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What Does Anon Want of Me? De-idealizing Transgender Digital Media on 4chan's /lgbt/ Imageboard

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Popular narratives centered on online trans communities implicitly associate transgender digital networks with forwardness and social radicalism. This association has become idealized, or taken as theoretically granted, after the “transgender tipping point,” which causally associates trans people’s appearance in the media with progress. Extending communication and media studies’ critiques of trans media visibility, this essay attends to backwards attachments cultivated by trans subcultures on a notoriously harmful digital platform. Through an attachment genealogy of transgender identity categories on the imageboard 4chan, I argue that depressive, recalcitrant, and self-negating affects play a constitutive role in online trans identity construction. Trans people on 4chan deploy the platform’s ironic mode to identify within an array of deliberately confusing, insincere, and antagonistic genders. Adoption of these identities affords users legibility on the platform as they develop a sense of everydayness opposed to the drives for authenticity and legibility which typify mainstream platforms. These unredeemable yet constitutive affective attachments reflect transgender users’ habitual appearance within and resentment toward the Internet’s trans misogynistic visual culture. The heuristic of de-idealization promises to plumb rose-tinted attachments to the constitutive habits of queer and trans digital subcultures.

Key words: digital media; 4chan; transgender; irony; affect theory

There is something trans about new media. When the Internet mediated social life during the pandemic, Covid-19 was termed a “mass egg-cracking event without precedent in history” (Dodds, 2023). The narrative reflected in this quotation suggests that young people found their true selves in mediated solitude, documented their transitions on TikTok, and returned to school with new pronouns. Earlier, mommy-bloggers on web forums discussed the supposedly sudden identity crisis plaguing their daughters. They blamed the Internet for seducing kids with “gender ideology,” as if trans identity were a contagion passed through the open air of the Internet (Hsu, 2022).

Earlier still, *The Matrix* represented radical cyber-culture from the vista of its directors' trans womanhood. Somewhere in between, a popular joke shared within the trans community suggested that all the computer programmers became trans women (Kychenthal, 2022).

Across these glimpses of trans digital life and reaction thereto, the openness of the Internet is linked to the openness of trans identity. Similarly, communication and media studies examine trans digital subcultures as spaces of liberation. Much of this work documents creative ways that trans people appropriate digital technologies to explore identity and politically mobilize (Cavalcante, 2016; Ruberg, 2022; Steinbock, 2019). When trans people's online interactions produce negative outcomes for the community, such as surveillance, commercialization, or misrepresentation, the consequences are typically characterized as impositions upon the trans community coming from cisnormative institutions, redeeming the correlation between transness and forwardness. With few exceptions (see Barnett, 2015), rarely has the field attended to online antagonisms emerging from the trans community itself. As a result, the problematic habits of certain online trans networks remain under-studied. If the affinity between digital culture and trans life is holistic and not coincidental, then connections must exist between trans networks and the Internet as a space of recalcitrance, backwardness, and violence. Trans studies scholars evince more troublesome affinities between trans people and new media (Dame-Griff, 2023, pp. 146–175; Gill-Peterson, 2023; Snorton, 2017, pp. x–xiv). Communication scholars might de-idealize the reigning association of (trans) digitality with forwardness to attend more fully to disturbing affective economies which constitute digital culture.

I take up this task by performing an “attachment genealogy” (Amin, 2017, pp. 28–31) of trans identities on 4chan. An attachment genealogy sustains attention to

“backwards” relations, or troubling feelings which emerge from frictional encounter with narratives of progress, to feel out the slippages between historical queer figures and forward-thinking imaginations which stick to queerness and transness (Love, 2009). Importantly, backwardness and forwardness are not pegged to corresponding “pessimistic” or “optimistic” outcomes. Backwards feelings such as nostalgia, shame, and rage belie a wide range of political imaginaries. Backwards feelings are constitutive of transness, even though they go mis- and un-represented in order to present a palatable, redeemable idealization of trans identity (Stryker, 1994). To develop an appreciation of trans backwardness from a media studies perspective, this project reflects five years of “lurking,” or observation-as-participation, on 4chan’s Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender imageboard known as /lgbt/. Despite 4chan’s reputation as a crucible for hateful content, /lgbt/ sustains an active userbase of predominantly trans women who produce over 11,000 posts daily. /lgbt/ is a crucible for trans vernaculars which circulate beyond 4chan, making it surprisingly central to certain trans subcultures despite its reputation for both political and emotional backwardness (Waller, 2025).

I argue that /lgbt/ exemplifies the backwards attachments which constitute certain online trans subcultures against an idealized imagination of trans-as-forward. Rejecting sincerity as symptomatic of normative digital culture, /lgbt/ users habitually deploy the ironic mode as a tactic for everyday identity construction. Through this ironic engagement, /lgbt/ users embrace stubborn, disturbing, and auto-antagonistic representations of their genders. I term this pattern “oppositional everydayness,” naming how /lgbt/ users embrace, rather than reject, feelings of shame and loss to ground their “everyday” gender expressions (Cavalcante, 2018; Felski, 2000). Through oppositional everydayness, /lgbt/ users react against narratives of trans forwardness

which disregard and shun backward affects. In short, /lgbt/ users do not go online in search of a community to affirm their gender identities but rather oppose the idea that an implied auditor outside of the 4chan userbase should recognize or validate their gender. This flight is grounded in 4chan's brand; the platform positions itself in opposition to the social-media driven web marked by commodifiable, name-and-face authenticity. Across trans digital subcultures like /lgbt/, backward affects play just as important a role in the cultivation of trans digital identity as does the openness which typifies the lion's share of trans media studies.

My argument proceeds in four parts. First, I review the cultivation of trans media studies over the past decade before, through, and beyond the forward narrative of the transgender tipping point. Second, I introduce the method of attachment genealogy as an intervention within trans media studies. Third, I introduce the /lgbt/ imageboard and situate its challenge to the field. The final section dwells with ironic identities endemic to /lgbt/ to explore oppositional everydayness as a backward practice among trans online networks.

Trans Media Studies

Transgender media studies¹ investigates how transness is taken up in media and how trans people produce meaning through media habits. Tensions between the former and latter impulses reify contradictions between structure and agency which have animated debates across media and cultural studies (Billard & Zhang, 2022). Accordingly, the subfield emphasizes visibility and representation to unearth the means, motives, and effects of transgender media texts and technologies.

Much of this work is situated within, against, and in front of the "transgender tipping point" (Ciszek et al., 2023; Richardson & Smith, 2022; Zamantakis & Sumerau,

2019). Declared in *TIME* by Katy Steinmetz (2014) and iconized by actress Laverne Cox, the tipping point describes a wave of visibility headlined by trans celebrities. Enthusiasts prophesied that the spike in trans representation across film, television, and social media would produce a wave of sympathy and recognition for transgender people. The tipping point was preceded by nascent interest in transgender studies among scholars. Early communication research emphasized how trans folks strive for legibility: the “coming out” process, representation critique, and activist tactics (Spencer, 2015, pp. xiv–xv).

Critique of the “tipping point” opened communication studies to interrogate the assumption that achieving visibility in the media is a prerequisite for liberation. Inspired by Foucault’s (1995) warning that “visibility is a trap,” scholars took stock of the tipping point’s consequences: the invocation of anti-trans backlash politics (Fischer, 2019, p. 5) and the marginalization of trans people of color who cannot or do not want to appear as icons within white visual culture (Chen, 2019, pp. 1–4). The tipping point elevates the “transnormative subject” whose gender transgression is legible because it brings them closer to white, upwardly-mobile femininities and masculinities (Hatfield, 2023, p. 818). Trans media studies blooms in reaction to a visual regime that remains preoccupied with manufacturing safety for the most privileged (Gossett et al., 2017; Villegas Simón et al., 2024).

In contrast to the spectacular authenticity of trans television and film, scholars of trans digital media search for what Andre Cavalcante (2018, pp. 18–22), following Rita Felski (2000, pp. 77–98), termed “everydayness.” Everydayness names a sense of belonging through which one might pursue their “aspiration for the rhythms and affordances” of social life. Trans folks generate everydayness through blogging (Haimson et al., 2021), tagging (Dame, 2016a; Oakley, 2016), and production of

resources (Dame, 2016b). There is important debate in the field about whether the “rhythms” sought through trans everydayness are problematically normative. For example, research about online transition documentation on blogs and YouTube channels examines trans everydayness in flux, within and against the linear conceptions of time which define the tipping point (Barnett, 2015; Eckstein, 2018; Horak, 2014). Through everyday media habits, trans people establish alternative frames of temporality which often borrow from, and just as often try to work against, the reigning rhythms of commercial platforms and medical institutions. Trans everyday tactics converge on identity formation because the Internet is said to afford unprecedented freedom to explore gender, transcending boundaries which produce anti-trans backwardness amidst progress (Cavalcante, 2016).

Despite these productive debates, it is still tempting to assume that trans folks incline toward unifying rather than discordant attachment when seeking everydayness online. For example, O. L. Haimson et al. (2021) defined “trans technology,” using the queer-friendly microblogging platform Tumblr as an example, as a media apparatus through which users may express their transness through forward-oriented affordances: “temporality, openness, change, separation, realness, intersectionality, and erotics” (p. 346). Their definition presumes that trans communities aspire toward collective safety, comfort, and togetherness, and that identity explorations within zones of antagonistic encounters are less true, meaningful, or trans than those that occur in safe spaces. This notion mirrors Dame’s (2016a, pp. 25–26) characterization of trans communities as networked counterpublics that incline toward ontological security. Dame read discourse over identity tags (e.g. #trans vs. #transgender) as constitutive because participants contribute in order to better the community. But as every Tumblr veteran knows, these debates are not always so principled. What to make of users who antagonize out of

boredom, trolling, or enjoyment of aggressive debating? Or of those, like “truscum” (Jacobsen et al., 2022), who see inclusion as a threat to their trans identity? Models of trans digital life that presume our unicity and progressiveness make naught of the curiosities, vices, and antagonisms which digital media foreground (Chu, 2017).

These “backwards” attachments are more essential to online trans subcultures than we know. Trans digital subcultures often propagate intramural moral panics (Gill-Peterson, 2024), embrace depressive rather than anticipatory transition narratives (Awkward-Rich, 2017), and coalesce close to the centers of online reactionary networks (Gleeson, 2018). This omission has already influenced the field. Feminist media scholars have analyzed the prolific trans YouTuber Contrapoints, characterizing her body and aesthetic as an implicit argument against the alt-right (Maddox & Creech, 2021; Malone, 2022; Schlotterback, 2023). Like many other trans people, Contrapoints uses 4chan. Her performance cannot be divorced from her deployment of the platform’s ironic mode. Contrapoints appropriates the mores of reactionary digital networks in order to refute them, at least complicating the assessed forwardness of her content.

In sum, if we assume that trans Internet users are uniquely forward-thinking when compared to cisgender Internet users, we risk idealizing both the Internet and transness. The idea that transitions are optimally customized through digital habits reifies the consumerist promises of platforms and overlooks the uneven distribution of visibility (Cárdenas, 2017). The resulting vision of everydayness reflects only one way that trans people construct their everyday life, a forward-thinking relation to the uneven promises of digital life. Resultingly, we saddle the Internet with an illusion of immediacy: uninhibited progress, de-limited self-expression, and unproblematic drive toward the good life.

Attachment Genealogy

I turn to queer affect studies to re-ground media studies' apprehension of trans digital networks. Before the tipping point, queer studies wrestled with the same conflation of visibility, progress, and everydayness. "It gets better" resounded through hotlines, commercials, and social media to affirm everydayness against queer youth suicide (Saunders, 2011). The tipping point was also critiqued by scholars of affect, defined as precognitive transmissions of meaning which subtend and constituted consciousness. Like Sara Ahmed's (2023) "feminist killjoy," scholars questioned a "good life" which demands rejection of the negativities—rage, shame, damage, and failed connection—which have long constituted queer sociality.

I follow Heather Love (2009) in calling these negative attachments "backward" (pp. 1–30). Backwardness indexes the pain of negotiating identity within a hostile world. It is not a synonym for "reactionary," nor do backward attachments lend themselves to reaction more readily than the tipping point's colorblind positivity. In fact, overlooking the backward risks obviating queerness's challenge against the wholeness, self-possession, and recognizability of gender (Bersani, 2009). Rather than dismissing shame, resentment, nostalgia, and other negativities as "internalized oppression" or a relic of the past, Love urges us to trace backwardness as the contrapositive of progress, as a felt contradiction which forces us to confront the harsher realities of trans life which the tipping point would have us leave behind.

I trace online expressions of trans backwardness by adopting Kadji Amin's (2017) method of attachment genealogy, which asks, "What happens when culture fails the expectations with which theory approaches it?" (pp. 6–7, 14–24). Amin argued that theoretical abstractions that refer to marginalized communities, such as "queer theory," tend to impose an expectation of ideological and affective forwardness upon those

communities. He urged us to attend to the “backwards” remainders which persist within culture despite being forgotten and shunned within critical theory. In short, attachment genealogy excavates backward feelings which theory disavows in order to redeem queer and trans cultures. To trans media studies, I ask: What happens when trans digital networks fail to present as icons of progress, radical counterpublics, or uplifting habits for everydayness? If Haimson et al.’s (2021) typography of “trans technology” idealizes trans digital media, attachment genealogy excavates the closings, exclusions, intransigency, falsehoods, myopias, and scrupulosity which idealization forecloses. Sideline critique and redemption, sitting with backwardness lets us feel across the contradictory demand that trans people be simultaneously autonomous as well as exceptional in their opposition to or desire for normalcy (Bennett, 2010).

Attachment genealogy demands close attention to context in order to resist the urge to erase the messy features of queer/trans experiences which do not square with our theoretical hopes. It bears emphasizing that backward attachments do not necessarily belong to the past. 4chan’s trans identities are products of their own time and place as trans folks feeling backward meet the forward-thinking, networked ideology of imageboard culture. To appreciate this context and dwell within it, we must consider 4chan from the standpoint of its trans subjects.

Trans Technology on 4chan?

At first glance, 4chan’s affordances correspond with the “trans technology” typography. 4chan is an English-language forum established in 2003 and divided into topical imageboards. Users, “Anons” who are anonymous by default, start threads by posting an image, and threads refresh or are “bumped” to the top of the board when they invoke replies. Threads are deleted when they receive fewer replies than other threads, or when they reach the “bump limit” which means that they have received the maximum amount

of replies allowed by the platform. Each board is moderated by site admins and community members according to its own norms, including “yellow boards” which permit adult content such as gore and pornography. 4chan’s anonymity, rejection of profile-based authenticity, ephemerality, robust circulation of erotic content, and contextual content moderation facilitate fluid practices of identity construction (Knuttila, 2011).

Resisting platforms’ demands for legibility, 4chan users figure themselves prior to social media and “in opposition to the dominant culture of the surface web” (Tuters, 2019, pp. 40). 4chan users display oppositionality through anti-social habits. Infamous boards include “Politically Incorrect” or /pol/, a white nationalist haunt; /r9k/ or ROBOT9000, a birthplace of the misogynistic Incel (involuntary celibate) subculture; and /b/, the random board known for “trolling” campaigns in which users invoke and enjoy the rage of “normies,” a derogatory term for people who lack understanding of 4chan’s mores (Phillips, 2015). The homophobic slur “fag” functions as the site’s demonym (e.g. a “newfag” is a new user), while women are pressured to post timestamped pictures of their breasts. 4chan platform identity is regenerated by habitually reproducing racism, homophobia, and misogyny (DeCook & Kelly, 2021). 4chan users construct an oppositional everydayness through extreme offensiveness that is felt as alternative because it generates laughter-inducing anger from sincere auditors.

4chan experienced its own “tipping point” in lockstep with the wider culture. For its first ten years, 4chan’s only topically queer boards were categorized under genres of Japanese animated pornography. Pornographic representations deeply inform the site’s language for representing trans people. For example, the “trap” meme originated on 4chan, which characterizes trans identity as sexual entrapment. The “trap” is a caricature of a trans woman who lures a straight man into bed, then bamboozles him

by revealing her penis. Typical of 4chan's dominant discourse before the creation of the /lgbt/ board, the trap meme depicts trans women as a threat to masculine heterosexuality (DeCamp, 2023, pp. 74–75). However, in 2013, 4chan added /lgbt/, the first non-pornographic board by, for, and about the LGBTQ+ community (Alfonso, 2013). On this board, trans folks can articulate their own ideas of transness against the dominant stereotype on 4chan represented by the “trap” meme. Common topics of discussion include “passing threads” where users solicit advice for their appearance; threads debating political topics; and “general threads,” a staple 4chan form in which a thread is consistently repeated to invite habitual discussion over a core topic (such as /lesgen/—Lesbian General or /agpg/—Autogynephilia General). By 2017, users called the forum /tttt/, reflecting the trans majority. Informal community surveys conducted throughout my observation period report that between 50% and 80% of the userbase identifies as trans. These surveys are not scientific instruments; nevertheless, their results reflect /lgbt/'s symbolic importance because talking points generated on /lgbt/ circulate among trans people beyond 4chan.

/lgbt/ invited trans participants as subjects of discussion, not objects in circulation, growing into one of the fifteen most popular boards on the site. The board explicitly invites gay and trans people who already use 4chan; by extension, we know that many trans people were (and remain) participants on 4chan's most problematic boards. In the shadow of 4chan's notoriety, /lgbt/ calls trans people to position themselves against the forward-looking visibilities demanded by the social web. This dissident posture is confirmed by inhabiting /lgbt/, identifying with vernacular figments of gender, and disavowing progressive idealizations by attaching to and through backwards cybercultures.

Ironic Genders

4chan's culture of irony textures /lgbt/ as a site of trans oppositional everydayness.

Irony "directs readers... to a preferred or intended understanding of communication" against the text's most obvious interpretation (Glasser & Ettema, 1993, p. 323).

Narrowly defined as a figure of speech, ironic meaning is strictly incongruent with the text's denotation. A broader definition is necessary to apprehend mediated irony consumed by diverse audiences (Cloud, 2010). On the Internet, irony functions more like an attitude. When interfacing with ironic media, audiences are called to detach from literalism, reading skeptically and indeterminately.

Irony is the master trope of 4chan. Due to 4chan's ephemerality, language evolves rapidly, demanding constant attention to cultivate the proper attitude. Interaction between images, words, affordances, and norms generates "layers" of meaning that require community-based knowledge to decode. Proper performance of irony indexes the user's adequate possession of community-based knowledge. A user's performance is validated when their post inspires other users to reply, adding even more layers of ironic meaning to a thread and "bumping" it, or increasing its visibility on the platform. In contrast, interpreting a flippant post as sincere is equivalent to branding oneself a "newfag" who must "lurk moar" (observe before posting). Posts that display ignorance toward irony fail to earn replies, reveal the poster's ignorance of 4chan's backwards mores, and are deleted much more rapidly than successful posts. Collectively, 4chan's ironic subject functions like an implied auditor, gatekeeping the platform from improperly attached participants.

/lgbt/ users access everydayness through ironic performances of gender identity. These gender identities are ironic in two senses. First, they signal the user's detachment from the sincere sense of everydayness, typical of the social web, against which 4chan

identifies itself. Second, understanding these identities requires beholding them from the subject's standpoint, embracing backward attachments. For example, /lgbt/ users have devised a schema of gendered "modes." Modes describe gender presentations worn by trans women to facilitate everyday life by suppressing their liminal bodies in the midst of transition. A "boymoder" emphasizes her softer masculine features to pass as a young cisgender male, wearing a sports bra to flatten her breasts and hoodie to conceal long hair. Relatedly, a "manmoder" emphasizes masculine characteristics such as facial hair to disavow her transness aesthetically. Both boymoder and manmoder aspire to "girlmode" one day by living full-time as a woman, but in the meantime, they deny their ability to "pass" (to be seen as the proper gender) and temporarily choose boy/man-moding as a survival tactic.

Boymoders and manmoders embody an ironic detachment from the literal meaning of their transition, womanhood, in order to avoid misrecognition by audiences who remain attached to cisnormativity. Uncoincidentally, this articulation takes a form endemic to digital culture. Modes are a "software of perception" (Jenkins, 2013, p. 25) through which users interface with a sociotechnical system. As in a cellphone's "airplane mode," modes offer gestures of control over the system while prefiguring the specifications under each mode. By describing gender expression as mode, /lgbt/ users render their outward appearance an interface through which they control their recognizability as trans to observers. Through "Do I pass?" threads and advisory infographics, /lgbt/ offers users space to negotiate modality and optimize their performance. It is important to remember that, like all 4chan-mediated identities, modes are ironic in a specific sense. Namely, gender-moders do not regard modes as sincere representations of their innermost selves because 4chan rejects the idea that identity ought to be sincere. At the same time, moders often refuse the identity of "trans

woman” as being too aspirational, suggesting that gender-moding disrupts the immutability of transness in ways that conventional survival strategies do not. While a “passoid” (/lgbt/’s term for a trans woman who “passes” or appears to onlookers as a cis woman) might regard “boymoding” as merely skin-deep, boymoders themselves often reject the idea that the sincerest trans identity can only be found in one’s interior world. Modes reify the openness of digitality in a backwards tune, interfacing with identity in order to negate the forward-thinking drive contingently for authentic recognition as “the correct gender” which typifies the conventional take on trans everydayness.

Ironically, this scene of openness demands the same gendered scrutiny that “moding” tries to avoid. For example, a self-described boymoder might post a picture in the Boymoder General thread, /bmg/, to discern whether she appears boyish. If her selfie looks too masculine, she will be told that she is in the wrong thread. By fixing ideal aesthetic standards to gender-modes, participants invert the premise of contingently representing the “wrong” gender. Gendermoding ironically reinforces aesthetical archetypes (boy, man, girl) in order to “make clearly visible the web of individual, state, society, and culture involved in maintaining identities,” as Catherine Squires and Daniel Brouwer (2002, p. 287) wrote about passing. Gender-modes reify the same survival motivation which undergirds passing, but gender-moders blur the individual’s role in maintaining identities as they adopt an ironic disposition toward the sincerity of their individual trans identity and the authenticity of transness itself.

Similarly, moding replicates 4chan’s backward attachments to offensive humor. The boymoder is rendered as a meme: a pale-skinned anime figure with a brown bob and oversized hoodie (see Figure 1). Boymoder’s proximity to white womanhood reifies the masculinist social norms of imageboard culture (Fathallah, 2021). Corroborating this read, boymoder’s appearance is often announced through a text template: “What

would you do if you came across a boymoder that was [X], [Y], and just generally [Z]?”

For example, on New Year’s Day 2024, one anonymous poster wrote, “what would you do if you came across a boymoder that was drinking by herself, uncertain of what’s to come next year, found no real reason to celebrate, and was just generally spending new years alone [sic]” (Anonymous, 2024)? The accompanying picture shows the boymoder sleeping, surrounded by empty liquor bottles. Many repliers wrote that they are this boymoder, others offered the boymoder a hug, and two replies expressed a desire to rape the drunk boymoder. I found over 400 threads posted between 2021 and 2024 that follow this format. The hypothetical question invites /lgbt/ users to project how they might encounter the boymoder in a compromised or absurd position. Many original posts and replies feature suicide, murder, and molestation. Original posts are sometimes penned with such fantasies in mind, such as Figure 1 (Anonymous, 2022a): “what would you do if you came across a boymoder that was telling you no, stating plainly that she doesn’t want to have sex with you, and just generally rejecting your advances?”

Posts like these, which invite repliers’ rape fantasies, receive significantly more replies than innocent derivatives.

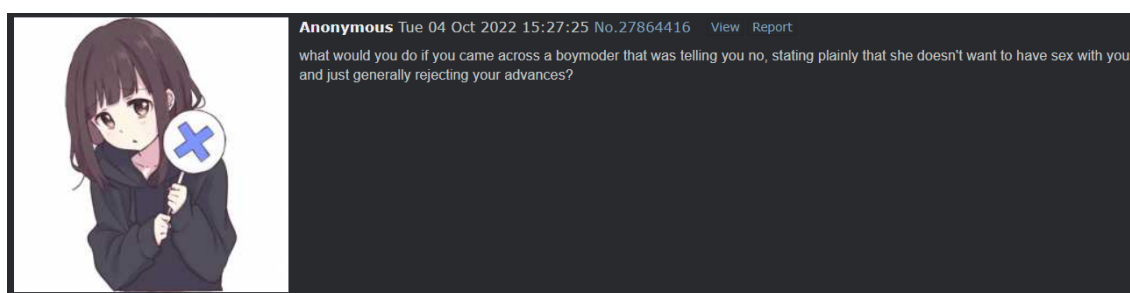


Figure 1: An example of “boymoderposting,” a meme format from /lgbt/. The post reads: “what would you do if you came across a boymoder that was telling you no, stating plainly that she doesn’t want to have sex with you, and just generally rejecting your advances?”²

Users attach to ironic genders because they proliferate scenes of violation against trans women—against oneself, from the purview of many users. The cartoon visualization of the boymoder enables her icon to be saved, iterated, and recirculated, conforming the subject position to the object status to which trans images are typically relegated on 4chan. Furthermore, her rendition as an anime character indexes sexualized depictions of trans women which predate /lgbt/ by way of the cynical aesthetic that developed on 2channel, 4chan’s Japanese predecessor (Fujioka & DeCook, 2021). Objectifying the boymoder enables /lgbt/ users to bond empathetically through collective self-denigration, breaking from the ethos of mutual validation endemic to conventional trans everydayness.

The concurrence is material, not just figural. Alexis Davin (2024) found that the “femboy,” a similar halfway identity between cis men and trans women, accrues disproportionate attention and capital among online subcultures. Like boymoders, femboys, like the live-streamer F1NN5TER, ironically dissociate from their self-identified gender (Frank, 2025). More importantly, they reject the attitude of sincerity by which audiences are called to validate another’s gender. The femboy’s status, to which the boymoder ironically aspires, is premised on her spectacularization within digital subcultures juxtaposed to sources of symbolic trans misogyny. These identities offer legible means to participate in reactionary networks while transitioning, enjoying the hypervisibility of transness without committing to the abject permanence of trans womanhood.

It would be simple to rest with a critique of the boymoder, but a comparison might help us feel backwards with those who find these modes appealing. Unlike the moders and femboys who dissimulate their transness, the “repper” represses their

transness. Short for “repressor,” the repper identifies with their struggle to overcome their desire to transition. The irony that animates the repper identity is its coming into being on a board dedicated to the trans community. Reppers often post longingly about their ideal transitions, mourn their “malefail” or inability to live as a cis man, and lament “it’s over” with respect to their prospects for everydayness. This resentfulness calcifies into an auto-antagonistic sense of everydayness.



Figure 2: A typical repper post. The post reads: “thinking about trannies who transitioned before 2010 make me feel like a failure t. old repper”

In contradistinction to televisual trans celebrity and trans authenticity on social media, /lgbt/ users deny the validity of their transitions and, by extension, the figment of a universal transition that every spectator understands. The repper in Figure 2 (Anonymous, 2022b) instructively locates their misery in the public appearance of other “trannies” (a slur used as a generic demonym on /lgbt/). Trans people who transitioned “before 2010,” before the tipping point, are represented by frolicking SpongeBob and Patrick, nostalgic television. Meanwhile, the repper appears as grumpy Squidward whose misery is caused by viewing SpongeBob through the “window,” analogous to the browser with which most users access 4chan or the screen through which users might view trans celebrity media. Read in dialogue, this post’s text and image hint toward the consequences of the tipping point as trans media establish ever-higher goalposts for everydayness, some of which are physically unachievable without going backwards in

time. Repper users attach resentfully to the tipping point by deriving misery from the appearance of its beneficiaries.

The repper gathers 4chan's habitual reaction to the figments of sincerity, authenticity, and progress which trans representation is said to proffer. In contrast to the social networking sites that dominate the field's apprehension of online trans life, 4chan offers few affordances with which users might mark their identity, leaving users to generate their own habits of profiling. If everyone is "Anonymous," nobody has a profile picture, and the only readily available demographic information is a user's IP address, 4chan appears as a radically-open terrain for identity construction as users must communicate their identity only through their posting habits. However, reppers read this "openness" as inauthentic, proliferating self-negative attachments which evade critical redemption. While they *could* use 4chan's frictionless interface as a "trans technology" to self-represent as anyone, reppers instead dwell in transgender shame, the backwards feeling exorcised by forward-thinking calls for queer and trans pride (Probyn, 2005). The repper's shame is arguably *the* essentially backward feeling, conjuring present memories of compulsory cis-heterosexuality (Stanley, 2018). Its prevalence on /lgbt/ complicates the notion that trans people use the Internet to escape the shame imposed upon us from without. Depressive affects are trans technologies, the stuff out of which flight from cisgender embodiment is desired (Amin, 2022; Awkward-Rich, 2017; Malatino, 2022).

Cognizant of their backwardness vis-à-vis the wider trans community, /lgbt/ users affectively clog the medium of transition. Genealogically examining /lgbt/'s favorite ironic gender, the autogynephile (see Figure 3), further equips us to handle the irredeemable intensities that Amanda K. Kennedy (2018) called upon media studies to take more seriously. Autogynephilia was coined by sexologist Ray Blanchard (1985).

His autogynephile/homosexual-transsexual (AGP/HSTS) taxonomy develops two “types” of “gender-disturbed males” as he called them, corresponding to the projected “cause” of “disturbance” so that they might be cured to pursue biomedical everydayness (pp.____). First, homosexual transsexuals (HSTS) are gay men, characterized by feminine (“boymoder”) appearance, who transition to access their ideal partners by becoming women. Second, autogynephiles (AGP) are straight men, characterized by their masculine (“manmoder”) appearance, who develop an “erotic target location error” which causes them to fetishize the idea of being female³ during intercourse. Blanchard’s scheme is scientifically invalid (Serano, 2020). Nevertheless, since 2016, the scheme has surged on /lgbt/ as a primary topic of discussion.

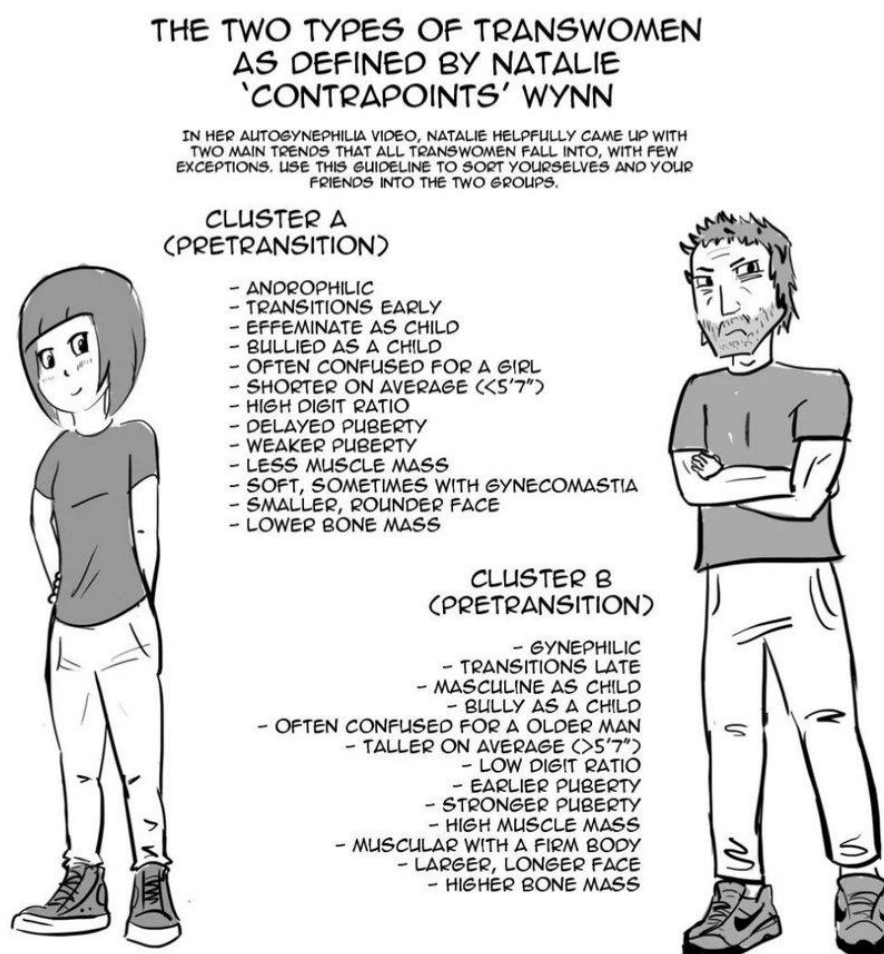


Figure 3: A popular rendition of Blanchard’s taxonomy, erroneously attributed to Contrapoints. Retrieved from a 4chan community archive (Anonymous, 2018).

Genealogical attention to the taxonomy elucidates why /lgbt/ users attach to a restrictive form of theorizing gender. A departure from the “critical habits of queer and trans theorization,” the taxonomy classifies by grouping attributes and assigning a typological relationship between them (Amin, 2023, p. 91). Taxonomy is central to sexology, as in Magnus Hirschfeld’s efforts to distinguish homosexuals, hermaphrodites, and transvestites (Gill-Peterson, 2018, pp. 59–68). Diagnosis is the primary purpose of the taxonomy, rendering it a “backwards” artifact of trans medicalization. Yet it also appears prominently in trans people’s efforts to conceive of their identity in relational terms. Some trans people repurpose taxonomies to reap the benefits of recognition while demonstrating the types’ incapacity to capture trans life (Dame, 2016a; Singer, 2015).

Blanchard’s taxonomy draws appeal from the “drift” of ableist, misogynistic, and racist attachments on 4chan (Hsu, 2022). Scholars of extremist media might recognize similarities between Incel beauty standards and the taxonomy’s hyper-specific corporeal schema (e.g. “high digit ratio” vs. “low digit ratio,” the sixth item on each scale, implying that the relative length of fingers determines AGP/HSTS status). Blanchard’s taxonomy is not connected to Inceldom, but its uptake on /lgbt/ was prefigured by 4chan’s scrupulous attachments to the sexed body. Through their “sexual economy” theory, Incels divine a man’s love life by measuring his skeletal features against “Chad,” an idealized, statuesque, Aryan figure (Held, 2023). Incels’ idealization of the male body is over-determined by racialized, ableist standards of desirability—not unlike the ideal figures of the tipping point. Likewise, the taxonomic form requires visualizing and describing an ideal for each type. Like the Incel sexual economy theory, the AGP/HSTS taxonomy hyper-fixates on secondary sex characteristics, particularly those expressed in bone structure and DNA which cannot be changed via hormone

replacement therapy, to ward off the indeterminacy of gender (Matheson, 2025). Although both Incels and AGP/HSTS theorists traffic in bioessentialism, a key difference is how communities channel backwards attachments to ideal figures. For Incels, comparison fuels backlash against women on whom the “sexual economy” is blamed. On /lgbt/, the same form of scrutiny also functions to generate attachment through antagonism, but the ensuing resentment is instead directed intramurally.

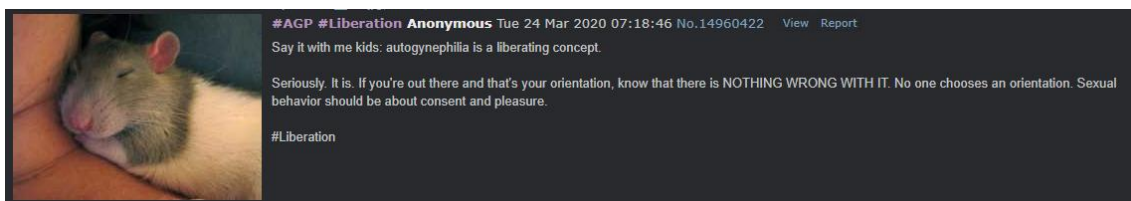


Figure 4: The first post of #AGP #Liberation, a March 2020 thread. The post reads: “Say it with me kids: autogynephilia is a liberating concept. Seriously. It is. If you’re out there and that’s your orientation, now that there is NOTHING WRONG WITH IT. No one chooses an orientation. Sexual behavior should be about consent and pleasure. #Liberation”

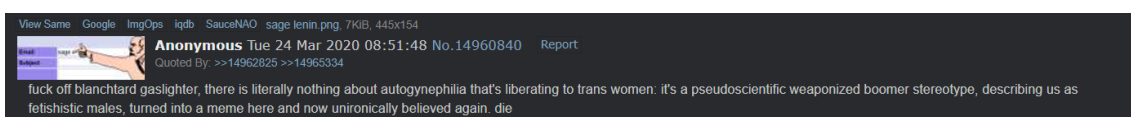


Figure 5: The first reply to Figure 4, a critique. The post reads: “fuck off blanchard gaslighter, there is literally nothing about autogynephilia that’s liberating to trans women. it’s a pseudoscientific weaponized boomer stereotype, describing us as fetishistic males, turned into a meme and now unironically believed again. die”

Some on /lgbt/ attach to autogynephilia as a “sexual orientation” defined by idealization as a woman. Ironically re-reading Blanchard, these users detach from the

invalidating denotation of the taxonomy. This March 2020 thread is exemplary. The original post (Figure 4) argues that AGP is a “liberating concept” because the name bequeaths legitimacy to the desires it indexes (Anonymous, 2020a). The language of liberation conjures feelings of forwardness and validity—a concept liberating insofar as it is recognizable, reifying the trans tipping point’s baggage. The first reply (Figure 5) refutes the claim, arguing that AGP misapprehends trans women as “fetishistic males” (Anonymous, 2020b). The displacement of “sexual orientation” by “fetish[istic]” is key. The former term, “sexual orientation,” implies directionality and agency beyond pathologization (Ahmed, 2006). In contrast, the term “fetish” conjures shame, deviance, and otherness. The discourse of the fetish was coined by European merchants to index the unrecognizable ways in which West African cultures assigned value to objects (Amin, 2017, pp. 76–109). What to West Africans was roughly “currency” was to European traders a “fetish.” When used to disparage, as in Figure 5, the discourse of the fetish conjures a “rhetoric of identification and disavowal that establishes conscious and unconscious value judgments connecting territorialized social things and embodied personal individuals within a series of singular historical fixations” (Pietz, 1985, p. 13–14). In other words, to characterize an identity as a fetish is to slander it as world-historically backwards, outside the fold of Western concepts of progress. If AGP is a fetish, it is utterly valueless and can be rejected so that the valid identity of trans woman is radically valuable. This displacement disparages AGP identity as both a “stereotype” and an abject sexual practice from which trans people ought to progress. Yet it does not land that dig without the critic claiming distance, leverage, and superiority by reifying a genealogy of racialization, mirroring the moralistic compulsion of the tipping point (Gossett et al., 2017).

The image chosen by the respondent (see Figure 6) elucidates how 4chan users mobilize the board's affordances to police attachments by denying visibility to overly sincere posts. When 4chan users want to reply to a post without "bumping" it, they can enter "sage" into the email or options field of a reply. Their reply will appear, but the reply will not cause the thread to appear higher on the board. The reply in Figure 6 shows a user advertising a sage, using a picture of Vladimir Lenin entering "sage." This interaction is rich with functional, social, and ironic meaning. When posters want to speak against a thread without "bumping" it, they may enter "sage in all fields" (represented in Figure 6 by the email field) and encourage other contributors to do the same. However, publicly advertising sage may result in a ban. Using an image to promote sage evades keyword-based moderation. More importantly, it marks the respondent as deeply encultured, a seniority status which lends credibility to their argument. By participating in the obscure means for undercutting a thread's visibility, the communist icon assigns progressive substance to sanitizing the board from AGP discourse, situating the identity as world-historically backward.



Figure 6: The image attached to Figure 5. Vladimir Lenin sages OP.

Autogynephilia substantiates /lgbt/'s sense of trans everydayness where insincere participation begets revelatory knowledge. It is widely accepted that AGP identity began as an ironic talking point before being taken seriously after habitual

uptake through “shitposting” or deliberately low-quality posts, a form of intramural trolling. Figure 5 displaces culpability onto /lgbt/ by characterizing AGP identity as a product of 4chan, “turned into a meme here and now unironically believed again.” My witness of AGP general threads corroborates this take. Users acknowledge but disregard the taxonomy’s origins in favor of attachments cultivated to AGP language on /lgbt/. A counterpoint takes AGP’s spuriousness as a given: “look, I frequent /agpg/ and i could give less of a shit over how real AGP is” (Anonymous, 2021b). By disconnecting the symbolic framework from Blanchard, AGP identity indexes users’ ironic attachments to 4chan and its visual culture. Figure 3 is exemplary when it cites the YouTuber and /lgbt/ user Contrapoints as the creator of Blanchard’s taxonomy. Displacing the transphobic sexologist, the citation of a progressive trans YouTuber uplifts AGP as validating. However, in the “Autogynephilia” video cited, Contrapoints (2018) does not “come up with the two main trends that all transwomen fall into,” but rather critiques Blanchard’s taxonomy and calls on trans folks to stop using it. One who falls for the disinformation confirms their outsider status, further attaching AGP to 4chan’s ironic auditor.

/lgbt/ users generate ontological security premised upon division rather than wholeness. These attachments are constitutive, not meaningless, despite their refusal of sincere meaning. For example, in August 2021, /lgbt/’s volunteer moderators began removing general threads for autogynephiles, boymodders, and manmodders. An anonymous moderator (2021a) explained, “We don’t need four different chatroom generals whose only difference is whether you’re a boymoder, manmodder, or simple image-based bulletin board-moder. These are all the same thing and belong in /mtfg/ [Male to Female General].” The mod implies that these identities are meaningless by comparing them to the default user defined by the medium. Deletions attempted to modernize the board by optimizing threads, reducing “shitposting,” and gathering the

irony-poisoned autogynephiles, boymodders, and manmodders into the valid identity of trans woman.

The mod erred in assuming that trans folks go online in search of validation or legibility, and that community formed through backward attachments is less meaningful than forward-looking counterparts. The fact that AGP is not understood by sincere observers is exactly why users attach to it, because 4chan's native grammar for conceiving of "everyday" identity is in contradistinction to the sincerity with which the platform associates mainstream social media. When /lgbt/ users adopt oppositional identities like gender-modes, repper, and AGP, they perform their opposition to the forward-thinking frames of legibility and sincerity by which they envision mainstream conceptions of trans womanhood vis-à-vis the mainstream Internet. Consequentially, /agpg/ interpreted deletion as transphobic hate. Users lamented the loss of the only place on the Internet which tolerates discussion of their identity, reacting with the same fervor that Dame (2016a, pp. 32–34) found within tagging discourse on Tumblr. The deleted general threads were restored and continue at the time of writing, signaling an emergent sense of oppositional everydayness opposed to the tipping-point normalcy represented by the identity of trans woman.

Attachment to detachment can generate a sense of everydayness. /lgbt/ demands that we question the opposition between the ironic and the serious (e.g. Colley & Moore, 2022, p. 11). The identities of boy/man-moder, repper, and autogynephile are constructed through the inhabitation of 4chan, a quotidian habit which demands adopting a dissimulative, detached, skeptical style, feeling backwards against the Internet's promises for openness. Nevertheless, these identities are serious business. The deletion controversy shows that ironic genders are meaningful, if not sincere, dispositions from which trans 4chan users navigate a transphobic world. If we mistake

these identities as a form of transphobic trolling or otherwise write them off as invalid expressions of mediated trans community, we overlook trans folks' capacity to express complex hesitancy, resentment, and even scorn against transnormativity. These users bring guardedness to a visual regime demanding openness, shame to the call for realness, and recalcitrance against progression to a universally legible trans identity.

Conclusion

The /lgbt/ community on 4chan testifies that the Internet's disturbing entanglements manifest meaningfully, constitutively, and complexly in the relational practices of transgender digital subcultures. This essay worked toward the de-idealization of transgender digital media by re-situating 4chan within the affinity between new media and everyday trans life. Historicizing backwards attachments which give life to identities like boymoder, repper, and autogynephile, this paper challenges the openness to which communication and media studies often attribute the Internet's affordances for trans people.

The heuristic of de-idealization might further what Adrienne Shaw and Katherine Sender (2016, p. 2) termed "non-binary approaches," challenging conventional oppositions which have both developed and hindered media studies. In particular, heeding trans people as digital subjects requires examining their capacity to attach ambivalently and supportively within trans misogynistic regimes. Whether these identities "go mainstream" is beside the point. The significance of the boymoder identity is not found in the quantity of boymoderns. Instead, the importance of this work is its potential to attend systematically to the Internet's troubling attachments, which are neither exclusively cultivated by white cisgender men nor detached from marginalized enclaves. To fulfill its intellectual ambitions vis-à-vis queer, trans, and feminist studies,

communication and media studies must feel its way beyond rose-tinted figments of digitality by way of the affective baggage which they disavow.

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¹ I introduce this section using the term “transgender media studies” to avoid confusion with “transmedia,” or multimodal storytelling. Later, I forward “trans media studies” to reflect the area’s interest in categories before and beyond “transgender.”

² Images uploaded to 4chan lack attributable properties and may be reproduced for the purpose of academic criticism.

³ When discussing AGP and Incel conceptions of sexuality, I use “male” and “female” instead of updated terminology. These bioessentialist terms are the most accurate reflections of how these groups conceive of sex/gender as determinate and immutable.