

Online Inspiration and Exploration for Identity Reinvention

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ABSTRACT

Self-representation online can be difficult for those who are in life transitions that involve exploring new identity facets and changes in personal style. Many desire to tailor their online representations for different audiences. Social media site profiles and sharing settings offer varying levels of anonymity, privacy, and thus safety, but these settings are often opaque and poorly understood. To understand the complex relationship between identity, personal style and online self-representation, we examine how people explore and experiment with new styles in public and in private online settings during gender transition. We present the results of interviews with transgender people who have recently reinvented their personal style, or are planning to do so in the near future. We find that people explore new styles in online settings to craft possible or ideal future selves. When involving others, people engage intimate and unknown others, but often avoid weak ties. Our results indicate that to account for changing identities, social media sites must be designed to support finding inspiration and advice from strangers and style experimentation with close friends.

Author Keywords

Online identity; social curation sites; social networking sites; identity transitions; transgender; LGBTQ.

ACM Classification Keywords

H.5.3. Information interfaces and presentation (*e.g.*, HCI): Group and Organization Interfaces: Collaborative computing, Web-based interaction.

INTRODUCTION

Online self-representation is highly dependent on perceived audience [3, 30]. An online space's social composition (*i.e.*, the mix of people from different social categories, including friends, acquaintances, strangers, only the user, *etc.*) affects how many and what types of risks a person is willing to take when exploring dimensions of self and identity. Social networking sites' affordances, such as privacy, disclosure settings, level of anonymity allowed, *etc.*, not only shape the

way people behave on these sites [2], but impact online self-representation during identity changes [23].

Personal identity is constructed and communicated materially through clothing, accessories, and other personal style artifacts [11]. People wittingly or unwittingly craft or participate in "looks," projecting identity to an audience through self-expression [31]. Others interpret a person based on these looks, which are deemed reflective of explicit and intentional "signaling" choices [22, 32, 35], and develop assumptions about membership in particular social roles and categories, including gender [31]. Fashion items are, thus, a "technology for managing identity" [27:105]. They are used to strategically signal role and identity stability (*e.g.*, "signature items" that are cherished and repeatedly worn) or change (*e.g.*, wearing more expensive items to reflect an income change). In McCracken's words, "clothing can also be used to mark and even to effect the *transition from one cultural category to another*" [31:60, italics are ours] as a result of significant life experiences and/or changing life contexts [9, 13]. Of course, changing one's identity is more complex and involved than just wearing a new outfit, a type of identity management that may be superficial, temporary, and ad hoc [22]. Progressive identity changes that challenge social norms involve a commitment to ongoing change through experimentation and exploration, and can be fraught with anxiety as well as excitement [15, 33].

Our research sought to understand how people craft new personal styles in times of identity change, how style changes and identity changes are intertwined and inform each other, and how such changes are represented online. We elected to focus on a group of individuals who deviate from assumed "everyday" occurrences or theoretical norms, which can reveal deep insights about practices overall [38]. In this paper, we detail the experiences of a group of transgender individuals who have recently changed, or plan to change in the near future, their gender and personal style. Transgender people specifically were chosen as the focus of this study because of the constant, active, dynamic negotiations that this group faces around personal style. Particular challenges arise as transgender people explore their personal identities and in the process confront entrenched cultural views regarding the binary nature of sex and gender (male/female; man/woman), assumed stability of gender from birth, and cultural norms of style and signaling.

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We address the role of online resources for inspiration and experimentation, and the navigation of online social spaces where exploration and experimentation of new styles may be intentionally or unintentionally shared with others. Broadly, we are interested in elucidating the complex and dynamic relationship between style and online identity. Although gender identity is much more complex than clothing and appearance, we intentionally narrowed our focus to style as one important facet of identity reinvention.

Specifically, we ask: How do people find inspiration for an emerging personal style during times of deep personal change? How do they envision and craft possible/ideal selves? With whom and how do they communicate their ideal selves? How do they socially manage iterative changes that challenge assumptions about gender and style? How do online services and other tools help and hinder this process?

We find that uncertainty around identity, social roles, and category membership can lead to playful and meaningful, but also occasionally stressful, engagement with available resources for inspiration. We also find that when identity is shifting, highly faceted, and/or highly situated, clothing and accessory choices are more consciously maneuvered and can be more challenging. Items become symbolically laden with questions of whether they are or are not representative and communicative of past, current, future, or ideal self and identity. Further, people engage in collaborative, social ways of discovering inspiration for emerging selves and crafting possible/ideal selves during identity changes, both online and offline. When involving others, such processes require substantial emotional labor [25] and constant consideration of privacy, safety, and intimacy, whether online or offline. Importantly, we find that sociality around personal style changes includes close friends and anonymous strangers, but not acquaintances or weak ties as typically found in networks on social networking sites like Facebook and Twitter [10].

In the following sections, we provide background and then describe results from ethnographically-inspired interviews focused on transgender people in online spaces. This work provides important insight into the ways that people find inspiration and interact with others online when crafting selves during identity changes. We intentionally give voice to a diverse group of people, whose experiences are often lumped together under the label “transgender,” by articulating their differences as well as commonalities.

BACKGROUND

Our work contributes to HCI and CSCW literature on faceted and changing identities [3, 9, 13], gender identity and social media [e.g., 23], and social curation sites [17, 21, 28, 39], as well as transgender studies and queer theory [5, 24, 34, 36]. Researching the experiences of transgender people as they find inspiration and engage in experimentation online allows us to better understand the differences between sociality in different online venues. This work also highlights how online identity exploration leads to formation of future selves not only for transgender people, but for those undergoing a variety of

identity changes (e.g., transition from college to a professional career, moving to a different geographical location). This work also applies to non-binary transgender people and others who experiment with personal style, seek style inspiration online, and work toward possible/ideal future selves.

Changing and Faceted Identities

Identity and image matter, and managing complex identities can be difficult. Many life changes and circumstances bring about changing or multifaceted identities. People inhabit different social roles, defined by different responsibilities, activities, and products [13, 18]. As such, people craft selves in ambiguous, complicated ways as different social roles take precedence and proscribe a person from simply being one singular “themselves” [26]. Instead, identities are “multiple, fraught with tension and contradiction, and asserted in specific performative contexts” [26:306]. Although gender change certainly exemplifies the complexities of identity, it is not only transgender people who must negotiate complex identities. Past research has focused on shifting and faceted identities of teenagers [3], and those transitioning from college to work [9].

Transgender Identities

Transgender is a term that refers to “people who move away from the gender they were assigned at birth, people who cross over (trans-) the boundaries constructed by their culture to define and contain that gender” [34:1]. That said, some suggest transgender is complex and perhaps misleading as an identity category, because many who are described by the definition above do not self-identify as transgender [36]. Most importantly though, a person’s relationship to their gender is what matters here, not necessarily physical characteristics or changes. Our sample includes nine people who identify as transgender: eight people who transitioned from one gender to another, and one self-identified “polygender” person who plans to transition to female in the future. Following [23], we use “trans” for the remainder of this paper to refer to the broad transgender population.

Gender norms are culturally constructed, and these ideals regulate and constrain everyone, trans or not, as they express gender along with other aspects of identity [5]. However, trans people face additional challenges, as they must adapt to living as a gender different from their gender assigned at birth, which they have spent many years being culturally mandated to perform. The risk of failing to “pass,” and uncertainty around how others recognize one’s gender, leads to further marginalization and stigmatization [19]. In such gender “failures,” others may assume that trans people are merely “performing” a gender, implying a lack of authenticity [5]. Instead, trans people express gender identity, as we all do, through gender performativity, Butler’s notion that gender identity arises through a process of iteration and reconstruction of cultural gender norms [5]. Butler’s concepts allow us to express the differences between participants’ experimental or provisional selves, which are recognized and experienced as gender performance, and asserted gender identities, which reveal gender as performative [5]. Much of the vulnerability

| | Pseudonym | | | | | | | | |
|---------------------------------|--------------|--------------------------|-------------------------------------|---------------|------------------|----------|--------------|-------------------|---------------------|
| | Marcus | Alex | Kieran | Donna | Jasmine | Lydia | Amelia | Elisha | Shallie |
| Gender | Male | Male | Male | Female | Female | Female | Female | Female | Poly-gender |
| Race/Ethnicity | White | African American / White | Pacific Islander / African American | White | Hispanic / White | White | White | Hispanic / Latino | White |
| Age | 28 | 17 | 17 | 30 | 23 | 44 | 23 | 22 | 25 |
| Full-time status* | FT | FT | FT | FT | FT | FT | PT | FT | NT |
| Length of time living full-time | 2 months | 2 years | not disclosed | not disclosed | 3 years | 2 months | N/A | 5 months | N/A |
| U.S. Region | Mid-Atlantic | California | California | California | West | South | West | South | New England |
| Residential setting | Small city | Small city | Small city | Large city | College town | Suburb | College town | Large city | Small city / suburb |

*Full-time status categories include FT (Living full-time in a gender different from their birth sex), PT (Living part-time in a gender different from their birth sex), and NT (Not yet living in a gender different from their birth sex). Categories modified from [20].

Table 1. Personal Characteristics of Participants.

and anxiety expressed by participants results from a lived / true identity (performative) being read by others as a mere performance that lacks authenticity [24].

Gender transition, like many identity changes, is an iterative, non-linear process that has no prescribed beginning and end. Identity exploration is exciting and can be fraught with personal styles explored and discarded potentially at a rapid rate. During and after gender change, gender identity presentation is managed using what Garfinkel calls “management devices,” a constant string of strategies, improvisations, and learning-as-one-goes-along that enable performing a new gender [16]. We find that many of these management devices are learned online. Since online identity carries different expectations around authenticity, certain online contexts may afford a degree of reprieve from stigma.

Because personal style, gender, and identity are so closely entwined, style and fashion, and even the daily act of wearing clothing, can be especially complicated for trans people. Cultural norms around gender and gender identity [5] are inscribed into products and “reinforce existing cultural assumptions” [7:54], which makes consumption and dress difficult for those with complex or changing gender identities. Media and products “embody messages about who we can be,” and because such products are implicitly gendered, “who we can be,” *i.e.*, our ideal self, also must be decidedly gendered and dependent on cultural assumptions [7:52]. The gendered nature of products and cultural norms around gender constrain gender expression and serve as an important backdrop for this work.

METHODS

We conducted in-depth interviews with nine participants representing a diverse subset of the trans population (see Table 1). Participants were recruited via several methods: in person at the 2014 San Francisco Trans March ($N = 3$), trans-focused Facebook groups ($N = 2$) and reddit forums ($N = 2$), and

through the first author’s personal network ($N = 1$). We recruited people who expressed they had reinvented their personal style during gender transition, were currently doing so, or planned to in the near future. We interviewed both transmen and transwomen, but in the later stages of our research focused more on recruitment of transwomen after discovering that style tends to change more drastically when moving from male to female than vice versa. We also skewed toward seeking out participants who were just beginning or had not yet begun their transition. This way, participants would be presently engaged in seeking inspiration for a current style reinvention, rather than recalling a transformation that occurred in the past. Each participant received a \$50 Visa gift card as compensation for their time.

Prior to interviews, we built rapport and trust with participants via email exchanges and/or in-person meetings. Interviews were semi-structured and conversational to allow themes to emerge that were most important to participants and that they were comfortable sharing. Thus, topics discussed varied to some extent among participants. General areas covered in all interviews were identity and personal style, style influences, and use of social media for style inspiration with an emphasis on social curation sites². Interviews were conducted in July and August 2014 and lasted on average 72 minutes ($SD = 15$, range: 41-86). Interviews were conducted in the format desired by / feasible for each participant, and included video chat ($N = 4$), phone ($N = 2$), in-person ($N = 2$), and instant message text chat ($N = 1$). All non-text interviews were either audio or video recorded and transcribed. Interviews included two interviewers, one of whom took detailed notes throughout.

² A social curation site is a type of social media site that allows users to curate content collections and interact socially with other users through traditional social media interactions (*e.g.*, liking, commenting, following, sharing) [21].

Following each interview, the researchers present conducted a debrief session in which we identified insights and possible emerging themes. Debriefs were audio-recorded and transcribed for later analysis. We engaged in data triangulation by following up on social media materials that participants recommended. The first author kept detailed memos throughout the interview process to document emerging insights and themes.

Interviews transcripts were analyzed primarily using a grounded theory approach of inductive open coding [8]. This inductive approach was used along with a deductive analysis of *a priori* themes, namely the use of social media and social curation sites for style inspiration, as found in previous literature [17, 28]. We met weekly throughout the analysis process to discuss themes that surfaced from the data. We then collaboratively organized codes into larger themes including inspiration, experimentation, and formation of possible/ideal selves. We reread all debriefing sessions and memos and determined that they were in line with the themes that had emerged from the interview data. Interview data was then revisited and organized according to the dominant themes.

RESULTS

Reinvention practices included formulating possible/ideal selves, seeking inspiration and understanding, curating items for possible/ideal selves, and engaging in active experimentation and exploration. These practices may occur sequentially, but more often happen concurrently and iteratively. In what follows we describe participants' experiences with style reinvention practices in a variety of online settings, and how their narratives demonstrate the ways that online sociality is situated and contextual. Importantly, style reinvention also happened in offline contexts in tandem with the online experiences we describe here. While a full description of offline practices is beyond the scope of this paper, we interweave some anecdotes to highlight the relationship between online and offline identity reinvention and the inability of truly separating the two. We begin by asking: *How do people craft possible/ideal selves?*

Possible/Ideal Selves

An important part of making any identity change is imagining the future self that may be possible. For example, Alex half-jokingly described his future self: *"I'm gonna hit that dad phase, and I'm gonna like build decks and wear nothing but Hawaiian shirts."* Similarly, Amelia described her desire to wear more revealing clothing after her body changes: *"I would wear clothing that's considered more stylish. I can't wear it now because it's more revealing than I can do."*

However, some versions of an imagined future self are not possible, and thus fall under the category of "ideal selves." The feasibility of an imagined future self depends on the existence and obstinacy of barriers, which may be practical (e.g., lack of access to healthcare or finances), psychological (e.g., fear, anxiety), and/or social (e.g., social pressure to dress in accordance with age or social role). For those early in the transition process, practical barriers sometimes made ideal

selves feel impossible. Shallie, for instance, experienced financial difficulty receiving the therapy necessary to move forward with their transition: *"Main thing I want to start doing is getting into therapy and that should probably be starting sometime early next year, once I rearrange my insurance plan."* At the beginning of her transition, Jasmine experienced psychological barriers to embodying her ideal self. The most difficult part of changing her style was *"realizing that I had permission to do it."* Lydia, on the other hand, experienced social barriers to her ideal self. She described her strong desire to dress in goth or fetish attire, but felt it was not *"appropriate for someone my age that was well known to people."*

Regardless of whether or not a future self was considered out of reach, all participants imagined or actively curated collections of items online representing possible or ideal selves. Such curation entails seeking inspiration, browsing and exploration, and active experimentation. All participants were actively engaged in seeking out inspiration and resources online, and all discussed the role of others, both intimate and unknown, in this process. In the next section we discuss this in detail, asking the question: *Where and how do people find inspiration and resources for style during identity changes?*

Finding inspiration

Online resources and spaces such as social curation sites, social networking sites, forums, and support groups act as places of inspiration during identity transitions [39]. Importantly, reported online interactions with others were often anonymous. Participants privately browsed content, followed unknown inspirational others, and anonymously sought advice or other resources on online forums and support groups. We demonstrate how such resources are used in concert and in practice, and how each are navigated and managed in the identity transition process.

Online search, though not inherently social, is an important way to privately find style inspiration and resources for new personal styles, as well as a space for experimentation. For example, Elisha was unsure about what would be appropriate to wear to a restaurant described to her as being "dresy casual," leading to a Google search: *"I actually, I searched 'dresy casual' on Google. You know, it's the simplest way to get things done, it seems."* Similarly, Shallie used Google search to find items or outfits for their transition: *"A lot of it just comes from Google Images. Just like, 'Okay. XYZ outfit. Boop, you get stuff.'" Online search is both a way to find inspiration and a lightweight way to experiment with new personal styles.*

Social media, including social curation sites, social networking sites, and other online social content sources were an important source of inspiration for emerging personal styles. Many participants described using social curation sites to find ideas for personal style.

"I browse Pinterest for ideas sometimes... When I look at the pictures I often find myself thinking, 'Oh wow! I would have never thought those would look so nice together'" – Amelia

“Once I discovered the Internet years ago, ... I really started to look for fashion inspiration. And nowadays, a lot of what I find are on Pinterest, which is a huge outlet for fashion right now, looking through that and comparing looks to things I already own to try and figure out what I can piece together.” – Lydia

Several participants found information and style inspiration from feeds showing content from people that they “followed” on sites like Tumblr and YouTube.

“And then I’ll look at it and I found... a set of black nails. I think it was on Tumblr and they were matte black with shiny black French tips. And I was like, ‘I finally found something that I like.’” – Jasmine

“There are people that I follow on YouTube that I get some good ideas from regarding trans issues, transitioning, stuff like that.” – Shallie

Shallie elaborated on the ways that YouTube in particular was an important source of inspiration, because of its highly visual nature, the access to inspiration from other trans people rather than the broader population, and because the format made it feel like the people from whom they sought advice and inspiration spoke *directly* to them.

“The people who do it well do create that sort of intimate personal relationship with their subscribers. Instead of going, ‘Hello everyone,’ they sort of go, ‘Hello you,’ and it feels a lot more friendly that way... Video I think is probably the best way to do it, ‘cause we’re very much a visual species. Being able to see things in addition to... as well as hear them makes things a lot more palatable.” – Shallie

In this way, anonymous yet personalized online interactions fill an information-need gap when style advice and inspiration from friends is unavailable and/or perceived as socially risky.

Although many items discovered are fun and/or symbolic of the ideal self in development, for many items found online, additional discussion needs to take place. One example is clothing. Most clothing is inherently gendered; gender identity is asserted simply through the act of wearing certain accessories or items of clothing. Because trans bodies often do not conform to standard masculine and feminine clothing sizes and because bodies in transition can change rapidly and extensively, deeper exploration is pursued. Off-the-shelf, standard-size-conforming brands frequently do not fit [14]. Such discussions can be sensitive, and require either intimacy or anonymity. Our participants found anonymous forums like reddit ideal for crowdsourcing information and advice about clothing and makeup in order to find items for their new personal styles that also are likely to fit.

“I mean [reddit is] comfortable because it’s anonymous, tons of people. I guess it’s most helpful for sourcing resources for tiny bodies particularly for menswear, or a lot of times it’s hard to find men’s pants styles that will actually fit... You can crowdsource those kinds of questions instead of just having to do trial and error everywhere. So that’s been helpful. I’ve tried

a couple of things online that I probably wouldn’t have known about otherwise.” – Marcus

“That’s a major source of information for me. I subscribe to all of the subreddits related to transgender topics. I’ve gone on the makeup subreddits as well as the fashion advice.” – Amelia

Others employed crowdsourcing within trans-specific online support groups on sites like Facebook and Tumblr, which for some offered a sense of home and belonging.

“I use Tumblr a lot. It’s a blogging website. And it’s got a really, really big LGBT community. It’s like a home, you know? I’ll go there, and I’ll look for... well now, I’m at the point in my transition where I can spread tips and information and helpful advice, the kind of stuff that I would’ve wanted when I was 12 years old and thinking I was a freak.” – Alex

“There are a few different Facebook groups that I’m a part of that I’ll be like, ‘Oh, what’s a stylish flat?’ ... or, ‘What type... Who makes good bras for people with wide chests, but small tits?’ and stuff like that.” – Donna

Our participants were clear about drawing inspiration from others in offline contexts, as well as from online sources. Strangers in public were an important source of inspiration, as Amelia described: *“When I look for ideas of what to wear, I generally think of the women I saw outside that day that wore things I liked.”* Retail store clerks were another important source of inspiration for participants, providing information about how to wear and size women’s clothing. Close friends helped participants by taking them shopping, answering questions and giving advice about particular types of clothing and accessories and places to shop, and offering support. Family was also an important source of style inspiration. However, because many participants did not have supportive families, they instead silently observed family members to learn about style. Kieran learned much of his masculine dress style from his cousins and brother, without making them aware that he was gathering inspiration from them. While participants may not have felt comfortable seeking inspiration from acquaintances, strangers in public and retail clerks offered the anonymity that made such gathering of information possible, while close friends and family members’ intimacy and proximity did the same.

Gathering inspiration and advice from online sources allowed participants to better imagine their possible or ideal future selves, and understand how they might become that person. We next examine another important step in the “becoming” process by asking: *How do people curate items for possible/ideal selves?*

Curating Items for Possible / Ideal Selves

Much of the search, exploration, or advice-seeking behavior described above resulted in ideas for possible and ideal future selves. As part of this exploration process, people created curated collections of things that struck them as interesting, useful, and/or potentially representative of their future self.

Content Curation on Social Curation Sites

Collages and other visual collections of images have long been an important practice for self-reflection. Previous research showed that people used personal websites as digital collages, particularly during major life changes, often constructing multiple websites to represent incompatible identities [32].

For many participants, social curation sites were a fundamental space for *crafting* possible or ideal selves through the curation of items found through inspiration searches and explorations. Specifically, the websites used by our participants for social curation of personal style items include Pinterest, Polyvore, Etsy, and Wantworthy. Such sites allow for search but also discovery. Items collected on social curation sites are “visual reminders of the ideal self,” which help people to learn about themselves, motivate change, and make “unfamiliar activities seem achievable” [28:2418-2419].

Participants in our study illustrated social curation sites’ importance during identity changes. Items can be selected for inspiration without limits of money, fit, or geography, allowing for representation of an ideal self that may not necessarily be feasible [32]. These are not shopping lists; they are social identity waypoints in a space of exploration.

“So yeah I have my own boards, there’s a style one, it’s just an easy way to... ‘inspiration board’ sounds kind of corny, but it’s just an easy way to remember ideas or remember styles or remember oh, that way too expensive pair of shoes that I kind of lust after.” – Marcus

“Or whatever I find on Pinterest, I’m like, ‘I really like that. I will definitely, eventually, purchase or make something like that,’ and then I never do. But it’s nice to have just in case.” – Jasmine

Participants often faced financial barriers to obtaining the items that they imagined their future self would wear, leading them to curate collections of items that they loved but may never buy. As Marcus explains, *“Yeah, I totally put idealized things on there even if they’re inconceivably expensive or inaccessible or whatever.”*

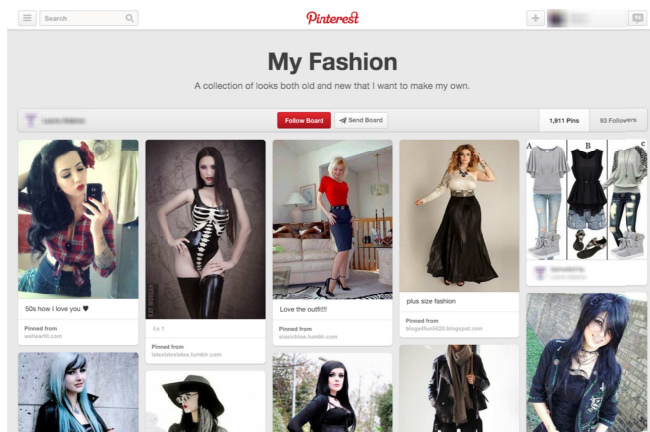


Figure 1. Lydia’s Pinterest board of “looks both old and new that I want to make my own” (used with permission).

Many participants stated that they curated collections of items that they felt would make them stand out too much to incorporate into their current wardrobe, or just simply would not look good. Curating such items online allowed participants to enjoy a creative space to play with such styles, which was not always feasible offline. Jasmine described curating a board of colorful items that she loved but knew would not look good on her. For instance, one dress made her think, *“I would love to wear this dress in yellow, but that makes me look like I have jaundice.”* Several other participants described liking brightly-colored or showy items, but feeling that they would draw too much attention to themselves if they wore such items. Similarly, Lydia curated a board including items that were not only too expensive, but she felt were too “over-the-top” to wear in her day-to-day life (see Figure 1). She stated, *“I may not have the funds or time to get all of the pieces on there, but you know, what I’ve shared with people and the looks that I’ve formed on there that I have yet to wear in real life all represent me, as diverse or over-the-top as some of them are.”*

Interestingly, several of our participants curated collections of clothing and accessories that they desired for possible or ideal selves, but did so mentally in their mind, *not* on social curation sites. Yet even these imaginings were influenced by social curation sites: mental collections often consisted of items found on social curation sites and were organized in a similar fashion. Elena explained, *“I should probably get around to making one, that way I can just keep things organized, but I usually just keep things in my head.”*

Amelia, an active Pinterest browser, also engaged in curation processes of items for an ideal or possible self, but stated that she did not feel knowledgeable enough about women’s fashion to curate her own board online. Instead, she kept a mental collection of items, despite being aware of the ability to curate private collections online. Mental curation, a desirable alternative to online curation for participants, made items more accessible and required less expertise, thus reducing barriers to crafting future selves.

Engaging Others in Social Curation

While much curation and exploration is conducted alone, many participants sought or would like to seek input from others. Although Jasmine and Donna were the only participants who had collaboratively used social curation sites, many others expressed desire to do so in the future, especially to share items with a small group of close friends. According to Alex, *“That’d be kinda rad. So like, a group of people on there? You’d have to add people into it? That’d be rad! Yeah!”*

Offline, close friends were an important source of inspiration, understanding, and experimentation for many participants. Close friendships gave participants the comfort and safety to explore emerging identities through clothing. Jasmine and Donna described close friends who were available for in-person advice and style ideation. Donna explains, *“Mostly I choose people in person that I am close friends with, and because I am such an open person ... it’s really easy for me to seek in-person advice about things from other people and I*

have a large community of people that are like me in part..." The comfort in intimate friendships allowed an open dialogue that was useful in curating items for future selves.

However, despite participants' desire to engage in similar experiences with close friends online, understanding how to share content among a small group of intimate others was not easy. Most were not aware that this functionality existed, which may explain why few had used social curation sites collaboratively. Others had difficulty using collaborative features. For instance, Donna described loving Etsy, but having difficulty using the site socially: *"I find their feature for sharing with your friends really confusing. I don't know. It's really random, and in general, their favorite lists and all that stuff, isn't really accessible. I'm having a hard time with it. But I'm friends with one of my trans lady friends on there, but I'm not sure that the way that they share what your friends are buying is really as helpful as it seems like it would be."*

Drawing from the closeness, comfort, and safety found in offline friendships during identity changes, it is important for social curation sites to enable shared and collaborative collections in an intuitive, easy-to-use manner. Our participants' experiences curating items for possible / ideal selves both online and mentally highlight the ways that social curation sites are an important space for crafting of self during identity transformations. The act of pulling together items allows people to more fully imagine future selves as possible, or if impossible, allows important identity work to take place.

We next examine the ways that our participants engage in active experimentation with and exploration of new styles. We ask, *In what settings and with whom do people experiment with emerging new styles and identities?*

Active Experimentation

Inspiration and understanding for new styles is important, but perhaps even more vital to new identity construction is the ability to experiment with those new styles. Identity change requires space in which to explore new possible selves, and much of this playful work is done online.

Anonymous online environments enable identity reinvention by allowing people to explore different identities [4, 32, 35], and are also important spaces for experimentation with new emerging styles. However, this identity work is more than "play"; it is serious, and can be used to aid transformation and identity reinvention in the real world [35]. Online technologies, such as avatars and anonymous forums, allow people to discover the differences between societal identity constructions and their own desires to construct and assemble identities [27]. Gender in particular is often explored and experimented with in online settings, such as virtual worlds [4] and online forums [15]. Identity reinvention, including reinvention of gender identity, can and does happen in online spaces.

In keeping with these findings, online spaces allowed participants to experiment with their new identities anonymously and privately through lightweight social interaction with strangers. Shallie, a gamer, engaged in online

experimentation with new style through female avatars in virtual worlds: *"It's a way for me to experiment playing, experimenting with being another sex... I always find opportunities to do something like that very rewarding."*

Most of participants' online sites of style and identity experimentation (e.g., reddit, Tumblr, blogs, forums, games, virtual worlds), with the notable exception of Facebook, allowed participants to remain anonymous, which led to the private and safe space necessary to embody new identities. In such anonymous spaces, one's imagined audience [30] consists of unknown others. Sites of experimentation allowed varying degrees of anonymity. For instance, when interacting in trans-specific groups on Facebook, participants used their name and personal profile. However, even these profiles were often anonymous in the sense that many were new or ancillary profiles and sometimes, as in Lydia's case, removed completely from one's pre-transition persona: *"About a year ago, as I was getting through therapy, and you know not hating myself, is when I started my Facebook page. I had no public identity, no online presence pre-transition."* Additionally, the majority of trans-specific groups on Facebook are private and are made up mostly of people whom are not part of one's Facebook friends list or network of intimate others. Thus, participation in Facebook groups is still somewhat anonymous, and can sometimes provide the privacy and safety needed for exploration.

Just as participants reported finding inspiration and understanding for style from observing unknown others, strangers in online and offline contexts are an important audience for experimentation during style reinvention. Unknown others offer anonymous and private observation or interaction that cannot occur when interacting with intimate others or acquaintances. This anonymity can allow important space for people to ask private or potentially embarrassing questions and/or to experiment without fear of recourse.

For instance, Lydia explored her new self in written form through a blog that was part of a website for her local trans support group. She expressed clearly how this was a process of developing comfort with her own "voice:" *"And I basically vented in a blog there for about a year until I felt comfortable enough, having processed a lot of stuff, and I have no idea if anyone ever looked at or read that thing. But it represented a safe place for me to explore in."*

Participants also engaged in complicated decisions regarding how to represent their iterative, emerging selves to networks on social networking sites. Elisha transitioned her Facebook profile picture gradually, as a way of carefully managing her online identity as her style changed: *"And then I changed my picture. And then a couple, about a month ago, I put a picture and that is overtly feminine of me. I was wearing a dress and flats. So I guess that was my second real coming out."*

Shallie, who maintained separate Facebook lists for family (whom were not aware of Shallie's trans identity) and friends, imagined a future time, post-transition, when faceted Facebook

lists would no longer be necessary: *“Well, honestly, if I’m out about that, there’s nothing really else that I need to hide... So I probably wouldn’t even need those privacy blocks anymore.”*

Offline, active style experimentation allowed participants to explore the materiality of their emerging identity and how items physically look and feel on the body, and to concretely embody possible future selves. While much offline style experimentation took place alone in private, public settings also provided an audience for participants to anonymously explore new styles. This led to positive anticipatory and actual experimentation for Jasmine, who made subtle changes to her wardrobe to publicly experiment with identity through personal style. Yet public spaces also engendered vulnerable, anxious feelings and invoked careful risk calculations; Elisha described *“shaking like a leaf”* the first time she went out wearing women’s jeans, and several participants spoke about fear for safety. The comfort and safety in relationships with intimate others allowed participants to understand through close observation, interaction, and mutual experimentation what it might be like to embody a new style. Many participants described a particular close friend or a small group of friends who experimented alongside them as they explored a new style. During the beginning of Marcus’s transition, a close friend was also exploring masculine style. They shopped together as a way of experimenting with masculine fashion: *“She and I sort of became tie buddies. We did a lot of scouring vintage shops and stuff for ties. I feel like we both sort of got into that together.”* When involving others in offline experimentation, like in online contexts, participants chose to involve unknown others in public settings, and intimate others such as friends and family, but not acquaintances.

In sum, during identity change, active experimentation allows people to try out new possible selves without commitment while carefully managing fears and anxieties about trans identities. Importantly, experimentation with new styles and identities allows people to embody possible future selves, thus building the bridge from inspiration to possibility. Presenting themselves as their new gender allowed participants to explore how it felt to be female, or be male, in different settings and for different audiences. Experimentation with intimate and unknown others helps people to become more comfortable in their new identity, opening them up to express this new identity among acquaintances or in public. The exploration process helped people to understand whom their ideal self is, and how that self may be possible. Clothing, accessories, and the physical artifacts of gender, along with one’s online presentation including those items, transforms a future self from an imagined, aspirational identity to a real, lived, material identity. Once a person makes that step, identity is no longer being experimented with: it is being asserted.

DISCUSSION

For participants in our study, online interactions were key to supporting exploration around shifting style identities. They found resources on a range of sites, including social media platforms and forums (e.g., Tumblr, reddit, YouTube) and

social curation sites (e.g., Pinterest, Etsy). But participants’ experiences highlight that the type of sociality desired when finding inspiration and engaging in experimentation during identity change is different than the sociality typically found in online social networking sites like Facebook and Twitter. On social networking sites, one’s network contains many acquaintances and loose ties [10]. Conversely, our participants found inspiration, understanding, and an audience for experimentation from close friends and from strangers, while avoiding experimentation under the gaze of acquaintances. Though one’s network on social networking sites certainly includes close friends and may also include strangers, it is the large body of loose ties that makes identity change uncomfortable. Close friendships allow the comfort and intimacy needed to ask private and potentially embarrassing questions and try out new looks that may expose vulnerabilities. Strangers allow the anonymity to explore these same types of questions and styles.

We show that the right mix of social, anonymous, and private inspiration and exploration allowed participants to craft new visions of possible or ideal future selves. These ideal selves have as much to do with online identity management as with style. Although most participants discussed management tactics for sharing with others, some expressed an ideal future when faceted sharing would no longer be necessary, such as Shallie’s expectation of merging their faceted Facebook lists in the future. Thus, an ideal self is not just a coveted body or a collection of clothing and accessories that convey a particular image. An ideal future self may also involve the expectation that faceted identities will one day coalesce to create a “true self” that is impeccably and easily managed online.

Yet such an ideal self for some includes either an erasure or a hiding of past ‘selves,’ while for others it is assumed that previous ‘selves’ will easily be incorporated into the ideal future self. This denies the social “face” and accountability work that caused our participants fear and anxiety. The work of managing multiple audiences in multiple temporalities that are constantly moving and changing is why participants avoided weak ties, whom, it was feared, may be critical, may require explanation work and/or may cause social complications. Such multifurcation results in an extreme form of impression management [18], where instead of a front stage and a back stage, there exist many stages with different-sized, shifting audiences and overlapping performance times.

Much has been written about the work of managing social information flows online (e.g., through privacy settings) [1, 23, 37], and many social media sites do make some affordances for faceted identities. However, the complexities of self-presentation online for those who must make a conscious effort to do the work of both exploring and projecting a fluid self *en route* to an ideal self is still not effectively designed for. Change management is not just personal; it is public, and involves constant reassessment and negotiation of self in relation to others. Tools to support changing identities on websites are currently nonexistent or clunky. As an example,

Facebook's "lists" allow people to limit posts to only certain audiences. These features have been shown to be challenging for users [23, 37], but in addition to this, they do not account for the temporality of posts. Just because someone is on one's "Close Friends" list today, does not mean that one would want that person to view certain posts that occurred in the past (e.g., pre-transition).

We have shown that online spaces such as social curation sites are great places to find inspiration for those who are reinventing their style as part of an identity change. To support style exploration, content sharing, and self-presentation online during identity changes, social media sites must design for the complexities of both social networks and human experiences.

DESIGN IMPLICATIONS

We highlight the disconnect between the potential of social curation sites to be an important social space during style reinvention, and the current capacity of these sites to support such interactions. Most participants did not use social curation sites in a social way, as they did with other social media sites, despite a desire to curate item collections with friends or strangers as part of their identity change.

Social interactions that include friends and strangers while excluding acquaintances, which we show that people desire during identity changes, is in line with the sociality that other researchers found common on social curation sites [6, 39]. For instance, Pinterest is driven by connections based on common interests, not on existing social connections [6, 39]. Although profiles are only sometimes anonymous, social curation sites do not pressure their users to present a true, authentic self the way that social networking sites like Facebook do [12, 23]. Because social interactions take place outside of one's core social network, and due to the lack of emphasis on static, authentic identity, social curation sites are an important place to reinvent style during identity transitions. Similar to virtual worlds as "identity workshops" where people can explore identities with little consequence [4], social curation sites can be spaces to explore identity and gender presentation through fashion.

Although the types of interactions and connections that happen on social curation sites are conducive to identity change, these sites are not designed to support such interactions. Pinterest, for instance, actively encourages users to "find your Facebook friends and follow them on Pinterest," assuming a uniformity between one's Facebook network and Pinterest network. Because social curation sites are important spaces for exploration and inspiration during identity change, we argue that such sites should design for users facing identity changes. To do so, designers must understand the important ways that networks on social curation sites are different than those on other social networking sites, and design specifically for the types of networks and interactions fundamental to social curation sites. We recommend several design improvements.

First, collaborative sharing, with ability to control privacy to share only with a specific group of people, should be at the

forefront when users create collections. Private, collaborative collections facilitate the sharing of sensitive information and style experimentation that emerges during identity transitions. Although different social curation sites currently exhibit different levels of ease of collaboration and privacy controls, important omissions remain in each. Lack of features for collaboration and privacy hinder users' ability to find inspiration for and experiment with new personal styles, thus limiting social curation sites' use as spaces for identity change.

Next, although it is not appropriate to import entire friends lists from sites like Facebook and Twitter into social curation sites, interfacing with particular communities on other social media sites may be a powerful way to support identity changes. A collaborative Pinterest board, for example, viewable and editable only by those who are part of a particular trans support group on Facebook, would be an innovative way for group members to collect visual and concrete examples of items recommended from one person to another. Many sites employ algorithms that make recommendations based on shared interests, but few allow people to recommend items to each other based on shared experiences.

Finally, in order to further support individuals during identity changes, social curation sites could implement highly personalized, social ways to share items. Participants found much value in YouTube as a place to find resources, not only because of the visual engagement of videos, but because the platform allows people to speak directly to each other in a personal manner. Collections of items on social curation sites are another visual way of sharing with others, but social curation site interfaces often lack the personal touch that gives the impression of one person talking *directly* to another person, rather than to an audience. Whether by embedding videos or allowing for text chat, social curation sites should make sharing personal.

CONCLUSION

This research explores the practices in which people engage when embarking on style reinvention during gender transition and the social contexts and networks in which these practices happen. We show that people engage in collaborative, social ways of discovering inspiration and crafting selves during identity changes. However, the sociality around style and identity reinvention involves close friends and anonymous strangers, but *not* acquaintances and weak ties as typically found in online social networks. Much work has focused on single site analyses. By focusing on the personal practices of participants we offer an analysis that shows how varied online tools and resources (e.g., online search, social media sites, etc.) are used in concert. Future research could expand on a number of our findings and provocations. For instance, a longitudinal study of people's online and offline behavior as they change identity would provide a deeper understanding of online self-presentation and the role of online spaces and networks in identity change. Additionally, future research should further examine the barriers to representing marginal identities online,

especially in light of Facebook's recent efforts to enforce the use of "real names" on user profiles [29].

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