Who Counts As Trans?
A Critical Discourse Analysis of Tumblr Posts
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Introduction
The standard model of transgender identity is someone who is distressed about being “born in the wrong body”, but medically transitions to the opposite binary gender and integrates into mainstream society. In order to gain access to medical care, many trans patients present a hyper-binary self-narrative that emphasizes bodily distress and minimizes any uncertainty or gender nonconformity. Medical and community discourses coalesce into a normative model that is upheld as the only image of trans identity, thereby excluding those who do not fit the narrative.

The Theory: Transnormativity
Johnson terms this normative model transnormativity: “an ideology that structures trans identification, experience, and narratives into a reified or trans enough hierarchy that is heavily reliant on accountability to a medically based, heteronormative model” (2016, p. 467-468). These narratives are one way that trans people can make previously marginalized and unstable identities “legible and solidified through the interactional practice of narrative formation” (2016, p. 470). However, individuals who fail to conform to these transnormative medicalized narratives—such as non-binary and non-medically transitioning people—may have their claims to authenticity rejected by both medical providers and other transgender people, subjecting them to micro-aggressions, accusations of being “not trans enough”, and exclusion from community spaces (Hudson, 2017). This is precisely what has occurred on Tumblr.

Methodology
Why Tumblr?
• Tumblr is a social media site that uses a blog-style, follower-based format. Previous research has established that Tumblr serves as an important platform for LGBTQ+ community building, especially among transgender youth.
• Users are constantly coining new terms to describe sexual orientations and gender identities, and forging collective meanings.
• My research considers how online trans communities may re-inscribe transnormativity in addition to disrupting dominant discourses and ideologies.

Critical Discourse Analysis
• Using criterion-based purposive sampling, I selected 40 Tumblr text posts that referenced a definition or criteria for identifying as trans.
• I conducted a critical discourse analysis, using open inductive coding to identify the key content of each post and the rhetorical strategies employed. I then compared and analyzed the posts as a whole, considering how transnormativity and power structures are both reproduced and resisted on Tumblr.

Transmed
Truscum
• Transmedicalized or transmed, refers to the group's view of trans identity as a medical diagnosis.
• The term truscum is also used, combining true transsexual and scam. Originally coined as a derogatory term, the term has been reclaimed by some users.
• While dysphoria is often understood as intense bodily hatred, some users redefine the term to include more mild experiences of distress. This absorbs critiques and reinforces and legitimates transmed’s criteria of transness.

Anti-transmed
Tucute
• Anti-transmed users reject the medical model of transness and embrace one rooted in bodily autonomy and self-definition, including counting non-dysphoric and non-binary individuals as trans.
• The term tucute is also used, created from the phrase “too cute to be cis.”
• Transgender also sometimes appears in reference to tucute and anti-transmed people, suggesting that such individuals are actually cisgender people who are pretending to be trans to get attention.

Rhetorical Strategies
Polyphony and the dialogue post
• A significant number of posts are written as invented dialogues. In these posts, the author establishes several competing voices (such as History, Tucutes, or Psychiatrists) and stages an interaction between them in order to prove a point or create an effect. In these posts, both sides strategically exaggerate their opponents’ views in order to make them look ridiculous.

Personal experience as evidence
• Users position lived experience as a valuable source of data, often drawing upon their own experiences to illustrate a broader theory.

Medical discourses
• Interestingly, both transmeds and anti-transmeds use medical discourses to legitimate their claims, despite anti-transmeds claiming to be against the medicalization of trans identities.
• This suggests that medical discourses remain a structuring force in trans people’s lives, leading many trans folks to internalize medical models of transness.

Register, tone, typography
• Many users adopt a conversational tone, using tools such as all lowercase text, erratic punctuation, textspelling abbreviations, and fractured syntax. This style is popular on Tumblr and grants an author authenticity and therefore credibility.
• In general, the tone of transmed posts was more formal and declarative, while anti-transmed relied more on humour and playfulness.

Why does this matter?
This research affirms previous findings that Tumblr continues to be a site of individual and collective identity formation for trans people. However, my findings suggest that digital trans spaces are not always counter-hegemonic, and in fact, that they can also be home to intense debate, division, hostility, toxicity, and lateral violence. By analyzing how these processes of exclusion play out, we gain critical insight into how trans communities define the boundaries of their identities in a struggle for visibility, resources, and respect. Situating these findings in the larger history of LGBTQ+ battles over identity labels and definitions reveals how contested terminology can give way to community in-fighting and divisions. As transgender people are thrust into the media and academic spotlight—often leading to misrepresentations—this research challenges exclusionary models of trans identities and broadens conceptions of what transness looks like.

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