



# The SAGE Encyclopedia of Trans Studies

## Online Communities

Contributors: **Author:** Oliver L. Haimson  
**Edited by:** Abbie E. Goldberg & Genny Beemyn  
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An online community is a group of people with shared identities or interests who use social technologies to connect and interact with each other. Since the early days of the Internet, online communities have been particularly important means for trans people to connect with similar others, explore identity, share resources, document transition, and work toward activism and advocacy. Some of these communities are for trans people broadly, while others focus on particular trans identities (e.g., trans women, nonbinary people, trans men) or particular identity facets or experiences that intersect with trans identities (e.g., race, disability status, age). Early Internet trans online communities involved high levels of anonymity, which enabled people to safely explore trans identities online. However, when many trans communities moved to social media sites, a new set of challenges emerged related to connections to one's physical world persona, disclosure difficulties, convergence of multiple audiences, and difficulties of moderation and maintaining community boundaries. Future trans online communities would benefit from design processes that include trans people and communities, as well as technology designs that center trans experiences.

### **The Importance of Trans Communities Online**

Trans people frequently seek, form, and participate in communities online, which enable them to connect with other trans people, explore their trans identity, share resources, document transition, and pursue activist goals. These spaces take many forms, such as social media sites (e.g., Instagram, Tumblr, Facebook groups, Twitter), online forums (e.g., subreddits, message boards), chat servers and apps (e.g., Discord, WhatsApp), and other types of social technology. Unlike in-person support groups or physical trans-focused events, online communities enable social connection without having to leave one's home, which can be particularly important for those trans people who do not feel safe or comfortable in the physical world. Online spaces give people more freedom to express identity however they would like, regardless of transition status and whether their physical appearance matches their online persona.

### **Types of Trans Online Communities**

Trans online communities form around many different topics, identities, and experiences related to trans lives. Because trans people each have other salient identity facets in addition to their trans identity, many trans online communities also focus on these and provide space to connect with others who have similar intersecting identities. For example, trans online communities include communities for trans people of color, nonbinary trans people, trans women, trans men, trans people with disabilities, trans people in particular age groups, people undergoing particular types of trans medical procedures or surgeries, trans people with particular health issues, trans people in particular careers, and trans people facing additional specific issues that require support. Trans online communities also sometimes focus on trans activism and community organizing, not only involving trans rights but also issues of racial justice, police accountability, youth activism, and specific advocacy issues (e.g., raising support for trans woman of color CeCe McDonald, who was accused of murder).

### **Trans Communities on the Early Internet**

The early Internet provided many opportunities for trans people to form online communities. In the early 1990s, trans online communities formed in text-based online virtual worlds and chat forums such as MUDs (multiuser dungeons), MOOs (object-oriented MUDs), and bulletin board systems (BBSs). Some prominent examples include LambdaMOO (which was for the broader LGBTQIA+ community but included trans community members) and the Usenet community alt.transgendered. However, some trans online communities on the early Internet experienced substantial censorship, leading many trans Internet users to instead create their own homepages and build community around this collection of websites.

Anonymity was an important aspect of the early Internet and is widely regarded as an important mechanism for identity exploration. Much research has focused on "gender swapping" on the early Internet, in which people presented as genders other than their "actual" gender in text-based online communities. While gender swapping was thought to be primarily practiced by cisgender (cis) people, this practice opened up

opportunities for trans people, as well as those who may not yet have known they were trans, to experience what it would be like to present online using a different gender. Text-based online communities, both those that were specifically trans focused (e.g., alt.transgendered) and those that were not, provided a mixture of social connection and anonymity that facilitated trans identity exploration online.

### **Trans Communities on Social Media**

The advent of social media presented a substantial shift in how online communities formed and how people were able to present identity online. These fundamental changes in how the Internet operated created many challenges for trans individuals and communities. While earlier social media sites like MySpace allowed users to express their identity however they would like, the rise of Facebook in the late 2000s verged substantially away from the norms of the early Internet by requiring “real names” that were associated with one’s physical world identity. Having online identity linked with one’s physical world identity created new challenges for trans people, including disclosing trans identity to one’s network, changing one’s online identity when one’s gender changes, and managing multiple discordant audiences in one online space. Additionally, trans communities on social media are frequent targets of online harassment, causing new difficulties in enforcing community boundaries and conducting content moderation.

Despite these challenges, social media emerged as important means for building trans online communities and thus for trans people to find support and resources related to trans identity. Large trans communities emerged on sites like Tumblr, Instagram, Reddit, and even Facebook (via Facebook groups). What constitutes a “community,” and how walls are constructed between these communities, differs substantially between different sites. On Tumblr, Instagram, and Twitter, there are no formal boundaries between communities; instead, people use tags/hashtags to signal their affinity to a particular online community and then follow, message, and interact with similar others to build social connections with that community. This lack of formal boundaries means that the community’s walls are permeable; any person can choose to use a tag/hashtag and often uses them to harass or troll community members. On Reddit, community boundaries are more defined via separate online communities called “subreddits” that focus on particular topics, such as “Transition timelines,” a space for trans people to document and share visual transition progress. Subreddits are often public, meaning that the community walls are permeable by outsiders, and thus they require substantial moderation to reduce online harassment and trolling. Facebook groups, focusing on trans experiences broadly (e.g., “The Facebook Transgender Alliance”) or particular subsets of the trans community (e.g., “Trans Men Over 40,” groups particularly for trans people of color), are a unique form of trans online community. Because these groups are on Facebook, according to Facebook’s rules, group members must use their “real” name and identity to join the group, although many Facebook users break Facebook’s terms of service and create separate profiles to use for trans-related content. Facebook groups often have high levels of privacy, being designated as “closed” or “secret” groups and requiring prospective members to answer validation questions before being approved for membership. Finally, increasingly, trans online communities form on Discord, an online text/voice chat server that was initially intended for gamers. These communities resemble early Internet communities in some ways: They are text-heavy and allow anonymity and pseudonymity. Discord servers are often linked to particular subreddits, to allow a group chat-based form of social connection not available on Reddit. Importantly, Discord servers have barriers in a way that many online communities do not, requiring verification and sometimes an invitation from a current member. Nevertheless, these communities must still be heavily moderated by community moderators to maintain safety. Discord’s features are conducive to trans online community building and identity exploration.

Tumblr was for many years an important online space for trans communities. However, in December 2018, the site changed its policies substantially and began to ban all “adult” content. Tumblr’s adult content classification techniques were notoriously messy and ended up banning much trans content that was not actually explicit. In addition, in trans contexts, a lot of adult content is considered medical, educational, or otherwise important for trans community building. After these policy changes, trans communities seemed to be in need of new platforms to congregate. Preliminary research suggests that many have chosen Discord to fill some of the gaps left by Tumblr’s policy changes.

## Trans Online Communities Moving Forward

Moving forward, it is clear that trans people will continue to use information and communication technologies like social media and other online spaces to form communities. Technology-mediated connection is invaluable for trans people to connect with similar others when they are exploring identity, gathering resources, documenting transition, and contributing to activism. Yet it is less clear the extent to which trans online communities will form in dominant sites designed primarily for cis users (e.g., Facebook, Twitter, or future similar sites) or whether trans communities will create their own online technologies and online spaces designed especially by, with, and for trans people. One such example is Trans Time, a social media site currently in beta testing, which was designed specifically for trans people to build community and document transition. Trans people and communities have unique needs, such as the ability for online identity to change over time as one's gender changes (often accompanied by appearance, name, and network changes) and the ability to present multiple identities online simultaneously (e.g., to separate one's audience based on whom one has and has not disclosed their trans identity). Additionally, trans online communities need tailored community-based content moderation that does not unnecessarily ban content or users but that quickly reacts to harassment and trolling. Future technology design must take trans people and communities seriously, as well as involve trans individuals and communities in design processes, to design the trans online communities of the future.

Oliver L. Haimson

See also [Activism](#); [Communication](#); [Community Building](#); [Social Media](#)

### Further Readings

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