Abstract:

This paper challenges the idea that social media is diminishing community, and suggests that it instead helps to create and maintain community, particularly among transgender people. Cannon et al. (2017) found that transgender people largely find their safe communities online, and that they are often lacking a sense of community and connection in their day-to-day lives. Jackson et al. (2018) found that transgender women on Twitter have created a safe community online through the use of the #GirlsLikeUs hashtag, where they are able to express themselves freely and provide each other with support. Furthermore, Hawkins and Haimson (2018) explored Tumblr as a platform for the development of online transgender communities, and found that many transgender people use Tumblr to access information and resources which they cannot find in their offline lives. These online communities are also examples of social media as a third place, providing an escape from the challenges of their home and work lives. Social media can be an important tool in creating communities, and the transgender community is an excellent example of how it manages to do so. This paper seeks to demonstrate that the changes to the concept of community brought about by social media are not destructive, and are often beneficial to community creation and maintenance.

#Transgender #SocialMedia #VirtualCommunities #MarginalisedCommunities #Twitter #Tumblr

The concept of community is interpreted in various ways by various schools of thought, but the unifying basis of these different interpretations is the idea that community concerns belonging and sharing among humans (Delanty, 2018). It is a vital way in which people make sense of the social world, and relates to the human search for solidarity, meaning, recognition, and collective identities (Delanty, 2018). The idea that the rise of social media has contributed to a diminishing of community is one shared by many people nostalgic for older, more traditional manifestations of community (Hampton & Wellman, 2018). What they fail to understand is that change does not equate to loss. The structure of community has indeed changed as a result of technological shifts, but these changes have not been a force of destruction for the human experience of community (Hampton & Wellman, 2018). On the contrary, these shifts have created greater opportunities for community engagement, and this is even more true in the case of marginalised subsections of society. Specifically, social media has provided transgender people with a greater opportunity to be a part of supportive communities, which exemplifies the way in which the internet creates, rather than diminishes, community. This paper addresses the nature of the changing concept of community, how virtual communities provide transgender people with a greater sense of community than ever before, and what this expression of community looks like in online transgender spaces.

The proposition that the internet is a force of community destruction is a response and reaction to the ways in which notions of community have changed since the rise of

social media. People who embrace this school of thought claim that social media is "pulling people away from spending quality, in-person time with their friends, neighbours, and relatives" (Hampton & Wellman, 2018, p. 646). To limit the definition of community to in-person relationships is to ignore important ways in which people are connected for the exchange of support and information (Hampton, 2016). Furthermore, to suggest that social media diminishes community is to also ignore the ways in which social media has allowed for greater connection and persistence of relationships between people. In the past, in order to maintain community connections and stay in touch with people, significant time and resources were required (Hampton, 2016). With the invention of social media, persistence of connection is made far easier by allowing person-to-network, rather than person-to-person contact (Hampton, 2016). An example of person-to-network communication is an individual posting a status on their social media profile, thus allowing their network of online contacts to consume the information they have posted, and create further opportunities for mutual communication via commenting or liking the status (Hampton, 2016). Additionally, once a connection is made on a social media website, social ties have a greater potential of enduring through the use of this type of person-to-network communication (Hampton, 2016). Community can also now persist over space and physical separation- moving, graduating, changing jobs, having children- all used to result in loss of social ties, but said ties can now be maintained (Hampton, 2016). All people can benefit from social media's contribution to community building, and the internet has not withered community, but rather reshaped the structure of it (Hampton & Wellman, 2018). Creating and maintaining community is made easier

through the functions of social media, and allows for communities to persist in ways that were formerly impossible.

　　While social media has largely improved upon and increased opportunities for community and connection among people as a whole, minority groups can often benefit from this improvement the most. By using social media to join virtual transgender communities, individuals who regularly experience a great sense of disconnection and isolation in their face-to-face encounters are provided with connection and community that they would otherwise lack. Cannon et al. (2017) state that transgender individuals often lack growth-fostering connections in their lives, which results in feelings of shame and fear. If we go back to pre-social media communities in the nineteenth century, we are looking at a world in which transgender people lacked positive connections in their lives to an even greater extent than today. Furthermore, the nature of those pre-social media communities meant that those densely knit networks supported a high level of conformity to similar beliefs, background and activities, with rigid hierarchies that governed what was and was not appropriate (Hampton & Wellman, 2018). This meant that a transgender person who existed prior to the introduction of social media would only exist within their local neighbourhood communities, which conformed to the dominant ideologies of "you are your assigned gender at birth no matter what" and "transgender people are wrong/do not exist." To live as that transgender person would then be extremely isolating, and the lack of social connection would be difficult to manage. That same transgender person living today, with social media available to them, may face a similar level of exclusion

and transphobia in their in-person communities, but will at least be able to find support and acceptance in their online communities.

In a study by Stone et al. (2019), it was found that upon discovering their authentic identitiy, most transgender people created new social media networks that affirmed their gender. Another study by Cannon et al. (2017) found that often when transgender people cultivated those new social media networks where authentic self-expression could take place, they would actively avoid connecting with in-person friends and family members on those accounts. Their in-person communities failed them, their authentic self was only expressed where these in-person connections could not see them, as their virtual community was their only safe and affirmative haven. This relates to a statement by Delanty (2018) that virtual communities are empowering, particularly to groups of people excluded from societal power through oppression. Where transgender people are disempowered in their day-to-day life as a result of transphobia, they can be empowered in their online communities. Without the constraints of place and distance, safe interactions can flow freely and allow them to find support all over the world, which in turn helps them to overcome the shame and fear they feel as a result of their in-person interactions (Hampton, 2016).

So what does a virtual community look like for a routinely disempowered minority group? Hampton (2016) highlights that social solidarity and cohesion are fundamental elements to a sense of community. In a study by Jackson et al. (2018, p. 1874), the "remarkable level of cohesion among those using the #GirlsLikeUs hashtag" is

noted. Furthermore, they found that transgender women using the #GirlsLikeUs hashtag and partaking in that particular online transgender community, used the platform in three main ways. First- to connect with each other (often expressing their everyday, mundane experiences), secondly- to advocate for transgender issues and rights, and lastly- to celebrate the accomplishments of transgender women (Jackson et al., 2018). Through the building of this community which transcends geographical distance, Twitter has become a place for transgender women to develop interpersonal relationships with other transgender women and find a place to simply exist as themselves- something that can be incredibly difficult to do offline (Jackson et al., 2018). The online gathering of these women is also an example of the use of social media as a third place. Oldenburg (1982, p. 269) explained third places as "existing outside the home and beyond the 'work lots' of modern economic production. They are places where people gather primarily to enjoy each other's company". Soukup (2006) expanded upon the idea of third places, stating that they provide benefits both to individuals and communities. At the individual level, the third place provides relief from work and home stressors, and enables a sense of belonging as a result of participating in the group's social activities (Soukup, 2006). At the community level, third places can strengthen community ties to one another and create interest in, and commitment to, local politics through public discourse (Soukkup, 2006). This concept of a third place can be seen in action among the transgender community on various social media websites, where they have created a third place to gather, escape from challenges faced in their home and work environments, and engage in discourse surrounding their unique experiences.

Another platform commonly used for the formation of transgender communities and third spaces is Tumblr, which has been described by transgender people as "a strong online community of care" (Hawkins & Haimson, 2018, p. 76). In their study, Hawkins and Haimson (2918) found that Tumblr was frequently described as a safe space for transgender people, most of whom did not have a physical community to experience support and discuss mental health issues related to their gender. There was a strong emphasis that Tumblr allowed transgender people to find important information that would be otherwise unavailable to them in their physical spaces (Hawkins & Haimson, 2018). Hardy (2019, p. 107) coined the term "queer information literacy" and defined it as "a process through which LGBTQ people find, recognize, share, and create information related to their sexual and gender identities." Websites such as Tumblr have contributed immensely to this literacy, allowing for LGBTQ people to share and spread important resources around the community. As Hawkins and Haimson (2018) highlighted, transgender individuals strongly emphasised the importance of their Tumblr communities in providing them with a means to access information related to transition that they could not obtain offline. Resource sharing is a key element of transgender virtual communities and makes it possible for people to get the information they need to transition safely and ultimately live a better life.

Though the structure of community has changed, it has not been diminished, and community can often prevail more effectively as a result of social media. Social media is a useful tool which provides marginalised communities with an easy way to create and maintain safe and empowering communities. Transgender people have a greater

opportunity to be a part of supportive communities through using social media, which

exemplifies the way in which the internet creates, rather than diminishes, community.

Through the use of websites such as Twitter and Tumblr, transgender people can connect

with each other to form supportive communities and share important information with

one another. While this community formation is advantageous for the transgender

community, it is also important to acknowledge the limitations of this paper. Further

research would be required to investigate the ways in which other intersections of identity

effect the experience of these online communities for transgender people. For example,

the difference in experience between a white transgender person and a transgender person

of colour, or the different experiences of transgender women, transgender men, and

nonbinary individuals. Community is an important part of the human experience and

social media's contribution to community creation impacts positively on the lives of

transgender individuals.

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