transgender populations who are already susceptible to violence and harassment online (Kidd and Witten 2007; Marwick 2021; 2023; Nock-Lundberg et al. 2020). Scholars approach the relationship between fake news and transgender rights by examining the strategies that anti-trans activists, media systems, and social media utilize to expand the current gender panic occurring within the United States and the United Kingdom (Bassi and LaFleur 2022; Billard 2023, 2024). While particular to their national context, far-right extremists in the United States and so-called “trans exclusionary radical feminists” (TERFs) have parallel strategies for selecting particular messages that reassert normative tropes of gender (Hines, 2020). Scholars productively point out that misinformation around transgender people reaffirms hegemonic understandings of gender and sex binaries by amplifying anxiet-

ies around trans youth (Lepore, Alstott, and McNamara 2022), the “erasure” of women (Thurlow 2024), or production of anti-gender ideology (Pearce, Erikainen, and Vincent 2020a; 2020b). Moreover, misinformation functions to limit access to necessary medical services (Ashley 2020; Billard 2023, 2024), and intensify the social mistrust of transgender people that permeates into political discourse (Libby 2022).

Transgender inclusion is shaped not just by access to medical services, but also by societal acceptance of their chosen gender presentation. A critical political debate that antagonizes trans bodies is the politics of passing and the visual performance of binary genders. Passing has functioned as a form of stigma management for trans people (Kando 1972; Squires and Brouwer 2002). Originally derived from the concept of racial passing in the United States (Hobbs 2014), passing for transgender people operates through one’s ability to “pass” as their gender identity. The issue of passing as a political/social end goal for trans people is that it produces a normative understanding of what it means to be transgender (Skidmore 2011); This erases nonbinary and gender-nonconforming experiences that fall outside the gender binary (Doyle 2022) as well as places one’s ability to blend in as a measure of safety. In short, passing affirms a “cisgender aesthetic” (Billard 2019; Silva, Souza, and Bezerra 2019) where the safety of a trans person is contingent on their ability to approximate and embody their cis counterparts. It constructs a visual binary of passing/non-passing, giving the dominant power tools to visually determine who is “authentic” to their gender/sex identity and who is deceptively performing it (Billard 2019).

Scholars have documented that this assumed deception around gender becomes particularly relevant to transgender people of color, who are already subject to more potential violence and harm (Bailey 2011; Bettcher 2007). The notion that transgender people are merely “passing” through gender presentation becomes the foundation for transvestigators campaigns against celebrities. Rather than just state that a celebrity is transgender, transvestigators calcify stereotypes around gender deception by relying on pseudo-scientific justifications for the difference between male and female skeletal structures and that these cues from skeletal structures are visible to those who know how to look for them. Phrenology has a well-documented history within eugenics and relies on false understandings that biological differences exist between individuals that are immutable and fundamental to particular demographics (Chun 2009; Lopez 2020). These transphobic and racist understandings of biological essentialism become reappropriated online, connecting EGI campaigns to previously existing power structures around determinism.

These different areas of disinformation circulating online produce a false understanding of transgender identity, which constitutes what Reddi, Kuo, and Kreiss (2023) called “identity propaganda,” or narratives about marginalized populations that circulate in news outlets and on social media that function to exploit previously existing prejudices that reassert a hegemonic structure around identity. These static narratives around identity produce polarization on social media platforms (Kreiss and McGregor 2024) while repurposing sedimented social inequalities into digital spaces (Uyheng, Bellutta, and Carley 2022). By amplifying social differences through false narratives and claims, anti-trans campaigners continue to other transgender people within the political landscape. Gender expression does not exist in isolation but is one that intersects with other forms of identity like race, sexuality, and disability. As trans-

gender scholars of color have highlighted, social inequalities around gender are amplified for non-white bodies (Kando 1972; Keegan 2022; Zhang 2023). This double bind of racial and gendered identity propaganda produces particular experiences (Brown et al. 2018). Thus, EGI posts continue to propagate gender essentialist notions around the body which extend the normative logics that transgender scholars have identified in systems throughout time.

Elite gender inversion (EGI) posts are not only texted-based arguments but rather function as a form of visual misinformation as well that affirms the mechanisms of cisgender aesthetics (Billard 2019) through physiognomy to produce visual claims about whether someone is transgender. Scholars within transgender studies have examined how certain forms of visual presentation that adhere to normative understandings of gender presentation follow cisgender standards around beauty (Zhang et al. 2023). It is not only that one must present as their gender, but they must perform that gender at a heightened space of visibility and care. This reinforces transphobic stereotypes that certain forms of gender presentation are deemed acceptable and others as well as has an impact on the expectations and attitudes that cisgender individuals already hold towards transgender people (Libby 2022; Pearce, Erikainen, and Vincent 2020a; West and Zimmerman 1987).

While EGI misinformation targets celebrities, the claim that one could identify that someone is trans based on skeletal structure and other physical indicators has consequences for trans people generally. The focus on normatively recognized figures of beauty in popular culture potentially allows transvestigators to create more ambiguity on whether a person can disguise their transgender status through an appeal to beauty standards. It also continues to affirm the notion that transgender people are hiding something or are in disguise. Transgender people already face increased online harassment for not adhering to normative power structures (Kuo and Marwick 2021), and the notion that anyone has the capacity to surveil and identify people visually only amplifies the potential harm. Regardless of the intention of why these posts are produced, transvestigations function within a greater ecosystem of misinformation, perpetuating false understandings of science and identity.

The significance of visual images in EGI misinformation campaigns offers insight into whether visual-based misinformation affects or amplifies text-based misinformation, which is the typical focus within misinformation studies. Visual misinformation around gender presentation places transgender people in a particularly dangerous position, for it reifies essentialist understandings that there are correct ways of performing gender. It provides those in power with the misguided idea that they can determine whether one “passes” through assessment. Not only does this create distrust between individuals, but passing affirms a cisgender aesthetic (Billard 2019; Johnson 2013; Silva, Souza, and Bezerra 2019) where the safety of a trans person is contingent on their ability to approximate and embody their cis counterparts.

Given the pervasiveness of visual misinformation in digital spaces and its role in reinforcing essentialist gender norms, it is crucial to empirically examine its effects. Specifically, we aim to explore how visual misinformation interacts with text-based misinformation, influences perceptions of gender presentation, and affects transgender individuals in online environments. To address these questions, we propose the following hypotheses:

- H1:** Exposure to EGI misinformation (text-based or text paired with visual) will lead to more negative attitudes toward transgender individuals.
- H2:** Participants exposed to EGI misinformation with visual elements will experience larger shifts in their confidence determining a person's gender compared to those exposed to text-only misinformation or no misinformation.
- H3:** EGI misinformation will increase the likelihood that participants believe the celebrity shown is transgender, with this effect being stronger for misinformation with visual elements.
- H4:** The effect of EGI misinformation on attitudes and certainty will vary based on the race of the celebrity, with EGI posts about a person of color leading to different responses compared to a white celebrity.

METHOD

To investigate these hypotheses about the effects of visual misinformation, we utilize elite gender inversion posts created by “transvestigators” as the foundation for a factorial experiment manipulating the presence of misinformation exposure. We conducted a three (no misinformation, text-only misinformation, text and visual misinformation) by two (celebrities Wendy Williams and Heather Gay) experiment of social media users who reside in the United States. Transvestigator posts circulate across social media platforms, ranging from YouTube to X (formerly Twitter). Individuals may come across an EGI post while scrolling through their feed without considering whether it contains misinformation. To explore this, we created six social media posts and randomly assigned them to participants. This setup allows for comparisons between different experiment groups and provides insight into how posts with misinformation influence attitudes toward transgender inclusion and policy.

Stimuli: EGI Post

Transvestigations to determine a celebrity's “real gender” have gained enough traction online that there are Facebook groups with more than 17,000 members who share visual and textual misinformation on transgender people (Lenton 2024). Individuals will find an image of a celebrity either from a television show or recent photoshoot and then overlay information that “proves” that the individual is hiding their transgender status. The infographics utilize pseudo-scientific concepts like “Q Angle” or other claims rooted in physiognomy, positing physical characteristics are inherently connected to sex characteristics. Creators will regularly include multiple images of the celebrity to justify their claim, creating a collage-like infographic (see Figure 2). EGI posts merge visual infographics that rely on false science in conjunction with textual misinformation to argue that all celebrities are transgender, and you can figure it out through visual cues. Appendix A includes the six stimuli randomly assigned to participants in each experimental condition. There were two different ways of grouping the social media posts. All posts included an image of a cisgender female celebrity from a red-carpet event, with accompanying text that described the image. Images of the celebrity were selected to minimize differences between the two figures.

The two celebrities, Heather Gay and Wendy Williams, were carefully selected



Figure 2. Example Twitter #EGI Post

for several reasons. First, both celebrities have documented histories of public speculation that they may be transgender women. Heather Gay, a cast member on the reality television program *The Real Housewives of Salt Lake City*, was initially thought to be a transgender woman after her first appearances on the show (DeCecco 2021). Wendy Williams, a popular daytime talk show host and public figure, has also been subject to speculation about her gender identity throughout her decades-long career (Marquina 2014). Additionally, both celebrities have some degree of social status, regularly walking red carpets or attending publicized social events. However, the two celebrities differ in race, with Heather Gay being a white woman and Wendy Williams being a Black woman, allowing the opportunity to make comparisons between the different celebrity-assigned groups.

For each celebrity image, three test conditions were included with variable amounts of accompanying misinformation. Images were modeled to look like Tweets, or posts commonly made to the popular social media platform X. Two groups either received an image of Wendy Williams or Heather Gay with a neutral description of the image. These groups function as the control group with the post including neither text-based nor visual misinformation. Another group of participants were presented the same images, but in this case with a caption utilizing EGI conspiracy rhetoric and speculating about the celebrity's gender identity. Specifically, the caption took the format: "Forensics do not lie; you can always tell someone's gender by looking at their bone structure. Phrenologists have been proving this for years. Regardless of what you

read online, you just need to know what to look for. [Celebrity name] is a MAN #EGI.” This caption was modeled by synthesizing captions included on popular transvestigator posts online, mirroring the language of physiognomy that commonly appears in EGI conspiracy posts. Finally, two groups were presented a social media post that contained the same text-based EGI misinformation as well as skull overlay on top of the celebrity’s image, using visual information to “prove” their textual claim. It was essential to consider the ethical implications of this experiment, particularly whether asking participants to perform a gender assessment reinforces the very issue we are studying. In the post-test instructions, we clarified that the posts containing EGI misinformation were false, ensuring that participants did not leave the study believing the social media posts were factual.

Participants

Participants ($N = 667$) were recruited utilizing Prolific, an online participant recruitment platform that functions as an alternative to Amazon’s Mechanical Turk. Research has shown that Prolific produces significantly higher data quality across a range of factors than common respondent recruitment platforms and survey sampling firms like MTurk, Dynata, and Qualtrics (Peer et al. 2017; 2021). The study was conducted in two waves and participants were offered financial compensation for completing each part. Participants who did not complete the second wave of the study only received compensation for completing the first wave. With the understanding that some participants would drop out between waves, the first wave of the study was sent to 1,004 individuals in the Prolific system. Participants who failed one of the attention check questions or completed the survey in less than 30 seconds were removed from the dataset, leaving a Wave One sample of $N = 984$. One month after Wave One, each of the included participants was sent an invitation to Wave Two and given roughly a week to complete the second wave. Attention checks were again placed throughout the survey, and only completed surveys were accepted and included in the final dataset. This final dataset included $N = 667$ participants.

The participants in this experiment were randomly assigned to conditions, ensuring a balanced distribution of key demographic characteristics (e.g., age, gender, religion, and race/ethnicity) across all experimental groups (see Table 1). Ages of study participants ranged from 18 to 80 ($M = 41.62$, $SD = 13.37$). Over half of participants (56.37%) identified as cisgender women, 40.03% as cisgender men, 2.55% as nonbinary, and 0.59% and 0.45% as transgender men and transgender women, respectively. The majority of participants identified as White (70.45%), while the remainder identified as Asian American/Pacific Islander (11.51%), Black/African American (12.27%), Latin or Hispanic (5.75%), or multiracial (1.71%). The vast majority of participants reported aligning more with the Democratic Party (69.67%), while a minority reported aligning more with the Republican Party (30.33%).

Measures

Participants were asked to provide information about their age, gender identity, religiosity, and political orientation. All measures beyond demographic information took the form of 7-point Likert-type scales, except where otherwise stated, although response labels differed depending on the construct. For all scales, greater scores in-

Table 1. Summary of Demographic Characteristics (N = 667)

Characteristic	M (SD) / n (%)
Age	41.62 (13.37)
Gender	
Women	535 (56.82%)
Cisgender women	376 (56.37%)
Transgender women	3 (0.45%)
Men	271 (40.63%)
Cisgender men	267 (40.03%)
Transgender men	4 (0.59%)
Nonbinary	17 (2.55%)
Race/Ethnicity	
White or European	465 (70.45%)
Black or African	81 (12.27%)
Asian or Pacific Islander	76 (11.51%)
Latin or Hispanic	38 (5.75%)
Multiracial	7 (1.71%)
Education	15.19 (2.55)
Religion	
Religiously unaffiliated	329 (49.33%)
Christian	276 (41.38%)
Jewish	18 (2.19%)
Muslim	7 (1.05%)
Buddhist	4 (0.60%)
Hindu	4 (0.60%)
Some other religion	7 (1.00%)
Political Party	
Democratic Party	464 (69.67%)
Republican Party	202 (30.33%)

dicate greater magnitudes of the construct. Demographic and control variables were captured only once in either the pre-test or post-test questionnaire, while dependent variables were collected twice, in both questionnaires.

Gender Essentialism

Gender essentialism was measured using a 10-item unidimensional scale developed by Coleman and Hong (2008) as adapted by Wilton et al. (2019). It was included as a measure of individual attitudes toward gender diversity. Sample items include “When men and women differ in some way, it is likely that the difference is due to biological factors” and “Gender is a result of ‘nurture’ more than ‘nature.’” The 10 items of the gender essentialism scale were tested for reliability ($\alpha = 0.81$) and averaged to create a single scale.

Attitude Toward Transgender Men and Women

To measure attitudes toward transgender people, the study includes the Attitudes Toward Transgender Men and Women scale (Billard 2018). Attitudes towards transgender men and transgender women were measured separately, meaning that questions specified a particular gender identity, such as “Transgender men don’t really understand what it means to be a man.” Measurements that were higher on the scale indexed negative attitudes towards transgender men or transgender women, respectively. The 12 items of the Attitudes Toward Transgender Men (ATTM) subscale were tested for reliability ($\alpha = 0.97$) and averaged to create a single scale, while the 12 items of the Attitudes Toward Transgender Women (ATTW) subscale were tested for reliability ($\alpha = 0.97$) and averaged to create a separate scale.

Opinions on Transgender Policy

Adapting Walch et al.’s (2012) ATTI scale, participants were asked about their support for pro-transgender policy and transgender inclusion (e.g., “A local business should have a right not to hire a transgender person”). Response options for each item ranged from strongly disagree (1) to strongly agree (7). Similar to Attitudes Toward Transgender Men and Women, sensitization was a concern because the same measure was employed during each wave. However, the closest measurements were one month apart, making it unlikely that participants remembered the specifics of the questionnaire items. The 14 items of the opinions on transgender policy scale were tested for reliability ($\alpha = 0.94$) and averaged to create a single scale.

Assessment of Transgender Status

Participants were asked whether they believed the celebrity depicted in the stimulus was transgender (Yes) or not (No), as well as to rate their confidence in that assessment on a scale from 1 (not at all confident) to 100 (absolutely certain). Participants were also asked to rate their confidence in assessing a stranger’s sex assigned at birth just by looking at them, also on a scale from 1-100.

Pervasive Ambiguity About Gender

The Pervasive Ambiguity About Gender (PAAG) scale measures individuals’ experiences of cognitive and affective disorientation regarding the social meanings of gender, capturing how challenges to previously stable categorizations of biologically determined and socially sanctioned gender contribute to confusion and discomfort (Billard, Jenkins, and Brewer 2025). This scale is designed to assess both the emotional and cognitive dimensions of ambiguity, including feelings of unease, frustration, and overwhelm when confronted with evolving gender norms and identities. Sample scale items include, “I feel like there are so many different gender identities that it is hard to keep track of them all,” “I miss the days when men were men and women were women,” and “Male, female, nonbinary, gender fluid—I can’t keep up with it all.” By quantifying these responses, the PAAG scale offers a nuanced approach to measuring how individuals process and react to societal shifts in gender understanding. The 9 items of the Pervasive Ambiguity About Gender scale were tested for reliability ($\alpha = 0.98$) and averaged to create a single scale.

Controls: Celebrity Familiarity, Transgender Network

One's acceptance of false information, especially around identity, often coincides with personal connections to the target of misinformation campaigns (Reddi, Kuo, and Kreiss 2023). Thus, a number of controls were included to test whether familiarity with the subject of the EGI post or relationships with transgender individuals influences attitudinal changes. Participants were asked whether they knew the celebrity before taking the survey and whether they looked up the celebrity while taking the survey. Finally, participants were asked a number of questions about their relationships to transgender people in their immediate network, including questions like, "How many people in your family, close friends, and place of work identify as transgender?" and "How familiar would you say you are with gender ideology or transgender politics?"

Procedures

In Wave One, participants completed a pre-test questionnaire that asked them basic demographic questions and baseline measures of their attitudes towards transgender people before proceeding to the experiment group. The questionnaire took no longer than five minutes to complete and participants were informed that they would receive an invitation to a second follow-up survey at a later date. Eligible participants who completed Wave One ($N = 984$) were sent the experimental study via email one month after wave one. Participants were again asked to complete the survey in one sitting. In Wave Two, participants were given one of six experimental conditions with a required thirty second timer, ensuring the participants had able time to view the post without being able to quickly move to the questions. After viewing the stimuli, participants were asked whether the celebrity in the image was transgender, their level of confidence in assessing a stranger's sex assigned at birth based solely on visual cues, and the attitudinal questions included in the pre-test questionnaire. The wave one and wave two responses were matching using respondents' unique Prolific ID numbers. Similar attention checks and time checks were employed in Wave Two to ensure compliance with the experimental procedures.

Because the figures presented in the experimental stimuli were public figures, and participants' prior experiences with or knowledge of the celebrity could affect the results of the study, participants were asked in Wave Two about their familiarity with the celebrity and whether they looked up the celebrity online during the study. After completing Wave Two, participants were informed that the study they had participated in was an experiment about misinformation and attitudes towards transgender people, and that the content presented to them in the experimental stimuli was fake.

RESULTS

To assess the effectiveness of randomization, demographic variables were compared across experimental groups using chi-squared tests for categorical variables and ANOVA for continuous variables. Chi-squared tests indicated no significant differences in gender distribution ($\chi^2(4) = 19.05, p = 0.52$), the recategorized binary race variable (white vs. non-white; $\chi^2(5) = 0.15, p = 1.00$), or political party affiliation ($\chi^2(10) = 10.92, p = 0.36$) across experimental groups. For continuous variables, ANOVA results revealed no significant differences in age ($F(5, 661) = 0.38, p = 0.86$), income ($F(5, 661) = 0.15,$

$p = 0.98$), or online media use ($F(5, 661) = 1.23, p = 0.29$). These findings indicate that the randomization procedure was effective, ensuring balanced distribution of demographic characteristics across all experimental conditions. The absence of significant differences supports the validity of subsequent analyses by minimizing the risk of demographic confounds influencing experimental outcomes.

H1 predicted that exposure to different experiment conditions would lead to significant differences in attitudes as measured by Attitude Toward Transgender Men and Women scales and Opinions on Transgender Policy scale. To test this hypothesis, we conducted a one-way ANOVA for each dependent variable, with the experiment group (A = no misinformation, B = text only EGI misinformation, C = text and visual EGI misinformation) as the independent variable (see Table 2). For attitudes towards transgender men, the ANOVA test revealed a significant effect of the experiment group, $p = 0.01$, indicating that there were significant differences in the mean scores across the groups. Follow-up Tukey HSD post-hoc tests showed that Group B had significantly higher mean values ($M = 0.16$) than Group A ($M = -0.03$), $p = 0.01$, but no significant difference was found between or between Group B and Group C ($M = 0.02$), $p = 0.10$.

Similarly, for attitudes towards transgender women, the ANOVA indicated a significant effect of the experiment group on the mean scores ($p = 0.04$). The Tukey HSD test revealed that Group B ($M = 0.15$) again had significantly higher scores (more negative attitudes) than Group A ($M = -0.03$), $p = 0.04$. However, there were no significant differences between Group C ($M = 0.01$) and Group A, $p = 0.86$, or between Group B and Group C, $p = 0.14$. These findings support the hypothesis that experiment group exposure influences attitudes, specifically showing a significant difference between Group B and Group A for both dependent variables, while the differences between Group C and the other groups were not significant. A further ANOVA test was conducted to examine differences between experimental groups on the Opinions on Transgender Policy scale. Results indicated no statistically significant differences between groups, suggesting that the experimental manipulation did not influence participants' views on this measure. Therefore, H1 was partially supported.

H2 predicted that participants exposed to EGI misinformation with visual elements would experience larger shifts in their confidence in determining a person's gender compared to those exposed to text-only misinformation or no misinformation. To test this hypothesis, we conducted a one-way ANOVA on the dependent variable Gender Assessment Certainty, with the experiment group (A, B, C) as the independent variable. The ANOVA revealed a significant effect of the experiment group on participants' confidence, $F(2, 664) = 7.11, p < .001, \eta^2 = .02$, indicating that the shift in confidence varied significantly between the experiment groups. Group C (visual misinformation) showed the smallest decline in confidence ($M = -4.01$) compared to Group A ($M = -7.69$) and Group B (text-only misinformation; $M = -7.00$). Post-hoc Tukey tests indicated a significant difference between Group C and Group A, $p < .001$. However, there were no significant differences between Group B and either Group A ($p = .07$) or Group C ($p = .28$). These findings suggest that visual misinformation may have had some influence on participants' confidence, though the lack of a significant difference between the visual and text-only conditions limits our ability to attribute the effect solely to the visual element.

H3 predicted that EGI misinformation would increase the likelihood that par-

Table 2. Means, Standard Deviations, and One-Way Analyses of Variance in Changes in Attitudes Towards Transgender Men, Women, and Policy Opinions

Measure	Experiment Condition: A		Experiment Condition: B		Experiment Condition: C		F(2, 663)	η^2	Tukey Significant Comparisons
	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD			
Change in Attitude Toward Transgender Men	−0.03	0.62	0.16	0.75	0.02	0.65	4.57***	.01	B > A ($p = .01$)
Change in Attitude Toward Transgender Women	−0.03	0.69	0.15	0.85	0.01	0.87	3.21***	.01	B > A ($p = .04$)
Changing Opinion on Transgender Policy	−0.03	0.49	−0.01	0.51	−0.02	0.47	.10	< .001	

Note. * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$.

ticipants believe the celebrity shown is transgender, with the effect being stronger for misinformation with visual elements. To test this hypothesis, we conducted a logistic regression model to predict whether participants believed the celebrity was transgender (a binary variable) based on a set of predictors, including the presence of misinformation, demographic variables, and controls (see Table 3). The results indicated that, although misinformation did not have a significant effect on the likelihood of believing the celebrity was transgender ($p = 0.17$ for B vs. A and $p = 0.41$ for C vs. A), several other variables were significantly associated with the outcome. Specifically, the variable assessing Pervasive Ambiguity About Gender had a positive effect ($\beta = 0.13$, $p < 0.05$), suggesting that participants with a greater unease about the societal changes around gender are more likely to believe the celebrity was transgender. The effect of political party was also significant ($\beta = -0.88$, $p < 0.001$), with Democrats less likely to believe the celebrity was transgender compared to the baseline group, Republicans.

Furthermore, confidence in determining a person's gender by sight was a strong predictor ($\beta = -0.50$, $p < 0.001$), indicating that participants who felt more confident in identifying transgender individuals were more likely to believe the celebrity was transgender. Age ($\beta = 0.03$, $p < 0.001$) was also significant, with older participants more

Table 3. Summary of Binomial Regression Results for Perception of Celebrity Gender Status ($N = 667$)

Variable	β	b (SE)
Intercept	-3.09***	-3.09 (0.72)
Experiment Group: Wendy Williams	-1.50***	-1.51 (0.46)
Text-only Misinformation	-0.19	-0.19 (0.31)
Text and Visual Misinformation	0.07	0.07 (0.32)
Pervasive Ambiguity	0.13*	0.13 (0.07)
Lookup Celebrity	0.43	0.43 (0.62)
Familiar with Celebrity	-2.26***	-2.27 (0.34)
Gender Assessment Certainty	-0.50***	-0.50 (0.08)
Gender Essentialism	0.19	0.19 (0.16)
Age	0.03***	0.03 (0.01)
Political Party (Democrat = 1)	-0.88***	-0.88 (0.26)
Know Trans Person (Yes = 1)	0.06	0.06 (0.06)
Follow Trans Politics (Yes = 1)	-0.01	-0.01 (0.15)
Gender ID: Woman	-0.09	-0.09 (0.22)
Gender ID: Nonbinary	-0.85	-0.85 (0.85)
Gender ID: Transgender Man	-14.82	-14.82 (694.99)
Gender ID: Transgender Woman	-13.08	-13.08 (741.75)
Interaction: Text-only $\times$ Race Experiment Group	1.23*	1.24 (0.57)
Interaction: Text+Visual $\times$ Race Experiment Group	1.18*	1.18 (0.57)
McFadden's R^2		0.33

Note. * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$. The dependent variable is the response to: "Is the celebrity transgender?" (1 = Yes, 0 = No).

likely to believe a celebrity is transgender. These results suggest that while the type of misinformation (visual vs. text-based) did not significantly affect the belief that the celebrity was transgender, factors such as pervasive ambiguity, political affiliation, certainty in identifying gender, age, and knowing someone who is transgender played a much larger role in shaping participants' perceptions.

H4 predicted that the effect of EGI misinformation on participants' perceptions of whether a celebrity was transgender would vary based on the race of the celebrity, with misinformation about a person of color leading to different responses compared to a white celebrity. The results of the logistic regression model support this hypothesis, revealing a significant interaction between the experiment condition of race and the experiment condition of misinformation. Specifically, the interaction between the two was significant for both text-based misinformation ($p = 0.03$) and text and visual misinformation ($p = 0.04$), indicating that the likelihood of perceiving the celebrity as transgender varied depending on both the celebrity's race and the type of misinformation.

For the Wendy Williams condition (experiment condition 2), both misinformation types led to a significant increase in the likelihood of perceiving the celebrity as transgender when compared to no misinformation. Participants exposed to text-only misinformation ($M = 0.16$) were significantly more likely to believe the celebrity was transgender than those in the no misinformation control group ($M = -0.03$), $p = .01$. Similarly, those exposed to text and visual misinformation ($M = 0.02$) also differed significantly from the control group, $p = .04$. The overall ANOVA confirmed a significant effect of misinformation condition on belief, $F(2, 664) = 4.57$, $p = .01$, $\eta^2 = .01$.

In contrast, for the Heather Gay condition (experiment condition 1), the effects were less pronounced. Participants exposed to text-only misinformation ($M = 0.11$) did not differ significantly from those in the control condition ($M = -0.05$, $p = .83$). Exposure to text and visual misinformation ($M = 0.02$) also did not significantly differ from control condition, $p = .56$. Though the group mean increased, the direction of the effect was less clear. The overall ANOVA for this condition was not significant, $F(2, 664) = 0.64$, $p = .43$, suggesting that misinformation had a weaker impact in this context. These results indicate that, for the celebrity of color, EGI misinformation had a stronger influence on perceptions of transgender status.

Figure 3 illustrates how the type of misinformation interacts with the race of the celebrity to influence participants' likelihood of perceiving the celebrity as transgender. For Heather Gay, the probability decreases with text misinformation but shows a slight increase when visual and text misinformation are present. In contrast, for the Wendy Williams condition, the probability steadily increases as misinformation type changes. This suggests that the change in misinformation has a stronger effect on perceptions of transgender identity for a person of color compared to a white celebrity, with the type of misinformation playing a significant role in shaping these perceptions.

Further post-hoc analysis, specifically Tukey's multiple comparisons of means, revealed several noteworthy findings regarding the interaction between race of the celebrity and misinformation type. For the Wendy Williams condition, the presence of text-based and visual misinformation resulted in a significant increase in the likelihood of perceiving the celebrity as transgender when compared to no misinformation.

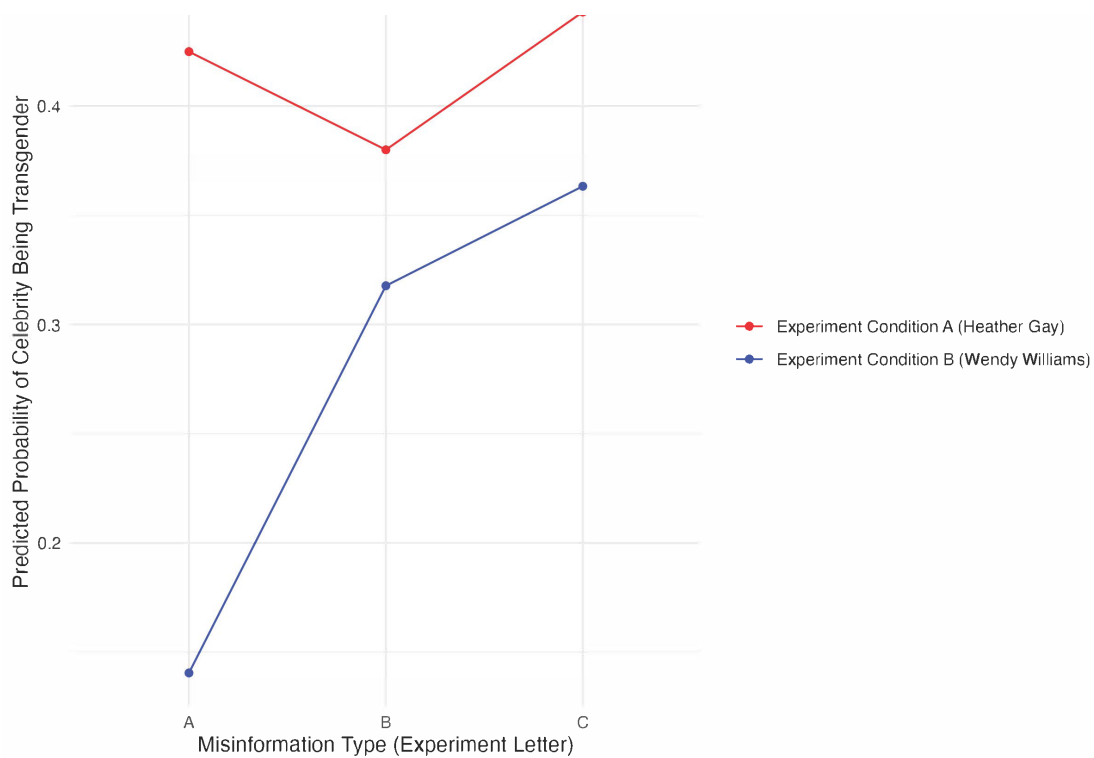


Figure 3. Effect of Misinformation Type on Perceptions of Celebrity Transgender Identity

Specifically, the difference between no misinformation and text-only misinformation was significant ($M_{\text{diff}} = 0.19, p = .01$), indicating that text-only misinformation had a stronger effect on perceptions of Wendy Williams than when no misinformation was present. Similarly, the difference between no misinformation and text and visual misinformation approached significance ($M_{\text{diff}} = 0.06, p = .04$), showing that visual and text misinformation also increased the likelihood of perceiving the celebrity as transgender in the Wendy Williams condition. The overall ANOVA for this condition was significant, $F(2, 664) = 4.57, p = .01, \eta^2 = .01$.

In contrast, for the Heather Gay condition, misinformation did not have as pronounced an effect on perceptions. For instance, the comparison between no misinformation and text-only misinformation was not significant ($M_{\text{diff}} = 0.02, p = .76$), suggesting little to no difference in the likelihood of perceiving the celebrity as transgender between these two misinformation types. However, text and visual misinformation showed a small, non-significant difference compared to no misinformation ($M_{\text{diff}} = 0.02, p = .59$), suggesting a potential trend where visual misinformation may have slightly *reduced* the likelihood of perceiving the celebrity as transgender. The overall ANOVA for this condition was not significant, $F(2, 664) = 0.64, p = .43$.

Overall, the post-hoc comparisons revealed that misinformation had a greater impact on perceptions of transgender status when the celebrity was a person of color (Wendy Williams) compared to a white celebrity (Heather Gay), highlighting the intersection between race and misinformation. This suggests that the race of the celebrity moderated the effect of misinformation, with misinformation having a stronger influ-

ence on the likelihood of perceiving the celebrity as transgender in the person of color condition.

DISCUSSION

Consistent with Hypothesis 1, participants exposed to Elite Gender Inversion (EGI) misinformation exhibited a significant shift in their attitudes toward transgender individuals and policies related to transgender inclusion. The results of the ANOVA revealed substantial differences in the change scores in attitudes towards both transgender men and transgender women, with notable shifts in attitudes toward transgender men being more pronounced than those toward transgender women. This discrepancy may be particularly relevant when considering the literature on how visual and text-based misinformation can alter perceptions of gender (Tucker et al., 2018). The heightened sensitivity toward transgender men may reflect a deeper confusion or lack of familiarity in distinguishing between transgender men and women, a point further supported by the fact that all participants were shown images of cisgender women, which complicates the interpretation of results. In line with previous studies, groups exposed to both visual and text-based misinformation exhibited the greatest shift in attitudes, confirming the powerful role of visual misinformation in altering perceptions (Steinfeld 2023).

While there were no significant differences between the impacts of visual and text-based misinformation, both types still produced measurable shifts compared to the control group, which received no misinformation. This suggests that the medium, whether visual or textual, may not significantly alter the nature of the misinformation's impact but that its presence alone is sufficient to influence participants' perceptions. These findings are consistent with the broader body of misinformation research, which highlights that both visual and textual misinformation can contribute to cognitive shifts, particularly in the context of gender identity (Ecker et al. 2022). Although the lack of significant difference between the two misinformation types suggests that both influence certainty similarly, the overall effect of misinformation, regardless of form, underscores the broader societal issue of misinformation surrounding gender identities.

Hypothesis 2 predicted that participants exposed to EGI misinformation with visual elements would experience larger shifts in their confidence regarding gender identification compared to those exposed to text-only misinformation or no misinformation. The results supported this hypothesis, revealing that participants exposed to visual misinformation (Group C) exhibited a significant shift in their confidence in determining gender, particularly when compared to the control group (Group A). Interestingly, while text-only misinformation (Group B) showed some influence on confidence, the difference between Group B and the other groups was not significant, suggesting that the visual component of misinformation played a more substantial role in shaping participants' certainty about gender identification. These findings highlight the unique influence of visual misinformation on gender perception, reinforcing previous research that suggests images and visual cues are particularly potent in shaping individuals' beliefs, especially in contexts related to gender identification.

Hypothesis 3 posited that EGI misinformation would increase the likelihood

of participants believing the celebrity shown was transgender, with this effect being stronger when visual elements were present. While the results did not support the hypothesis in terms of a significant increase in the likelihood of perceiving the celebrity as transgender based on misinformation, several other factors played a significant role. Specifically, pervasive ambiguity about gender, a measure of participants' uncertainty about changing gender norms, was positively correlated with the likelihood of believing the celebrity was transgender. Political affiliation also emerged as a key factor, with Democrats less likely to believe the celebrity was transgender compared to Republicans. These findings suggest that, while EGI misinformation itself did not significantly alter perceptions of gender identity, individual differences, such as political views and societal uncertainty about gender, significantly shaped how participants interpreted the misinformation. This underscores the need to consider individual predispositions when examining the effects of misinformation on gender identity perceptions.

Hypothesis 4, which predicted that the effect of EGI misinformation on participants' perceptions of whether a celebrity was transgender would vary based on the race of the celebrity, was supported by the results. Specifically, the interaction between the race of the celebrity and the type of misinformation was significant for both text-based misinformation and text plus visual misinformation. This indicates that the likelihood of perceiving the celebrity as transgender varied depending on both the celebrity's race and the type of misinformation presented. These results align with the literature on identity propaganda (Reddi, Kuo, and Kreiss 2023), which suggests that misinformation often works by amplifying pre-existing stereotypes and biases, particularly around marginalized groups. In this case, the misinformation around transgender identity was shaped by racial stereotypes and contributed to reinforcing harmful narratives about people of color.

The findings from this study provide compelling evidence that Elite Gender Inversion (EGI) misinformation has a disproportionate impact on perceptions of transgender identity, with race playing a significant role in shaping these perceptions. As anticipated, exposure to EGI misinformation led participants to make increased assumptions about a celebrity's gender identity, with significant effects seen when the celebrity was a person of color, specifically Wendy Williams. This suggests that misinformation about gender identity is not only shaped by the content itself (whether visual or textual) but also by the racialized nature of the subject being targeted, aligning with the literature on identity propaganda. As argued by Kuo and Marwick (2021), misinformation often extends and amplifies existing prejudices and power dynamics, particularly in marginalized communities. In this case, misinformation about transgender identities in people of color taps into pre-existing racial stereotypes, reinforcing harmful biases and racialized perceptions of gender.

The interaction between race and misinformation effects found in this study contributes to our understanding of how racialized gender stereotypes shape perceptions, a theme that has been central to critical disinformation studies. Previous research has highlighted that the perceptions of people of color are often distorted through racial stereotypes, with misinformation serving as a tool for reinforcing these stereotypes (Freelon et al., 2022). For example, participants exposed to images of Wendy Williams, a Black celebrity, were more likely to perceive her as transgender when

exposed to misinformation, especially when visual elements were included. This result underscores the power of visual misinformation in re-disciplining public perceptions, which has been noted in other studies exploring the intersection of race, gender, and visual representation (Zhang et al. 2023). The visual elements of misinformation appear to be particularly potent in reinforcing racialized understandings of gender, making individuals more prone to believing that celebrities from marginalized racial backgrounds may be transgender based on their physical appearance.

Interestingly, for the white celebrity condition (Heather Gay), the effect of misinformation was less pronounced, particularly with text-only misinformation. However, visual misinformation still significantly altered participants' perceptions, suggesting that the combination of visual and textual misinformation is particularly effective in shifting gender perceptions, even when race is less salient. However, the lesser impact of text-only misinformation in the Heather Gay condition may suggest that, in the case of white celebrities, visual cues play a more crucial role in influencing perceptions, potentially due to dominant norms around beauty and gender presentation. These findings are consistent with identity propaganda theories, which argue that misinformation works by tapping into deep-seated societal anxieties and biases, particularly about gender and race. As Pearce et al. (2020a) and Lepore et al. (2022) note, misinformation campaigns frequently target marginalized groups to reinforce hegemonic narratives around gender, particularly those based on binary understandings of sex and gender.

The interaction of race and gender within the context of EGI misinformation raises important questions about how this imagery, even if created about cisgendered celebrities, can perpetuate harmful stereotypes, especially when misinformation about transgender identity is amplified. In addressing misinformation that disproportionately affects marginalized populations, it is crucial to consider the dynamics of race and gender. As the digital landscape continues to evolve, especially in the context of social media and viral content, future research should continue to explore how visual misinformation interacts with racial and gender stereotypes to perpetuate harm, particularly for transgender individuals of color. Addressing these challenges requires a broader understanding of how misinformation works to reinforce pre-existing stereotypes and how this can be mitigated through better education, regulation, and awareness surrounding visual misinformation.

While the current study provides significant contributions to the field, there are several limitations that offer opportunities for future research. One key limitation is the methodological approach used to capture the effects of visual misinformation. Future studies could benefit from employing longitudinal designs to examine the long-term effects of exposure to EGI misinformation on attitudes and beliefs over time. Such designs would allow researchers to better understand the cumulative impact of repeated exposure to misinformation and how it shapes perceptions over extended periods, providing a more comprehensive view of its social implications.

Additionally, expanding the study to include lesser-known celebrities or individuals with comparable levels of fame would deepen our understanding of how familiarity with the subject influences perceptions. Given that the celebrity's familiarity can act as a potential moderator in the perception of gender identity and misinformation, exploring less mainstream figures would offer a more nuanced perspective on the

role of fame and recognizability in shaping attitudes. Furthermore, the study focused primarily on images and text-based misinformation, yet EGI misinformation also extends into other formats, such as video content. Given the increasing prominence of multimedia platforms like YouTube and Reddit, incorporating video content in future research would provide a more comprehensive understanding of how different types of content—including multimedia formats—contribute to shifts in attitudes and perceptions regarding gender and transgender identity (Freelon et al. 2022).

Another limitation is the narrow focus of this study on misinformation about celebrities, which may not necessarily generalize to real-world interactions with transgender individuals in everyday settings. Future studies could explore how misinformation about transgender identity influences interpersonal relationships and social dynamics beyond the media sphere. Examining how misinformation intersects with real-world gender performance, stereotypes, and interpersonal interactions would provide important insights into the broader social consequences of misinformation.

As the visibility of transgender individuals continues to rise, so too does the complexity of the disinformation campaigns that target them. This study has made an important contribution to our understanding of the role of visual misinformation in shaping attitudes toward marginalized populations. Moving forward, it is essential to address the confluence of race, gender, and misinformation, particularly as disinformation campaigns evolve across digital platforms. Given the increasing pervasiveness of misinformation and its potential to influence both public attitudes and policy outcomes, continued research is needed to assess the long-term effects of misinformation on societal norms, political discourse, and policy decisions related to transgender rights and gender equity. Misinformation doesn't just mislead. It affirms the belief that you can, and should, be able to "always tell." And that misinformed belief carries real consequences.

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