



2-23-2023

Centering Transgender Consumers in Conceptualizations of Marketplace Marginalization and Digital Spaces

Beck Hansman
Loyola University Chicago

Jenna Drenten Ph.D.
Loyola University Chicago, jdrenten@luc.edu

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Recommended Citation

Hansman, Beck and Jenna Drenten (2023), "Centering Transgender Consumers in Conceptualizations of Marketplace Marginalization and Digital Spaces," *Journal of Consumer Affairs*, <https://doi.org/10.1111/joca.12520>.

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RESEARCH ARTICLE



WILEY

Centering transgender consumers in conceptualizations of marketplace marginalization and digital spaces

Beck Hansman | Jenna Drenten

Quinlan School of Business, Loyola University Chicago, Chicago, Illinois, USA

Correspondence

Jenna Drenten, Quinlan School of Business, Loyola University Chicago, Chicago, Illinois, USA.
Email: jdrenten@luc.edu

Abstract

The purpose of this study is to center transgender consumers in the conceptualizations between marketplace marginalization and digital spaces. We examine transgender crowdfunding as a hashtag-bounded digital space created by and for the transgender community—namely, the #TransCrowdFund digital space on Twitter. We draw on *trans digital geographies* as a novel analytical lens to focus attention on transgender consumers' unique experiences in and between digital spaces. Through qualitative hashtag mapping, we analyzed a sample of 200 Twitter profiles and accompanying tweets drawn from individuals using the #TransCrowdFund hashtag. Findings suggest transgender consumers utilize crowdfunding as a hashtag-bounded digital space in three ways: accessing networks, narrativizing needs, and signaling identity. Within each of these functional uses, underlying tensions arise in navigating transphobic marketplace marginalization, unique to transgender consumer well-being. Our research demonstrates the power of centering transgender consumers—both conceptually and contextually—in consumer research and offers implications for scholars and policy makers.

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KEYWORDS

crowdfunding, digital spaces, marketplace marginalization, trans digital geographies, transgender consumers, twitter

1 | INTRODUCTION

Consumer culture scholars suggest hashtags delineate the boundaries of digital spaces and act as mediation devices that aggregate postings to attract and sustain particular practices in consumer culture (brand publics, Arvidsson & Caliandro, 2016; hashtag publics, Nathan, 2015). Such hashtag-bounded digital spaces “may be considered the subaltern counterpublics” that function “as alternatives to the universal public sphere” (Hirji, 2021, p. 81). Marginalized consumers, in particular, seek these alternative digital spaces to speak their truth, engage in activism, build coalitions, and escape physical spaces (Ekpo et al., 2018). For instance, the #MeToo hashtag offers a digital space to share experiences with sexual assault and the #BlackLivesMatter hashtag functions as a digital space for community organizing against racism and police brutality. These digital spaces are imbued with transformative power between the imaginative and the material (Denegri-Knott & Molesworth, 2010) and between the digital and physical (Cappellini & Yen, 2016).

Digital spaces enable new forms of relationality by extending connectivity, virality, and spread (Nathan, 2015), resulting in valuable publicity (Arvidsson & Caliandro, 2016). But for marginalized consumers, this circuit of publicity can be fraught with tensions as conspicuousness attracts harmful attention when it intersects with racism, homophobia, transphobia, and ableism. Perhaps nowhere is this systematic and structural marketplace marginalization more evident than in the case of transgender consumers, or “people whose gender identity and/or gender expression differs from what is typically associated with the sex they were assigned at birth” (GLAAD, 2022, n.p.). Digital spaces provide a vital outlet for survival (Cavalcante, 2016) at a time when transgender consumers are socially deterred and/or legally barred from using gender-affirming bathrooms, playing gender-affirming sports, and accessing gender-affirming healthcare (ACLU, 2022). While valuable consumer culture research advances our understanding of consumers’ self-expressive, visibility, and identity-related practices in digital spaces (Arvidsson & Caliandro, 2016; Belk, 2013; Kozinets et al., 2010), transgender consumers’ unique experiences in using digital spaces to navigate transphobic marketplace marginalization remains undertheorized. In part, this is due to a dominant scholarly focus on cisnormative digital spaces and a tendency to lump transgender individuals into a larger monolith of marginalized LGBTQ+ consumers – both of which dilute the nuances of transgender experiences with marketplace marginalization and digital spaces. However, recent scholarship calls for a “turn towards addressing the material conditions of transgender existence and the issues transgender people face in the world” (Billard et al., 2022, p. 4). To that end, extending previous work on marketplace marginalization and digital spaces in consumer culture, we ask, how do transgender consumers utilize hashtag-bounded digital spaces to navigate marketplace marginalization, and in doing so, what unique tensions emerge with regard to transgender consumer experiences?

Specifically, we examine a hashtag-bounded digital space created by and for the transgender community—namely, the #TransCrowdFund digital space on Twitter. In 2016, transgender activist J. Skyler’s employer suddenly terminated year-end bonuses, resulting in an increased financial burden. To make ends meet, J. Skyler started crowdfunding online and later created the #TransCrowdFund hashtag-bounded digital space to catalyze and promote crowdfunded financial assistance for other transgender consumers. Since its inception, #TransCrowdFund has emerged as



a form of resistance and “a radical—and voluntary—redistribution of wealth” (J. Skyles, 2017, n.p.), particularly as transgender individuals face increased marketplace marginalization (Brown et al., 2022) including housing discrimination (Glick et al., 2019), healthcare discrimination (Edwards-Leeper & Anderson, 2021), and employment discrimination (Carpenter et al., 2020).

To center transgender consumers in the conceptualizations between marketplace marginalization and digital spaces, we draw on *trans digital geographies* as a novel conceptual lens. As Billard et al. (2022) note, cisnormative theoretical frameworks often adopt a pathologizing position where transgender consumers are used “as tools to test the limits of sociological theory” (p. 2) and queer and feminist theorists often “coopt transgender experience for their own theoretical ends and professional advancements without attending to the specificities of transgender life” (p. 5). In contrast, trans digital geographies epistemologically centers transgender experiences by mobilizing a trans way of knowing (Radi, 2019). Through a method of qualitative hashtag mapping (Highfield & Leaver, 2015), we analyzed a sample of 200 Twitter profiles and accompanying tweets drawn from individuals using the #TransCrowdFund hashtag. Findings suggest transgender consumers utilize the hashtag-bounded digital space to navigate transphobic marketplace marginalization in three ways: accessing networks, narrativizing needs, and signaling identity. Within each of these functional uses, we identify underlying tensions unique to transgender consumer experiences. Our research demonstrates the power of centering transgender consumers—both conceptually and contextually—in consumer research and offers implications for scholars and policy makers.

This article is structured as follows. First, we ground our study in prior literature on marketplace marginalization and digital spaces. Next, we address the importance of centering transgender consumers in research beyond the LGBT monolith. We then introduce trans digital geographies as our conceptual lens. After outlining our digital qualitative methodology, we present findings using illustrative examples from the data. Finally, in the discussion, we address theoretical contributions for research on digital spaces and practical implications for transgender consumer well-being in the face of marketplace marginalization and public policy failures.

2 | CONCEPTUAL FOUNDATION

2.1 | The intersection of marketplace marginalization and digital spaces

Marketplace marginalization is largely a function of imbalanced power relations resulting in constrained accessibility and vulnerability (Bennett et al., 2016). For example, plus-size women face limited clothing options as power lies in ‘thinness’ (Scaraboto & Fischer, 2013), multicultural consumers fail to see themselves represented in advertising as power lies in ‘whiteness’ (Harrison et al., 2017), and transgender consumers struggle to shop in retail settings as power lies in ‘cisgenderness’ (McKeage et al., 2018). From a sociological perspective, marginalization has been broadly defined as a set of complex processes relegating groups of people to the fringes of society (Mowat, 2015); it is “both a condition and a process that prevents individuals and groups from full participation in social, economic, and political life enjoyed by the wider society” (Alakhunova et al., 2015, p. 2). In consumer research, marketplace marginalization is characterized by stigmatizing consumers due to a particular identity marker that situates them as ‘othered’ in the marketplace (Mirabito et al., 2016). Thus, marketplace marginalization parallels Pechmann et al.’s (2011) conceptualization of at-risk consumers as “marketplace participants who, because of historical or personal

circumstances or disabilities, may be harmed by marketers' practices or may be unable or unwilling to take full advantage of marketplace opportunities" (p. 23).

Previous research indicates one way consumers mitigate marketplace marginalization is by turning away from physical spaces to seek refuge in digital spaces (Ekpo et al., 2018). In consumer culture, digital spaces manifest in an array of ways: as brand publics (Arvidsson & Caliandro, 2016), as online communities (McQuarrie et al., 2013), as networked narratives (Kozinets et al., 2010), and as social media platforms (Drenten & Zayer, 2018), among others. Such digital spaces fulfill consumers' needs by extending access to goods and services (Denegri-Knott & Molesworth, 2010) and enabling consumers to navigate everyday risk-laden life experiences (Drenten & Zayer, 2018). For instance, marginalized consumers turn to digital spaces to avoid discrimination in physical spaces (e.g., shopping online instead of in-stores) and to prepare for battle in physical spaces (e.g., learn skills for coping with discriminatory encounters, Ekpo et al., 2018). Previous research suggests access to digital spaces supports consumer well-being (Belk, 2013; Cappellini & Yen, 2016). However, for marginalized consumers, factors such as anonymity and visibility in digital spaces can enable both liberation and harm (Brock, 2018; Sobande et al., 2020).

Digital spaces can be uniquely perilous for marginalized consumers. For instance, Harris and Vitis (2020) find women are confronted with various types of digital 'spaceless violence' such as receiving threats online, being targeted by digital stalkers, and contending with known (physical) abusers digitally. Similarly, Davis (2020) finds racial trolling manifests in Black cyber-territories (e.g., African-American blogs), concluding "there are no 'safe' spaces free from hostile white intervention" (p. 9). Digital spaces "provide marginalized users with safe spaces in which to speak freely, seek support, and organize action against injustices faced" in physical spaces (Clark-Parsons, 2021, p. 2127), but "no digital space can ever be truly safe for all participants at all times" (p. 2142). Thus, the forms of dominance (e.g., misogyny, racism, transphobia) that produce marketplace marginalization in physical spaces are often reproduced in digital spaces.

Tensions in navigating marketplace marginalization are particularly poignant in spatially-restricted digital spaces, like hashtags, which operate with amorphous borders (Davis, 2020; Matley, 2018). In line with research on brand publics, hashtag-bounded digital spaces function as "vehicle[s] for visibility and publicity" (Arvidsson & Caliandro, 2016, p. 743). For brands, this 'circuit of publicity' can be a source of value, but for marginalized consumers, such conspicuousness may be rife with trade-offs. For instance, hashtag-bounded digital spaces enable consumers to publicize counternarratives, organize communities, amplify social movements, and build networks of dissent (Conley, 2021), but these benefits may come at a cost of harassment and trolling. Existing consumer culture research undertheorizes the promise and peril of hashtag-bounded digital spaces in mitigating marketplace marginalization. Thus, the purpose of this study is to explore how consumers use hashtag-bounded digital spaces to navigate marketplace marginalization and the tensions that emerge therein. Given the increasingly prevalent role of transphobia as a source of marketplace marginalization, we are interested in understanding the unique conditions of transgender consumer existence in hashtag-bounded digital spaces (Billard et al., 2022), which we discuss next.

2.2 | Transphobic marketplace marginalization beyond the LGBT monolith

Consumer researchers increasingly call for research understanding gender-based marketplace marginalization manifests in consumer culture as a result of transphobia, which is defined as



“emotional disgust toward individuals who do not conform to society’s gender expectations” (Hill & Willoughby, 2005, p. 533; Hein et al., 2016; Zayer et al., 2017; Steinfield et al., 2019). Some transphobic practices are legally sanctioned. For instance, 37 countries support defacto criminalization of transgender people (Trans Legal Mapping Report, 2020) by enforcing cross-dressing bans (i.e., wearing gender nonconforming clothing) and gender-affirming healthcare restrictions (i.e., hormone replacement therapy and gender-affirming surgery). Other transphobic practices are more subtly woven through the marketplace, such as gender-binary dressing rooms and clothing categories which create undue stress in the customer service exchange (Puckett et al., 2023). Previous research on transphobic marketplace marginalization, albeit limited, suggests transgender consumers experience powerlessness across products, services, retail spaces, and advertising (Cavalcante, 2016; McKeage et al., 2018). Such powerlessness is often the result of gender biases and exclusionary boundaries in the marketplace (Drenten, Harrison, and Pendarvis, 2022). For example, advertising for menstruation products reifies cisgender women’s perceptions of and management of their periods, as a marker of femininity, which ignores transgender men’s experiences with menstruation (Chrisler et al., 2016). Collectively, these real-world examples parallel the rise in “applied transgender studies” which calls for “research focused on identifiable and pragmatic social, cultural, and political problems of relevance to transgender people” (Billard et al., 2022, p. 1). Yet, with some notable exceptions (Cavalcante, 2016; Coffin et al., 2019; McKeage et al., 2018), few consumer culture studies deeply explore the material conditions of transgender consumers, much less their use of digital spaces to navigate transphobic marketplace marginalization.

The dearth in research exploring transgender consumers can be attributed to pooling them together with other marginalized individuals under the acronym “LGBT,” defined as lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (Cashore & Tuason, 2009), with evolving iterations (e.g., LGBTQI+ adds ‘Q’ for queer, ‘I’ for intersex, ‘+’ for additional identities). For example, in Shepherd et al.’ (2021) study of LGBT consumers’ perceptions of LGBT advertising, none of the participants directly identify as transgender. A problem with studying transgender consumers as a function of LGBT nomenclature lies in diluting the transgender consumer experience or conflating it with the experiences of non-transgender individuals. Even within the LGBT community, transgender consumers have been historically considered the minority group as being transgender is a function of gender identity while being lesbian, gay, and bisexual are a function of sexuality (Felsenthal, 2004). In this way, transgender consumers face marginalization not only within society-at-large but also within the LGBT community. Moreover, for transgender consumers, marketplace marginalization can be exacerbated as they are often blamed for their own conditions (Mirabito et al., 2016). Thus, presenting LGBT consumers as a mass consumer market undermines the nuance and distinctions between and within each population.

A similar dynamic occurs when considering analytical frameworks through which to explore transphobic marketplace marginalization and hashtag-bounded digital spaces. Billard et al. (2022) outline two paradigms which are often used to explore transgender experiences. The first, the gender deviance paradigm, treats transgender people as objects of study often using pathologizing cisnormative theoretical frameworks to test sociocultural boundaries. The second, the gender difference paradigm, treats transgender people as subjects of study using feminist and queer theories to center transgender people. The gender difference paradigm, while pioneering it its pushback against transgender objectification and exoticization, still embeds transgender studies within queer and feminist studies (Keegan, 2019). Todd (2021) contends studying transgender hashtag-bounded digital spaces requires attention to the uniqueness of transgender experiences. As such, we aim to conceptually center transgender consumers—

apart from the LGBT monolith and distinct from cisnormative scholarship on digital spaces—by applying a uniquely transgender analytical lens for exploring digital spaces: trans digital geographies (Figure 1).

2.3 | Trans digital geographies as an analytical lens

Transgender, or trans,¹ geographies scholarship explores the ways in which transgender people experience and create places and spaces (Browne, 2016; Browne et al., 2010; Nash, 2010). Pioneering work in the domain of trans geographies focuses on transgender experiences and narratives in physical spaces (e.g., transgender men living in rural communities, Abelson, 2016; transgender healthcare in the ‘gay capitol of the UK’, Browne & Lim, 2010). However, the centrality of digital spaces in modern geographical praxis has prompted a ‘digital turn’ provoking two parallel trends: geographies through the digital and geographies produced by the digital (Ash et al., 2018). Such digital geographies can advance “theorizations of how social difference, oppression, and resistance are reiterated in and through digital life” (Elwood & Leszczynski, 2018, p. 636). Taken together, scholars have begun to merge trans geographies and digital geographies resulting in conceptualizations of trans digital geographies (Elwood, 2021). The emergence of trans digital geographies supports what Billard et al. (2022) define as a post-disciplinary approach to transgender studies. That is, trans digital geographies merges ideas from cultural studies, human geography, transgender studies, feminist theory, and new media and society.

Trans digital geographies explicitly centers transgender people and their digital spatial practices. This parallels a conceptual pushback against appropriating transgender stories as anecdotes of “freewheeling ‘shape-shifting’” without nuance or specificity (March, 2021, p. 460). As Nash (2010, p. 583) writes, “trans scholars argue that notions of performativity, deconstruction, and signification have rendered the transgendered subject an imaginary, fictional and merely metaphorical presence in the service of a larger intellectual project.” In contrast, trans digital geographies work challenges spatial explorations of how gender is ‘performed’ (Butler, 2004) or ‘done’ (West & Zimmerman, 1987), which often minimizes transgender experiences to “encounters with binary gendered space” (March, 2021, p. 462). Trans digital geographies allow scholars to spatially interrogate the locality and specificity of trans lives and spaces (Todd, 2021) in the context of digital spaces.

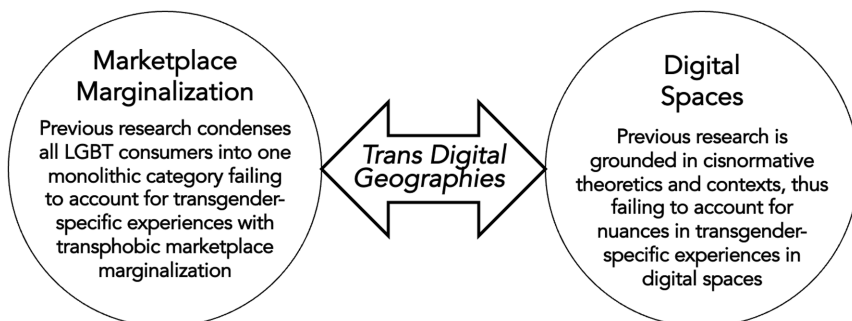


FIGURE 1 Trans digital geographies as a bridging analytical lens.



In line with digital geographies more broadly, trans digital geographies scholarship focuses on theorizations in four streams: epistemologies and methodologies, mediation of gendered relations and social re/production, bodies and embodiment, and digital spaces/spatialities. In this study, we focus on the fourth stream: digital spaces/spatialities—particularly as tied to hashtags as a mechanism for bounding digital spaces. Trans digital geographies direct attention to how spatiality is mutually constitutive for transgender consumers and/or in transgender digital spaces, with a focus on relationality and transmission. That is, how digital and physical spaces are contingent on one another and how people and ideas move through digital spaces. By adopting a trans digital geographies lens, we orient our analysis to the nuances of transgender life as a valuable subject of study in its own right and push beyond the limitations of cisnormative theoretical perspectives.

Trans digital geographies, as an analytical approach, is valuable in its ability to capture the “significance and workings of digital practices of thriving, given a longstanding orientation toward reading for hegemonies” (Elwood, 2021, p. 210). It explores how possibilities of resistance unfold through digital technologies and spatial practices of everyday life, while centering transgender experiences in gendered geographies (e.g., digital gaming, Dornelles, 2020; digital fan spaces, Halliwell, 2021; digital surveillance, Hoover et al., 2022). As a complement to consumer culture perspectives of digital spaces, trans digital geographies focuses on transgender-specific experiences that shape and are shaped by the cultural construction of digital spaces. This perspective draws attention to spatial power geometries, such as who has control over the narratives and flows within and through digital spaces and implications of these oscillations for those who inhabit the space (Scheuerman et al., 2018). In this way, transgender lives are centered in analysis—not as a non-normative alternative to cisgender but as expressly trans; not on transitioning but on *being* trans. This lens ontologically captures how digital spaces mediate ways of thriving despite marketplace marginalization. Importantly, trans digital geographies scholarship does not focus solely on discourses and spaces of hostility and discrimination. It also explores affirming, and even mundane, experiences and spaces that reflect trans people's everyday lived realities (Elwood, 2021; Todd, 2021). This then offers a holistic depiction of trans lives not often seen in other theories.

Digital spaces have transformed the cultures and practices of transgender people as they navigate a gendered social world and negotiate their identities (Rooke, 2010); however, a potential shortcoming in studying transgender digital spaces is defaulting to a spectacularized form of visibility (Berberick, 2018), often reflected in ‘wrong body’ discourses (Engdahl, 2014). In contrast, trans digital geographies enable us to focus on material spatialities and geographies of their production, transmission, and appropriation specific to trans coded spaces (Cavalcante, 2016). Previous studies grounded in trans digital geographies largely focus on the ways in which digital technologies enable digital safe spaces for transgender individuals (Austin & Goodman, 2017). For example, drawing on trans digital geographies, Dame (2016) explores how trans people carve and stitch together spaces and cultures of their own using the hashtags #ftm (i.e., female-to-male) and #mtf (i.e., male-to-female) on Tumblr. Findings suggest ‘Trans Tumblr’ enables trans youth to navigate political economies of oppression. Similar studies note such spaces challenge other cis-coded digital paradigms and physical, offline, transphobia (Jenzen, 2017). Given our interest in transphobic marketplace marginalization, specifically, utilizing the analytical lens of trans digital geographies challenges the cisnormative theoretical roots that dominate our understanding of digital spaces. To that end, we aim to better understand the nuanced ways in which transgender consumers navigate marketplace marginalization through hashtag-bounded digital spaces and the unique tensions which emerge therein.

3 | CONTEXT AND METHODOLOGY

The context for this study is the #TransCrowdFund hashtag-bounded digital space on Twitter. Previous studies exploring transgender crowdfunding suggest crowdfunders are encouraged to engage with social media networks and share compelling identity narratives to increase their donation potential (Barcelos, 2019; Barcelos & Budge, 2019; Messerschmidt et al., 2018); however, these previous studies are limited in their contextual focus on high-cost transgender healthcare funding via crowdfunding websites (e.g., gender-affirming surgery and hormone replacement therapy crowdfunding on GoFundMe). In contrast, the context of our study—the #TransCrowdFund digital space—is confined by a particular hashtag on a social media platform, rather than a dedicated crowdfunding website. This enables transgender consumers to turn to the digital space, designed specifically for trans people, as a means of financing personal needs not afforded in physical spaces (Bakko, 2019). In line with the trans digital geographies analytical lens, a given hashtag is a metaphorical map, which “does two things at once: marks significant places; and it makes places significant by marking them” (Burbules, 2006, p. 102). Our study conceptualizes #TransCrowdFund as a hashtag-bounded digital space. This spatial approach highlights how crowdfunding mediates interactions and, more importantly, how crowdfunding is embedded with sociocultural and critical elements unique to transphobic marketplace marginalization. Indeed, the tacit purpose of #TransCrowdFund is crowdfunding by and for transgender individuals.

This study employs a qualitative method for hashtag mapping, which employs “the filtering of the collected data” (Highfield & Leaver, 2015, p. 3) to contextualize and trace content on Twitter (e.g., sexual assault awareness through #MeToo, Clark-Parsons, 2021; transgender advocacy through #GirlsLikeUs, Jackson et al., 2018). Highfield and Leaver (2015) note several reasons quantitative approaches of large datasets collected through a single hashtag may be limited. First, the presence of a hashtag in a tweet does not confirm an author is part of or even tangentially related to the digital space it marks. For example, individuals often post unrelated content with trending hashtags. Second, contextual and conversational insight would be lost if limited to only the tweets from a scraped hashtag dataset. For example, a person may post a series (i.e., thread) of 10 tweets and only use the #TransCrowdFund hashtag in the first or last tweet; however, all 10 would be relevant in understanding the digital space. By adopting a qualitative hashtag mapping, we more deeply contextualize the #TransCrowdFund digital space. Specifically, the hashtag mapping approach begins with collecting a master sample of tweets related to a single hashtag, over the course of at least a three-month period to capture longitudinal patterns in the data. From the master sample, a subsample is formed to remove duplicates and ensure relevancy. In line with Highfield and Leaver’s (2015) protocol, posts from the subsample are then mapped back to the profiles from which they are initiated. The profiles and content (e.g., surrounding tweets and retweets) are captured for rich analysis.

Data collection originated by utilizing TAGs2, or Twitter Archiving Google Sheet, an open-source tool that automates the data collection process by routinely accessing Twitter’s search API with a query and returning tweets and meta-data. TAGs2 has been used in a range of prior studies (Alkhamash et al., 2019; Greenhalgh & Koehler, 2017) including consumer research (Park et al., 2018). It was selected for its user-friendliness and cost-free accessibility (Yu & Muñoz-Justicia, 2022). Given the context of this study, the hashtag #TransCrowdFund was used as the sole search parameter in initiating the TAGs2 query. The TAGS system was activated over a 10-month period (November 2019–August 2020) and was executed each week. The collective return captured a total of 236,105 tweets and associated meta-data (e.g., username, additional hashtags, hyperlinks, user location, follower/following count).



In line with qualitative hashtag mapping, we took a sample of the total dataset that resulted in a convenience sample of $n = 200$ original tweets. By ‘original tweets,’ we mean (1) the tweet was not a retweet from another person and (2) the tweet represents a unique profile (i.e., no two tweets in the dataset from the same person). Analyzing a subset of large social media-based data is a practice previously used in consumer research with exploring hashtags (Rokka & Canniford, 2016). The number of 200 original tweets was determined given the capacity of the researchers to employ a rigorous and in-depth analytic process. There is no standard metric for sample size in qualitative hashtag mapping; however, our sample is similar to other published qualitative hashtag analyses (Matley, 2018). We then traced these 200 tweets back to their original Twitter posts using the hyperlinks in the downloaded dataset. This enabled us to see the #TransCrowdFund tweets in situ on each profile, including replies, threads, profile bio information, and other contextual cues. Thus, the final data analyzed included 200 original #TransCrowdFund tweets mapped back to 200 unique Twitter profiles (see Table 1 for illustrative examples) and contextualized with correlated content (e.g., replies, related threads, Twitter usernames, profile hyperlinks, profile bios, reasons for crowdfunding). In line with hashtag mapping, this type of qualitative immersion in the data is critical to understanding unexpected patterns in the data which may be missed through automated techniques.

The data were analyzed through a combination of deductive a priori and inductive open coding that was driven by constant comparison looking for similarities and differences. Tweets and profiles were analyzed independently, searching for meanings and patterns, rather than just casually reading the data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). In line with hashtag mapping, this encompassed an analysis not only of the 200 tweets identified in the sample but traced back to the profiles for each tweet and contextualized with surrounding information. Then, the posts were analyzed across tweets and profiles to identify patterns and related back to existing literature to develop insights about how crowdfunding is used as a hashtag-bounded digital space for navigating marketplace marginalization. This parallels the digital method approach of content analysis for social media texts set forth by Caliandro and Gandini (2017).

To ensure trustworthiness in this research, we adopt Nowell et al.’s (2017) view that reflexivity is central to the audit trail. Personal and functional reflexivity is a constant process of examining one’s own judgments, practices, and belief systems throughout the research process—from data collection to analysis to reporting. In digital research, it is “particularly useful in the microethics of access, whether identifying as a researcher, communicating across various social platforms, or in describing participants” (Cox, 2022, n.p.). As such, we acknowledge our own positionality and our connections to the research at hand. The first author (they/them) identifies as nonbinary with a rich history of navigating their own gender experience without the constraints of the gender binary. The second author (she/her) identifies as cisgender with deep personal experience supporting her transgender sibling. The research was at its core collaborative, with the two authors working closely to analyze the data and to acknowledge how positionality may mold the findings therein. This included tracking our procedural and meaning-making decisions, how we felt about them, and how our own contexts may influence them (Cox, 2022). Given the risks transgender consumers face in the marketplace—both digital and physical—researchers also face an increased burden of care when handling transgender individuals’ publicly available and searchable content, including Twitter handles and posts. Whiting and Pritchard’s (2018) exploration of digital ethics in qualitative academic research identifies “traceability” as a key ethical concern for digital data reporting, even when anonymized (e.g., using pseudonyms). In this study, Twitter usernames are not reported in the findings, and pseudonym usernames are used for illustrative examples. Given the searchability

TABLE 1 Illustrative examples from data

Pseudonym	Bio	Followers	Following	Tweets	Example #TransCrowdFund tweet
@jzzz_hxdx	The subject known as jay dod [1992-] / returning 1/1/2020 / more info @ pinned tweet / she+her	8344	1515	181.3 K	Greetings as I have clarified somewhat over my profile I am taking a rest from my principle media platforms as I address some medical problems (physical and mental). Your help is valued! #transcrowdfund
@tiredGender	Andrea. They, she, gen Z. Adult human non-binary female. My life is one long existential crisis. likes can b 🍷 Art account: @maltmaker	333	1233	11.2 K	One more day, another Transphobia Tip Jar. In case you are cis and you do not want me dead however much the remainder of your kind, at that point drop me a tip so I have something to counter the day by day provocation I get driving to work. #TransCrowdFund #LwiththeT #GwiththeT
@sappy	Econometrician and statistical programmer seeking next opportunity. White but anti-whiteness. #girlslikeus 🍷🍷 Opinions solely my own. Formerly @asymbina.	6276	3274	560.9 K	If it's not too much trouble, share and support! I need to purchase basic goods and medications! #TransCrowdFund; I am at 14 months of job searching and still have zero pay beside gifts! I need to pay lease, utilities, food supplies, gas, and so on! Kindly assist and share! #TransCrowdFund
@ay_tyla	Neurodivergent Enby mess who's always tired and always gay. RTs NSFW content sometimes, along with plenty of random art and political content (They/Them) 🍷🍷	862	2380	78.3 K	RTs to help support this are appreciated 🍷 Paypal is my lone option, and this faltering PC is my solitary connection to the web at the present time so please: #TransCrowdFund #PovertyCrowdFund #ShowUpForWishes #CrowdFund #CrowdFunding
@tessa5	She/her, 23, help me please, PFP- @/pride_spite	793	1710	34.3 K	Hello all, I'm trans, demi/pan, and genderfluid, and I need monetary assistance to get away from my oppressive family. I create and sell mission patches, key labels, stickers, and pronoun pins. Nothing is more than \$8 USD. DM me to purchase, or give at my PayPal. Thank you! #TransCrowdFund #Space
@42_Chop	Narkuula/N@ A/Melody, 26, Femby, Dragon. 18+ Pronouns: shi/hir, it/its	525	2840	15.6 K	Hello, I'm Nat! I'm truly hurting at this moment, account's overdrawn by, a great deal, and the quest for new employment has not been fruitful, I could truly utilize some assistance! Message me for PayPal (has deadname) #TransCrowdFund



TABLE 1 (Continued)

Pseudonym	Bio	Followers	Following	Tweets	Example #TransCrowdFund tweet
@helixdraw	Elio here! All art can be found in #heliosdraws or #heliosdoodles. This is a fan art/fan rambling account! NSFw tweets are marked for easy muting.	1173	926	96.2 K	I'm REALLY humiliated to request help on this one (in light of the fact that previous endeavors have flopped massively because of monetary restrictions in the family) yet my laptop is on the fritz, and it's about time that I get another PC. Any donation makes a difference! #TransCrowdfund
@mx_tolov	28 / Nonbinary Lesbian Trans Woman / Mentally Ill & Disabled / She/Her / Leftist / Friendly Pro Accessibility No Hit/Damage Vtuber / Sengoku Jidai History nerd	1235	812	145.1 K	As an update if it's not too much trouble, possibly support me on the off chance that you can manage the cost of it, I do not need anybody to hurt themselves in order to help me. Also, kindly check out #TransCrowdFund first to help those more deserving than me.
@chippe_n	@6ArmSweet are our wonderful girlfriends, and we love them all so much! We're plural with a surprising number of fictives. Art by @sdamm. She/her, 21.	484	960	138.8 K	I need assistance paying for my medication, as well as other necessities. I cannot work due to health issues, so all support is greatly appreciated. Thanks. #TransCrowdFund
@canablink	Non-binary plant-based mental health worker, spiritualist & cannabis advocate #destigmatizeitRaised fistPotted plant☐Sparkles Pronouns: (They/them/theirs)	862	1399	67.8 K	I'm a disabled non binary lgbtq+ social worker with two cats and I lost my home. please support #TransCrowdFund #crowdfunding
@b_treclm	Support, follow, amplify, believe Black women. I am white, trans, non-binary: they/them. Smash the white patriarchy.	2546	5006	135.7 K	Calling my white followers: RT and pay toward. A Black trans woman who needs essential care urgently. #EmergencyCrowdFund Thank you. #BlackTransLivesMatter #TransCrowdFund #BlackLivesMatter #BlackTransCrowdFund #LGBT+

of Twitter posts, quotes from the data in this study have been rephrased in the findings, while still retaining their original meaning. Each rephrased quote was then entered into a Twitter search and a Google search to ensure the rephrased quote would trace back to the original post. In the following section, we present findings from the qualitative analysis of the data.

4 | FINDINGS

Findings suggest the #TransCrowdFund digital space is characterized by three functional uses in which underlying tensions arise: accessing networks (tension between connection and violation), narrativizing needs (tensions between legitimization and justification), and signaling identity (tensions between celebration and essentialism). In line with trans digital geographies, each tension uniquely centers transgender consumer experiences and sheds light on the material consequences of relationality and transmission in hashtag-bounded digital spaces in terms of transphobic marketplace marginalization. Figure 2 provides a description of each functional use and its related underlying tensions as they connect to marketplace marginalization. #TransCrowdFund, as a hashtag-bounded digital space, circumvents transphobic marketplace marginalization by enabling transgender consumers to request financial support for an array of expenses including but not limited to rent, food, toiletries, transportation, medical care, job support, legal fees, and entertainment. While the #TransCrowdFund hashtag delimits an important second space for transgender consumers to seek such support for their offline, physical, lives, an array of challenges unique to transgender consumers arise in the process. Here, we outline each functional use of the #TransCrowdFund digital space and discuss the related tensions that emerge. All usernames in the reported data are anonymized using an online username generator, and directly quoted Tweets are paraphrased to protect users' anonymity while retaining the meaning of the original Tweets.

4.1 | Accessing networks: Tension between connection and violation

Through the #TransCrowdFund digital space, transgender consumers are able to expand their access to networks of support (e.g., people, services). Accessing networks reflects how a hashtag-bounded digital space provides geographically unbounded reach. However, underlying tensions arise between connecting and violating. That is, the digital space enables widespread sharing to overcome physical marketplace marginalization (i.e., connection) but this gives rise to unique trans-specific harms such as deadnaming and outing which may further transphobic marketplace marginalization (i.e., violation).

The #TransCrowdFund digital space gives transgender consumers potential opportunities to receive financial support from both friends and strangers on social media, most of which are also transgender consumers. In this way, it broadens the boundaries of accessibility for transgender consumers who face marketplace marginalization in their physical lives. The community comes together around the hashtag, which demarcates the space, in order to share the burden of transphobic marketplace marginalization. For example, @TranzDino shared a #TransCrowdFund post accompanied with the #HelpEachOther hashtag and said, "How about we help each other out, sibs ❤️ If you have a cashapp/venmo/paypal/and so forth drop it beneath and retweet others' for visibility!" This act of helping each other out is fundamental to the activist intention of the #TransCrowdFund space and enables consumers to reach a broader



Functional Uses	Description	Underlying Tensions in Navigating Transphobic Marketplace Marginalization	
Accessing Networks	Crowdfunding through the #TransCrowdFund hashtag-bounded digital space is used to expand transgender consumers' access to support	Connection	Violation
		Enables widespread sharing to overcome marketplace marginalization	Gives rise to unique harms (e.g., deadnaming, outing) furthering reinforcing marketplace marginalization
Narrativizing Needs	Crowdfunding through the #TransCrowdFund hashtag-bounded digital space is used to present personal stories for financial requests	Legitimization	Justification
		Affirms transgender needs and wants as legitimate financial asks to overcome marketplace marginalization	Offers evidence of 'deservingness' for financial asks further reinforcing marketplace marginalization
Signaling Identity	Crowdfunding through the #TransCrowdFund hashtag-bounded digital space is used to indicate transgender group affiliation	Celebration	Essentialism
		Centers the distinct value of trans identities as an act of resistance to overcome marketplace marginalization	Erases other intersecting identities (e.g., race, sexuality) further reinforcing marketplace marginalization

FIGURE 2 Functional uses for crowdfunding as a hashtag-bounded digital space.

audience of potential supporters, relative to those they may have access to in a physical, offline, space. Much of the data indicates transphobic marketplace marginalization in physical spaces (e.g., medical insurance denial, employment precarity) prompts transgender consumers to turn to the #TransCrowdFund digital space for support. For example, @FurPhantom appealed to the #TransCrowdFund community to raise \$9000, with the goal of getting top surgery (e.g., removal of breasts) because “the insurance I have through my job does not cover gender confirming surgeries and I’ve been living paycheck to paycheck struggling to pay bills this entire year.” Thus, in line with previous research (Denegri-Knott & Molesworth, 2010; Ekpo et al., 2018), #TransCrowdFund affords access to networks which may help mitigate transphobic marketplace marginalization when physical spaces are unsafe or unfit.

In the #TransCrowdFund digital space, sharing other people’s digital content is colloquially known as ‘signal boosting,’ or seeking attention for a post by sharing widely within and across social media. In the data, transgender consumers frequently retweeted their own posts or asked others to retweet, in order to gain a broader audience and increased donation potential. In our data, individuals post calls to ‘please share’ and ‘please retweet.’ In the #TransCrowdFund digital space, consumers signal boost requests both for themselves and on behalf of others. For instance, @silly_lalalalily posts on for a friend stating, “!! PLEASE SPREAD + CONTRIBUTE !! boosting this urgent #crowdfunding #TransCrowdFund #mutualaid behalf of an amazing friend of a friend. please share widely and donate; i want them to be supported and know they are loved!” This enables consumers to connect with others without the boundaries of geographic constraints and beyond the digital borders of the #TransCrowdFund digital space, mirroring the amorphous borders found in prior research (Davis, 2020; Matley, 2018). Accessing networks casts a wider net; however, in doing so, it gives rise to tensions in between connecting and violating. Findings suggest transgender consumers face unique circumstances when in the #TransCrowdFund digital space, as it is spatially connected to other digital spaces and even

extends to physical spaces (and people). In attempts to access networks digitally, transgender consumers risk increased violations as a result of being deadnamed or 'outed' across social media. Thus, the #TransCrowdFund digital space offers both harm and liberation (Brock, 2018).

In order to participate in networks through the #TransCrowdFund space, transgender consumers must make themselves 'known' as a transgender individual to varying degrees. In the data, many consumers have adopted a gender affirming name that differs from their name at birth, or their 'deadname.' Many individuals in the data negatively associate the use of necessary crowdfunding payment platforms like PayPal with the dreaded experience of being 'deadnamed.' In the transgender community, a 'deadname' is an individual's birth name. Because financial platforms like PayPal and Venmo are typically tied to an individual's legal name, crowdfunding can be triggering for transgender consumers by causing undue anxiety from being confronted with or needing to disclose their deadnames. In the data, trans crowdfunders use phrases like 'ignore deadname please' and 'deadname warning'. Others express that they cannot participate in crowdfunding due the fear of outing their deadnames which are linked to pre-existing payment platforms. Although the #TransCrowdFund space may be deemed 'safe' for transgender consumers, the required linkages between other digital spaces (e.g., payment platforms) gives rise to unique harms, akin to powerlessness found in prior research on transgender consumers in the marketplace (McKeage et al., 2018).

The spatiality between digital platforms generates potential for violations not only in using a deadname but also in transgender individuals being inadvertently outed. For example, @CaterpolarisKid (trans feminine) was given the name Kevin at birth. She expresses reluctance at using her deadname in relation to her crowdfunding need:

@CaterpolarisKid My family is not reliable so the home I'm currently living in *will* be put on the market in the next few weeks unless I can pay fees. So, I have until October 18th to raise more than \$1000: [PayPal.com/Kevin](https://www.paypal.com/kevin). Please excuse my deadname. HELP.

@CaterpolarisKid Please do not crosspost. I'm still closeted on facebook (even though most of my family members are blocked) so linking my deadname on FB to my name on here gives me a lot of anxiety.

Asking others in the #TransCrowdFund digital space to 'not crosspost' is a request to not post on other social media platforms (e.g., Facebook). Because of the interconnectedness of digital platforms, @CaterpolarisKid fears that if her tweets gain too much traction beyond the safety of the #TransCrowdFund space, her chosen name used on Twitter might become associated with her deadname on Facebook. This fear of being linked to her deadname limits the opportunity to gain increased viral traction, which is typically a primary appeal of the #TransCrowdFund digital space. Across the data, trans crowdfunders expressed anxiety and frustration concerning their deadnames being linked to payment platforms and the potential violations this may cause despite the promise of connection with others in the #TransCrowdFund digital space. The #TransCrowdFund digital space thus becomes at once empowering and endangering. This reflects a critical trans theorist perspective of conferring gendered identity wherein "it allows us to consider the violent implications of interpellation and the subjectivity that remains unrecognized when trans people are misgendered" (Finlay, 2017, p. 63).

Transgender crowdfunders must weigh their desires to connect with other against the potential violations which may occur as a result. Trans consumers adopt strategies to navigate



these tensions. For example, in the data, some crowdfunding campaigns became fodder for harassment and hate speech, forcing trans crowdfunders to delete their #TransCrowdFund posts or to make their Twitter accounts private. To counteract the harassment covertly, trans crowdfunders use fake names, cartoonized/illustrated (e.g., via Picrew) or stock profile photographs, and payment platforms (e.g., Ko-fi) that allow the use of gender affirming names. While the #TransCrowdFund hashtag provides a digital space for transgender consumers and potential allies to fund individual trans needs, it also puts them at risk of further transphobic marketplace marginalization. This reaffirms other transgender studies in which trans individuals overwhelmingly report that while identity sharing gives them access to a large support system, it is coupled with an increased frequency of negative and often violent remarks against them (Pinter et al., 2021).

4.2 | Narrativizing needs: Tension between legitimization and justification

Through the #TransCrowdFund digital space, transgender consumers are able to narrativize their needs—or tell personal stories to accompany their financial requests. Narrativizing needs reflects how a hashtag-bounded digital space is used to contextualize digital financial requests with physical lived experiences, thus bridging the spatial gap between physical needs and digital requests. In contrast to prior work on trans crowdfunding, which focuses primarily on medical needs, the #TransCrowdFund space enables individuals to solicit support outside of the realm of ‘transitioning,’ which reflects a more holistic sense of their needs. However, underlying tensions arise between legitimization and justification. That is, as an activist safe space created by and for transgender consumers, #TransCrowdFund inherently affirms transgender consumers’ needs and wants (i.e., legitimization) but simultaneously compels transgender consumers to provide evidence of their deservingness (e.g., justification) thereby reinforcing transphobic marketplace marginalization.

The #TransCrowdFund digital space implicitly welcomes financial requests from transgender consumers. In our data, specific narrativized needs range from high-cost medical expenses directly related to being transgender (e.g., gender-affirming surgeries, hormone replacement therapy, facial feminization surgery) to more mundane asks like a few dollars for gas, money for a new pair of glasses, cash for replacement headphones. The #TransCrowdFund digital space does not explicitly place value judgments on needs; instead, it affirms transgender needs and, perhaps more importantly, wants. For example, @snapshot_queen says a “shitty asshole” told their husband, Alex, that he should not have “a hobby he can’t afford,” specifically cycling. They used the #TransCrowdFund digital space to crowdfund for him to get new cycling equipment. This reflects an inherent acceptance of transgender needs, desires, and requests within the #TransCrowdFund space. In other words, transgender needs do not need to be narratively coded as ‘trans’ in order to be legitimized in the #TransCrowdFund digital space. This underscores how the digital space affirms transgender people’s everyday lived experiences, including the mundane and affirming realities (Elwood, 2021; Todd, 2021).

These findings suggest the needs of trans crowdfunders extend beyond medical care to more routine daily survival and ultimately the legitimization of transgender joy. However, perhaps not surprisingly medical needs are commonly narrativized. For example, @PirateBuoyBoy posts a mirror selfie of his bare chest showing his “man boobies” saying he is “beginning to feel better in my body but also: i want ‘em gone so any gift or retweet would help,” coupled with the hashtag and a link to his GoFundMe campaign for top surgery (i.e., breast removal). In

narrativizing health-related needs, data suggest trans crowdfunding look to the space as one of hope as well as one of last resort. For instance, @DoctorZombie says they are experiencing employment precarity due to “health problems from using [chest] binders and having to be in the closet bc of my abusive folks.” They turn to the #TransCrowdFund digital space as their “only real option at this point.” In these cases, the #TransCrowdFund digital space is used to share personal stories that accompany the requests, particularly relative to the complex and contested marginality trans individuals experience physically. In this way, the #TransCrowdFund space legitimizes and affirms trans needs, therefore bridging a spatial gap between physical lived experiences and digital narratives in line with prior research on trans experiences in digital spaces (Jenzen, 2017).

However, tensions between legitimization and justification are evident in narrativizing needs. Despite inherent affirmation in the #TransCrowdFund digital space, transgender consumers are compelled toward providing evidence of their ‘deservingness’ for financial asks. This tension is apparent in the following example from @Alien_Hobbit:

@Alien_Hobbit Hi. I need serious help & begging for donations to help survive. This is a thread explaining my circumstances (and venting). Long story short: I’m a homeless trans girl who needs money to survive. Help me please #transcrowdfund: ko-fi.com/Alien_Hobbit

@Alien_Hobbit Here’s the deal: for a few years, I’ve been homeless. I’m doing a lot better than before but I am in *constant* need of help. At night I sleep at a shelter that costs \$7 and spend my days at Starbucks (thankful for that)

@Alien_Hobbit On days I’m not at Starbucks or interviewing for jobs (more opportunities lately, hell yea) I’m at the library or another café. Obvs I need to buy food to justify hanging out at restaurants, and um: need to eat to live. The ATM is constantly drained.

@Alien_Hobbit Right now my biggest problem is the shelter. I’m thankful for it, but I’ve been the victim of sexual assault at the shelter two times (cannot do anything about it) and the place has a required church service, 30 mins each day.

@Alien_Hobbit The church part is an ENDLESS and HUGE source of panic for me and often makes my depression worse. I’ve been pushed to harm myself a few times because of hateful preachers spewing vile and bible thumping.

@Alien_Hobbit I do not have a constant income which makes me worried all the time. I’m looking for jobs but I need help. That’s why I’m asking for donations – for my safety and sanity while I find work safe.

@Alien_Hobbit I am hopeful I’ll find a job soon. But I need my sanity to even function which is impossible when I’m stressed over going to church and not being safe at the shelter. This is my plea for help.

@Alien_Hobbit My goal is to find work, repair my car, and get a cheap apartment. Then I want to save money to live with my girlfriend. I honestly need help to be safe and stay alive long enough to find a job.



@Alien_Hobbit Here's the two links where you can donate, use the one that's best for you. Thank you if you can help, in any way. I'll keep trying my hardest. Please donate or retweet this. Paypal: [PayPal.com/Alien_Hobbit](https://www.paypal.com/Alien_Hobbit) / ko-fi: ko-fi.com/Alien_Hobbit

This illustrates how transgender physical lives—and their subsequent digital crowdfunding requests—are shaped by an array of experiences. For @Alien_Hobbit, this involves narrativizing her request for money by adding context she deems important, including sexual assault, homelessness, depression, employment precarity, and religious ridicule. The urge to explain one's circumstances reflects a pressure to provide justification for crowdfunding (Barcelos, 2019; Barcelos & Budge, 2019). In extreme cases, trans crowdfunders provide visual narrative evidence of their needs, such as photographs of eviction notices, screenshots of their checking accounts, and copies of healthcare bills—all digitized and shared in the #TransCrowdFund digital space. This pressure to provide evidence of deservingness is often coupled with bartering goods/services or showing evidence of labor as a strategy for justification. Trans crowdfunders use the hashtag to ask for financial support but with the premise that donors will receive something in return, such as artwork, or with assurances of employment. For instance, @VictoryHammock offers to “draw icons for you in case anyone wants to toss me a couple dollars” and @SpookyJeffton offers to sell pronoun pins, keychains, sew-on patches in exchange for “financial help to escape my abusive family.” Many offer labor or products in exchange for financial donations as a way to circumvent beliefs surrounding their personal “deservingness” of aid. Similarly, @XAUNKitten asks for financial support but with the caveat that they will begin working “20 h of overtime” soon. These forms of justification shift the nature of the #TransCrowdFund digital space from one of communal activism to one of commercial exchange. Despite being a hashtag-bounded digital space created by and for transgender consumers with the express purpose of fulfilling financial requests, trans crowdfunders are compelled to counter their requests by providing evidence of deservingness in how they narrativize their needs. Justification risks further reinforcing marketplace marginalization by reifying a meritocracy where transgender financial requests can be ostensibly approved or denied by the hashtag publics.

4.3 | Signaling identity: Tension between celebration and essentialism

Through the #TransCrowdFund digital space, transgender consumers are able to signal their transgender identity. Signaling identity reflects how a hashtag-bounded digital space is used to indicate transgender group affiliation, thus offering a form of spatial digital embodiment often not afforded to transgender consumers in physical spaces. However, underlying tensions arise between celebration and essentialism. In contrast to spaces coded as cisgender or collectively as LGBT, the #TransCrowdFund digital space centers trans identities as a celebratory act of resistance (i.e., celebration) yet this inadvertently makes ‘trans’ an essentialist signifier (i.e., essentialism) at the risk of rendering other identities (e.g., race, sexual orientation) invisible.

In our data, consumers’ trans identities coalesce in a central digital location demarcated by the hashtag. This, in and of itself, is an unapologetic celebration of transness in the public sphere and reflects hegemonic resistance to marketplace marginalization. Being trans or supporting trans people becomes a code requirement for engaging in the space—a

proxy for belonging. Much like a physical location, consumers can invite others to be there too. For example, @Impulse_Fairy frequently posts her PayPal link to solicit financial support but without the #TransCrowdFund hashtag. After others in the space invite her to use the hashtag, she writes, “Apparently I shoulda been using hashtags for some of my posts. Had no clue. #TransCrowdFund http://paypal.me/Impulse_Fairy Really need help getting my meds/gas/possibly a bit of food. Big thanks.” Those who already operate in the digital space can invite others by commenting on their tweets and encouraging others to use the hashtag or by adding the hashtag via retweets. The #TransCrowdFund digital space is trans-specific, meaning individuals are not lumped together with a monolith of other LGBTQ+ consumers or heteronormative cisgender consumers. Thus, the #TransCrowdFund digital space is used to signal group affiliation as an act of centering—or celebrating—trans identities, with the hashtag operating similarly to brand publics (Arvidsson & Caliandro, 2016).

However, this celebration of trans identities lies in tension with essentializing trans identities. In grouping consumers by their trans affiliation, other personal identities become erased or further essentialized. Trans individuals cannot be spatially disconnected from their trans identities, which increases the potential for transphobic marketplace marginalization. This is only aggravated by multiple differing identities which intersect with being trans including sexuality, class, race, age, religion, and lifestyle. Trans individuals are holistic and multifaceted. Our data reflect a multiplicity of trans identities. For instance, @TimePecan's profile bio reads, “I'm Kai! Parent of possums. Dim Jedi. LDS. Enby/Pro. they/them. Spoonie. Don't call me a tireless advocate. I'm just tired. Venmo: @timepecan.” These descriptors provide evidence of identity-oriented nuances within the #TransCrowdFund space, which often becomes relegated to the sidelines in favor of essentializing transness. Other users draw on additional metacommunicative hashtags to indicate group affiliation beyond their trans identities. In the data, hashtags such as #BlackTransCrowdFund, #GwiththeT (gay trans), #LwiththeT (lesbian trans), #homeless, #disabilitycrowdfund, and others reflect more intersectional identities. These hashtags are coupled with #TransCrowdFund to identify not only multiplicity of identities among transgender consumers in the space but also to call on who is expected to contribute financially to crowdfunding requests as a function of identities. For example, @ReppinSWP posts, “Calling my white followers: RT and pay toward .. A Black trans woman who needs essential care urgently. #EmergencyCrowdFund Thank you. #BlackTransLivesMatter #TransCrowdFund #BlackLivesMatter #BlackTransCrowdFund #LGBT+.” Thus, the #TransCrowdFund digital space signals identity—or group affiliation—and also functions as a mechanism to establish insider/outsider spheres. Signaling identity establishes who should be celebrated in the space—not only as a requester of financial support but also as a donor. Essentialism risks further marginalizing transgender consumers by exoticizing them. In line with trans digital geographies, (Halberstam, 1995, p. 16) warns against “trying to fight power by battling over the relations between signifiers and signifieds while leaving the structures of signification itself intact.” As a hashtag-bounded digital space, #TransCrowdFund is used to signal identity and therefore evade marketplace marginalization. The tensions that arise between celebrating and essentializing trans identities reflect this battle over signifiers. Though the #TransCrowdFund digital space is meant for trans people, using trans as the primary identity marker inadvertently risks erasing trans individuals' other identities.

5 | DISCUSSION

5.1 | Implications for hashtag-bounded digital spaces in consumer culture

Conceiving of the #TransCrowdFund hashtag as a digital space enables theoretical extension of previous streams of literature on digital virtual consumption, digital communities, and consumer culture (Arvidsson & Caliandro, 2016; Belk, 2013; Kozinets et al., 2008; Kozinets et al., 2010). Prior research largely centers on theoretical frameworks grounded in heteronormative and cisnormative thought (Billard et al., 2022; Brock, 2018). In contrast, this study takes a trans-specific theoretical approach by drawing on trans digital geographies. This mirrors previous work grounded in intersectionality, queer theory, critical race theory, and feminist theory—which all serve as conceptual resistors to the default heteronormative and cisnormative frameworks that are common in digital consumer culture studies.

Similar to how “Black folk have made the internet a ‘Black space’” (Brock, 2018, p. 5), our research suggests trans individuals have made the internet a trans space – not queer, not LGBT – but uniquely and distinctly trans. This serves to decenter cisgender heteronormativity as the default identity in the digital consumer culture, and by proxy, in theorization about digital consumer culture. While digital spaces do indeed provide respite from physical spaces for marginalized consumers (Ekpo et al., 2018), our research demonstrates ways in which digital spaces are inclusive but also persistently structured by privilege and potential harm. In our study, the porous borders between digital spaces, for example, generate potential for trans people to be outed or deadnamed. Digital spaces may be used for actualizing consumer daydreams and pursuing consumer desires (Denegri-Knott & Molesworth, 2010) as a form of playful consumerism or pleasurable risk-taking (Drenten & Zayer, 2018). In contrast, our research suggests marginalized consumers may not be afforded the same frivolity digitally, as their desires and daydreams often constitute sheer survival. Thus, contributing to theorization of digital spaces, the trans digital geographies perspective shows how unique harms manifest for particular consumers as a function of their particular marginalized identities. Such issues call for more research not only on digital spaces and the people within those spaces but more importantly on the ways in which people and content move between and through digital spaces. Similar to Brooks et al.’s (2021) concept of content traversal in digital spaces or Boyd and Marwick’s (2011) concept of networked publics, content can be taken out of context or moves across digital borders without consent. These practices of digital culture may have vastly different implications for marginalized transgender consumers further underscoring the importance of drawing on trans theories (e.g., trans digital geographies) to explore trans digital spaces.

Prior research examines hashtag-bounded digital consumption spaces built around brands and activities (Arvidsson & Caliandro, 2016; Rokka & Canniford, 2016). Extending this work, the digital space in our study is not centered around a brand but rather a particular gender identity (e.g., transgender) and activism for that identity (e.g., crowdfunding). Mainstream hashtag movements such as #MeToo and #BlackLivesMatter are of increasing interest to consumer culture scholars given how they reflect inequality and inequity in the marketplace (Prothero and Tadjewski, 2021). Our work contributes to these interests in identifying unique tensions accompanying hashtag-bounded digital spaces for a marginalized consumer group. Transgender people are expected to step up, be visible, confront the system, and lead the charge for change. In our study, they do so by creating a dedicated space of their own for individualized crowdfunding; however, this introduces unanticipated forms of harm as they take these

chances. As Cook (2019, p. 409) writes, hashtag activism movements “have shone a light on the dark underbelly of taking chances: the demand for individuals to step forward and share their voice paints targets on the already vulnerable and marginalized for fear- and anger-filled hate and aggression, repeatedly and relentlessly beating down the voices of change.” Even when a hashtag-bounded digital space is created by and for marginalized consumers—such as in the case of #TransCrowdFund—the harmful forms of domination seep through its blurry borders. Future research should explore how other cases of crowdfunding through hashtag-bounded digital spaces and how the dynamics of these highly individualized practices (e.g., crowdfunding for tuition, cancer treatment, adoption fees) unfold.

For transgender consumers, hashtag-bounded digital spaces are ones of potential liberation but with trade-offs. The space meant to cope with so-called “physical” transphobic marketplace marginalization inadvertently introduces unique new harms, not experienced by cisnormative individuals in crowdfunding spaces, reinforcing findings from research on the ways activist crowdfunding exacerbates the very problems they try to solve (Kenworthy, 2021). Hashtag-bounded digital spaces embrace networked sociality (Oliver & Raney, 2014) to enable community building, identity development, and visibility. However, the trans digital geographies perspective confronts scholars with the need to rethink these concepts from non-cisnormative viewpoints. In this case, the #TransCrowdFund digital space is inherently identity-oriented, to a point of essentializing trans identities. This sets it apart from publics, which are more a vehicle for visibility and publicity rather than identity elaboration. Moreover, the politics of visibility are fraught with tensions for transgender consumers in digital spaces. Publicity that is enjoyed by cisnormative actors in the marketplace (Arvidsson & Caliandro, 2016) is more complicated for transgender individuals.

Lastly, because hashtags are metacommunicative, they offer a valuable gateway for understanding digital spaces in consumer culture. This is particularly important on platforms like Twitter, TikTok, and Instagram in which hashtags are central to delineating communities, relative to other platforms like Reddit, Facebook, and Discord, where threads, groups, and servers bound digital spaces, respectively. To date, hashtags have largely been employed as a data collection mechanism—a methodological tool used to scrape data for a given population. In contrast, our research demonstrates the value of the hashtag itself as a digital space with implications for theorization.

5.2 | Implications for addressing transphobic marketplace marginalization

From a consumer affairs perspective, our study calls on policymakers to consider the myriad of ways transgender consumers experience transphobic marketplace marginalization. Our study shows that their needs are not limited to ‘trans-coded’ activities, such as gender-affirming surgeries or hormone replacement therapy. The trickle-down effect of transphobic marketplace marginalization for transgender consumers manifests in a lack of resources or a lack of protection across a wide array of domains, such as food, shelter, transportation, and entertainment. In adopting a trans digital geographies perspective, this study demonstrates the ways in which a hashtag-bounded digital space can support transgender consumer well-being.

Access to rent payments, food, employment, medical care, and more are supported through the #TransCrowdFund digital space as an act of participatory funding. The #TransCrowdFund digital space harnesses networked digitality to redistribute power, opportunities, and access for



trans individuals. That is, innate in the #TransCrowdFund digital space is the hope that the funding movement will reach a larger audience (relative to in-person options) and generate opportunities to supplement income in the face of transphobic marketplace marginalization. Findings from this research demonstrate how crowdfunding as a hashtag-bounded digital space catalyzes counter-hegemonic fundraising. This study represents a first step to understanding how transphobic marketplace marginalization can be offset by such collective action.

While the #TransCrowdFund space is communal; it also reflects an acutely individualistic form of benevolence, where deservingness is interconnected with donations. Moreover, traditional crowdfunding sites like GoFundMe have been shown to help the people who actually need them the least (Barcelos, 2019). In the case of the #TransCrowdFund digital space, one-off campaigns via peer-to-peer payment systems should be democratizing to combat racism, ableism, and classism; however, as our analysis suggests, some unintended consequences of engaging in the #TransCrowdFund digital space includes experiences such as deadnaming on payment platforms or being reduced to trans-only identities. While the digital space enables resistance, this resistance is only required because of failures in the physical marketplace and public policy.

In line with previous research, transgender consumers turn to digital spaces because of unsafe conditions in their physical lives (e.g., trans youth using Tumblr because their parents are not on Tumblr; Jenzen, 2017). On Twitter, the #TransCrowdFund digital space provides technology-enabled access to a broad community of people and to economic resources. However, one might ask what are the responsibilities of tech platforms to foster safe, non-transphobic spaces (e.g., digital geographies) through formalized policies against deadnaming, harassment, censorship of trans bodies, and other related issues? This study shows using a hashtag-bounded digital space for crowdfunding is helpful but not nearly as stable as consistent physical protections transgender consumer rights. For policy makers, consumer-driven practices should be viewed as a failure in the social safety net and thus a need for institutional protections (e.g., codified laws). Initiatives to protect transgender consumer interests have gained traction (see National Center for Transgender Equality, 2021), yet to date, the marketplace has largely failed to accept or anticipate transgender consumers' unique needs—a failure that constitutes transphobic marketplace marginalization as it intersects with public policy (Bennett et al., 2016).

To address transphobic marketplace marginalization, policymakers must center transgender individuals and nuances in transgender consumer well-being, apart from the LGBT monolith. This study marks a call for more consumer affairs research on transgender consumers specifically drawing on transgender theoretical frameworks. To date, the field of marketing, public policy, and consumer affairs reflects a shocking lack of research on transphobic marketplace marginalization, much less on transgender consumers' needs, joys, values, rituals, and beliefs—all of which are relevant to policy makers. Transgender lives are under attack, as demonstrated through the expansive needs of individuals in our study as well as mainstream news and legislative actions (Trans Legal Mapping Report, 2020). Much of the research on transgender consumers is relegated to transgender studies journals and/or narrowly focused on transgender consumers' health. However, as our study suggests, transphobic marketplace marginalization extends across multiple facets of consumer life. This is a fruitful and much needed domain for future inquiry. Moreover, while much of the research on marketplace marginalization inherently interrogates stressors and oppressive forces, there is much space for examining ways in which transgender consumers draw upon the marketplace for gender euphoria (Jacobsen & Devor, 2022). Notably such research, and the policy implications therein, must be mindful to

explore transgender life, in and of itself, rather than in comparison to cisgender consumers nor as a subset of LGBT consumers.

Our research demonstrates unexpected ways in which transgender consumers must navigate transphobic marketplace marginalization, such as being deadnamed by payment platforms and banking institutions. Policymakers should more deeply explore the unique needs and risks (e.g., mental, physical) experienced by transgender consumers in the marketplace. Indeed, transgender consumers are treated differently and deprived of access to certain marketplace resources (e.g., healthcare, housing, work). When marketplace institutions like insurance providers and homeless shelters fail to provide equitable and safe services to consumers, regardless of gender, the crowdfunding digital space can provide a respite. The latent outcome is increased transphobic marketplace marginalization as the expectation becomes individualized financial support, usually from other trans consumers, rather than systemic policy changes. Using a hashtag-bounded digital space for crowdfunding is a practice of harm reduction and care; however, structural change is still the goal. Hashtag-bounded digital spaces, such as #Trans-CrowdFund, are not a free pass for public institutions to abandon initiatives working toward transgender consumer well-being.

ORCID

Jenna Drenten  <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-9718-3437>

ENDNOTE

¹ Debate in trans studies centers on using the term ‘trans’ versus ‘trans*’ (trans-with-an-asterisk). Trans* emerged from internet search structures but has come to represent broader gender diversity (e.g., genderfluid, intersex; Tompkins, 2014). We recognize trans* has become a contested term—some suggesting it is transmisogynistic while others claim it is inclusive (Serano, 2015); thus, we opt to use trans nomenclature.

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How to cite this article: Hansman, B., & Drenten, J. (2023). Centering transgender consumers in conceptualizations of marketplace marginalization and digital spaces. *Journal of Consumer Affairs*, 1–26. <https://doi.org/10.1111/joca.12520>