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# SILENCING TACTICS: PRONOUN CONTROVERSIES IN A COMMUNITY QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS SITE

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## ABSTRACT

Understanding how and why online professional knowledge sharing communities develop issues with gender inclusion is essential to building safe and respectful environments. Trans and nonbinary gender identities are under constant threat and scrutiny, and trans people frequently face harms in online environments. Through digital ethnography, I explore how an international online programming community, Stack Exchange, responded to the challenges of implementing trans and nonbinary inclusive language policies. I discuss the rhetorical strategies and silencing tactics deployed by the community in response to policy changes. The analysis draws on Dotson's concept of testimonial smothering to argue that epistemic violence prevents dialogue about the importance of respecting preferred pronouns. The paper concludes with reflections on the implementation of pronoun policies in international communities.

Keywords: social epistemology, nonbinary gender, trans gender, epistemic violence, pronouns, stack exchange.

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# 1 INTRODUCTION

Stack Exchange is a network of community questions and answers websites, centred mainly around coding and programming. In late 2019, Stack Exchange introduced a new code of conduct which included an explicit statement about referring to others by their preferred pronouns. This change caused a sequence of events that still affects the community today. This paper follows the way that the community responded to these changes and explores the discourse about trans and nonbinary genders. I deploy the lens of epistemologies of ignorance in my analysis to demonstrate the effect of testimonial smothering in online environments. Testimonial smothering (Dotson, 2011) is a form of epistemic violence that causes people to silence their own experiences and accounts. In discussing these events, I uncover some of the concerns that affect international communities when negotiating pronoun policies and trans and nonbinary gender identities.

This research is guided by questions about how pronoun policies are implemented by online platforms, and what kinds of rhetorical strategies are adopted to discredit the validity of pronoun policies.

This paper builds on previous arguments about the relevance of epistemic injustice to misgendering (Argyriou, 2021), and situates this work in an empirical case. This paper also builds upon work done to understand the safety concerns of women in online knowledge sharing platforms (Menking et al., 2019), and extends this work to diverse gender identities. While other research has focussed on the extremes of geek masculinity (Regehr, 2020), in this paper I emphasise the ways in which the logics of geek masculinity and hegemonic masculinity are mainstreamed into professional knowledge sharing settings.

Throughout this work, I adopt the stance that trans and nonbinary identities have the potential to disrupt gender binaries (Butler, 2004), and adopt a critical stance toward gender binarism. I undertake ethnographic fieldwork with the experience of having worked in the software sector as a technical writer. In this context I was a regular reader of Stack Exchange. As someone who experiences gender as fluid, I am sensitised to the kinds of issues that arise in online spaces for people who identify as nonbinary.

Readers should be aware that the findings section of this paper contains reconstructions of hate speech towards trans and nonbinary people, and therefore may be triggering.

## 1.1 Stack Exchange

Established in 2009, Stack Exchange is a network of community questions and answers (QCA) forums covering a diverse range of topics. The flagship QCA forum on Stack Exchange is Stack Overflow, which is one of the largest online coding communities, with more than 15 million registered accounts and upwards of 50 million monthly users (Brooke, 2021; May et al., 2019). The company who run

Stack Exchange are called Stack Overflow, and they are based in the USA. Stack Overflow as a company not only operate the Stack Exchange network, but also run a careers site for coders and developers, and offer commercial knowledge sharing products. The focus of this paper is the Stack Exchange network and suite of QCA forums. This network cannot be treated as a single site with a single community; it is arguably an institutional setting that harbours many smaller communities and settings which are coordinated by Stack Exchange as an institution. An institution can be understood as a structure that uses texts to coordinate the activities of people (Smith, 1999, p. 196). Stack Exchange uses texts to coordinate the activity of users on the site, such as: blogs, the code of conduct, and platform mechanics such as reputation, and badges.

Knowledge sharing sites like Stack Exchange and Wikipedia, unlike other social media sites, grew from the commons-based and collaborative contentment creation movements (Menking et al., 2019; Reagle, 2013). The basic format of the site is a questions and answers forum, where users can upvote and downvote posts, and earn badges for their activities. Certain activities on the site generate reputation points, and accumulating reputation points opens up access to features of the site.

Stack Exchange dominates Google searches for information about coding and programming, and therefore, much like Wikipedia, has a strong epistemic power (Menking et al., 2019). Arguably, this site can be considered influenced by geek masculinities, both by its identity as a programming community, and by its situation as part of the creative commons movement (Menking et al., 2019).

Stack Exchange has a distinctive approach to moderation, and relies heavily on users moderating each other as peers. While the moderation approach does not easily map to the strategies of other large platforms, Stack Exchange uses a mixture of community-reliant volunteer moderation (Caplan, 2018) and automated moderation (Ponzanelli et al., 2014). Official Stack Exchange moderators are volunteers elected by their community who gain access to a moderator sub-community within the site. There are relatively few elected moderators on Stack Exchange compared to the active user base of the site: 24 moderators on Stack Overflow, and 540 across the entire Stack Exchange network (*Moderators - Stack Exchange*, 2021). However, any user can gain access to moderation tools by accumulating enough reputation points on the site. This means that most of the people who do moderation work are those who have earned enough reputation to access moderation tools, and not those who are elected as moderators. Those users do not necessarily have a strong connection to Stack Exchange as an institution. In other research, similar approaches to moderation have been linked with increases in alt-right opinions (Jasser et al., 2021).

Previous research on Stack Exchange has shown that the network has a longstanding issue with underrepresentation of women and under participation of women. This is evident on Stack Overflow (Nivala et al., 2020; Vasilescu et al., 2013), and it is also evident elsewhere on the Stack Exchange network. One study of the Graphic Design subsite, a field that typically has gender parity, estimated

that only 4% of the participants on the subsite were female (Dubois et al., 2020). Previous research specifically on female participation in Stack Exchange has relied on using computational models to determine the gender of posters, based on checking the username and profile picture for features that indicate gender (Brooke, 2021; Dubois et al., 2020; Ford, Harkins, et al., 2017; Vasilescu et al., 2013).

## 1.2 Trans and nonbinary experiences online

Social power regulates gender by reducing it to a binary of masculine or feminine identity, rendering other ways of relating to gender impossible or unthinkable (Butler, 2002). Gender identities outside of the binary offer opportunities to disrupt the social power that enforces the gender binary (Butler, 2004, p. 48). Trans and nonbinary identities are examples of such disruptive gender identities.

The internet offers a range of ways in which trans and nonbinary people are made visible, to each other and to the world. This can cause issues for trans people, who are more likely to experience harassment online compared to cis people (Powell et al., 2020). Harassment does not need to be targeted to cause harm; many trans people face "incidental harm" (Scheuerman et al., 2018) though witnessing content that is harmful but which is not directed at them personally.

Misgendering – or referring to someone in a way that does not respect their gender identity - is a common form of harassment that trans and nonbinary people experience online and offline. Misgendering is experienced chiefly through language and testimony, and can often be a result of linguistic conventions at a structural level (Argyriou, 2021). Being misgendered causes trans and nonbinary people to feel stigma, and previous research has suggested that this stigma is experienced most frequently by people who identify as genderqueer (McLemore, 2015). One way that misgendering can be prevented is through ensuring that people can state or display their pronouns. A study of trans and nonbinary college students found that people often appreciate the opportunity to declare their preferred pronouns in advance, so that they do not have to repeatedly come out (Goldberg et al., 2019). The same study also found that people who prefer the pronoun "they" experience the most resistance when asserting their preference of pronouns (Goldberg et al., 2019).

Being "out" in an online space also means dealing with the ways in which others impose stereotypes on people with LGBTQ+ identities (McKee, 2004). LGBTQ+ people may be strategic about the social networks where they are "out" about their sexuality or gender identity in order to avoid discrimination or harassment (Ford, Milewicz, et al., 2019; Talbot et al., 2020). However, the internet can also help trans and nonbinary people to explore their gender identities, for example, by allowing access to new concepts that describe their experiences (Scheuerman et al., 2018). For trans people, social media can provide a host of different ways to access information about the process of transitioning (Miller, 2017), and can be important for emotional support (Haimson, 2020).

### 1.3 Epistemic Violence and Testimony

In this paper, I explore how epistemic ignorance causes trans people to smother their testimony about their experiences online. Testimony can be understood as "any kind of telling in and through which the expression and transmission of knowledge becomes possible" (Medina, 2013, p. 28), which includes speech, writing, and digital communications that have the intent to convey the knowledge of the speaker.

Testimonial smothering is when a speaker withholds information from an exchange due to some external threat, and it is a form of silencing (Dotson, 2011). Dotson (2011) argues that testimonial smothering is a form of epistemic violence caused by pernicious ignorance. A pernicious ignorance arises from a reliable ignorance. Following Dotson's definitions, a "reliable ignorance" is an ignorance that arises from a known epistemic gap that is not necessarily harmful (Dotson, 2011). For example, it is possible to be ignorant about transgender people's experiences in the workplace, and be reflectively aware of that ignorance, without that ignorance causing harm. The ignorance might instead be a motivator to learn more. That ignorance becomes a "pernicious ignorance" when it can cause harm to someone in a given context. A pernicious ignorance might occur when an institution such as a large employer is ignorant to the harm of "deadnaming" (using a transgender person's pre-transition name) and that employer maintains a system that does not allow staff to update their names on their ID badges, forcing their transgender staff to be misgendered at work – a situation that occurred at Alphabet, Google's parent company (Mayo, 2021).

Dotson argues that a linguistic exchange leads to epistemic violence when an audience refuses to reciprocate in the exchange due to a pernicious ignorance. In certain circumstances, this kind of epistemic violence can lead to testimonial smothering. Dotson gives the following three linked circumstances as precondition to a speaker smothering their own testimony: (1) that the content of the testimony carries some risk to the speaker; (2) that the audience has demonstrated a testimonial incompetence to the speaker; and (3) that the testimonial incompetence arises from a pernicious ignorance (Dotson, 2011).

## 2 STUDY DESIGN

### 2.1 Methods

The data for this paper were drawn from ethnographic observation on the Stack Exchange network, herein referred to as SE. During ethnographic observation, key issues were identified from the problematic of gender, taking up the standpoint of nonbinary users and readers. Through observation, a research question was developed about the implementation of language inclusive policies and the rhetorical strategies used to discredit inclusive language. Observation was

conducted as an outsider and involved being present on the field site for four stretches during 2021. The observation focused initially on gender discourses on SE, and then developed a focus on the period during which the new code of conduct was implemented (Summer 2019 to Spring 2020). Having several shorter engagements allowed me to refine my observation strategies in response to my evolving understanding of the standpoint perspective. Analysis is based on memos written during observation and on the corpus of threads, documents, and other materials that were created through the observation. The issues were followed to other sites, social media, and blogs where they were being discussed, using a mobile approach to multi-sited ethnography (Hine, 2011), following the phenomenon and the discourse rather than individual subjects. Connections were traced through a wide variety of approaches, through exploration of the "online landscape" (Hine, 2007). In reconstructing the effects of implementing a language policy, a timeline approach was taken (Smith, 1990a). This involved comparing competing narratives about the introduction of the code of conduct and triangulating with other sources to compile an objective temporal ordering.

The main sites of observation were SE Meta, a subsite of SE where users discuss SE, blog posts written by SE, and blog posts written by SE users. However, the observation in total included a diverse cross section of the sub-sites and features of SE, and sites are discussed in the findings where relevant. Sites observed outside of SE included social media such as Reddit and Twitter; technology news sites; and technology blogs.

The strength of an ethnographic approach for this research is that it avoids some of the pitfalls in previous research on gender in SE. Previous research has relied on using usernames to predict gender, and researchers using these methods generally find that they cannot determine gender at all for between a third to a half of their samples (Ford, Harkins, et al., 2017; Vasilescu et al., 2013). Research on trans programmers has highlighted the inadequacy of name prediction approaches and the need to use approaches that consider the spectrum of gender (Ford, Milewicz, et al., 2019). By focusing on talk about gender rather than on the gender presentation of individual users, this research is able to develop a nuanced understanding about gender on SE.

## 2.2 Ethics

Where quotes are used in this paper, they are fictionalised composite quotes (Markham, 2012). These quotes may combine elements from several sources and are written to capture a typical exchange rather than one specific exchange. The reason for this is twofold; first to reduce searchability and thereby lessen the chance of identification; second to avoid focussing on individual interactions within the material, to keep the analysis at the social level. Usernames are also fictionalised and based on the general character of usernames on the site.

Material on SE is public and made available through a creative commons license, at time of writing this license is CC BY-SA v4 (*What Is the License for the Content I Post?*, 2021). No private material from SE, or from other websites and blogs, is quoted, and a sensitivity is taken toward which material might constitute "private" in these spaces (Markham & Buchanan, 2012). For example, while blog posts by SE users are publicly available, they are not quoted directly or indirectly in this paper.

# 3 FINDINGS

## 3.1 Telling Histories

In 2019, SE updated its code of conduct to specify that "be nice" means that users should refer to each other using their preferred pronouns, where they are stated. The events surrounding this change stirred up a huge controversy across the SE networks.

Unfolding the history of what transpired around these events reveals conflicts in the institutional sequencing of the timeline. Comparing between all these different retellings of the history of events, I reconstructed a timeline of my own to find an objective sequence of key events (Smith, 1990a).

Throughout my investigation of the history of the implementation of the new code of conduct, it seemed important to the community to recount the timeline of events, just as it seemed important for SE to offer some record of events themselves. There are a few key posts that are community written which contain a record of events and there is even a website dedicated to presenting a timeline of the events that transpired.

Most intriguing to me was that the majority of the community response to the new code of conduct happened before the new code of conduct was known and was based mostly on community hearsay about the content of the code of conduct. As the accounts of the history settle, the events are constructed to obfuscate the harms done to the trans community in favour of playing to a narrative about the institution losing touch with its core and acting against the interests of the community as a whole.

In my reconstruction of events, I start by positioning a few of the changes that SE were making to the business model of the site. In June 2019, paid advertisements were introduced to the site. Then, in September 2019, SE updated their creative commons licensing from CC BY-SA v3 to CC BY-SA v4. SE controversially applied this change in retrospect to contributions on the site. These are all changes that were negatively received by the community. Around this time, Stack Overflow appointed a new CEO. In user created timelines, these events were often positioned as evidence that the management of SE, and SE as an institution, are losing touch with its core userbase.

In September 2019, SE signalled to its moderators and staff that updates were incoming to the code of conduct. Immediately after this, one moderator resigned, citing in their resignation that they had been hurt by recent events, and that this was part of a larger pattern of harm towards trans and nonbinary people. The day after, a different moderator was fired outside of the established processes for the removal of moderators. The textual reconstruction of events frequently presented by other members of the community and by SE allow the reader to infer that the resignation and the firing are related. The firing was misattributed to bigoted behaviour, which is contested by the accounts of both involved moderators. This move is important to highlight and discuss; any solidarity with the trans community is quashed and replaced with vitriol that SE would fire a moderator unfairly. This is a subtle tactic for silencing a broader discussion about harms done to the trans community.

Following from this, other moderators started to resign in sympathy. The first sympathy resignations began in late September 2019 and continue until time of writing. From an analysis of the 35 resignations that took place between 28th September 2019 and 31 December 2019, only two mentioned the violence toward the LGBTQ+ community, 24 mentioned the moderator who was fired, and 8 specifically mentioned that they disagreed with the new code of conduct. Of those 8, three are very overt in saying that they disagree with referring to people by their preferred pronouns. These kinds of statements fed into a narrative that later emerges outside of SE, which positioned this incident as a case of political correctness gone awry, or a case of forcing Christian groups to accept LGBTQ+ framings that curtail their freedom of religious expression. Other resignations stated that their reasons for resigning were the changes to site licensing, or general concerns with the quality of the site. These statements fed into a contesting narrative that emerged within SE about the incoming management changes exploiting the userbase for financial reasons. A community written timeline springs up, which was frequently cited in these resignation posts. That timeline omitted the story of the original resigned moderator from the retelling and did not mention anything about the harms done to the trans community. It seems that the community found it easier to side-line the potentially difficult conversation about the treatment of trans and nonbinary people within SE in favour of rallying around the common cause of the way in which one moderator was unfairly fired.

At or around this time, users started to change their usernames in support of the fired moderator, adding phrases like “Reinstate the moderator” to their names. Eleven days after the original incident, SE made an official response. At this point, the issue at hand was known to be related to the upcoming code of conduct changes, and was presumed to be about pronouns, but the code of conduct was not yet public. Members of the community created a “Pronoun Assist” script in October 2019, described in more detail later in this paper.

Members of the moderator community wrote two letters to SE on SE Meta in October 2019, titled *Dear Stack Exchange,* which focussed on the harms done

to SE's relationship the community, and *The Lavender Letter*, which focussed on the harms done to the LGBTQ+ community on SE, specifically on homophobic and transphobic incidents. These letters were open for anyone to sign to show their support.

The new code of conduct was officially published on 10 October 2019, accompanied by an FAQ. The original FAQ received a large number of downvotes and attracted a lot of vicious transmisogynistic comments, and it was closed down and replaced with a new version on 22 October 2019.

The fired moderator eventually successfully issued a legal challenge to SE. Around November 2019 SE announced that community ads can no longer be used to promote legal fundraisers, which implies that there was some large-scale activity at this time to promote the crowdfund campaign. As a researcher, these kinds of actions, combined with the number of users who had changed their names in solidarity, lead me to investigate what had happened.

In the months after, SE made the first tentative steps towards repairing the damage done to the community, through backtracking on changes to creative commons licensing (March 2020), introducing diversity training for elected moderators (June 2020) and responding to *The Lavender Letter* (October 2020).

### 3.2 Reflections on Histories

In the official textual construction of this event, there is a complete "textual silence" (Huckin, 2002) about the very fact that the issue at hand (pronouns) is raised in relation to trans and nonbinary identities. In the code of conduct, the imperative to use stated pronouns is broadly outlined under the heading of "no bigotry". The relevance of trans and nonbinary identities is instead made clear in the FAQs. FAQs on SE are presented in a similar manner to their main questions and answer content. SE distances themselves from the responsibility of contextualising the reasoning behind referencing preferred pronouns, and places that responsibility in the hands of its community. In not explaining the issue, SE avoid themselves taking a stance or making their stance explicit. This is something that happens frequently when companies perform lip service to LGBTQ+ inclusivity, which is a phenomenon sometimes called "rainbowwashing" (Wolowic et al., 2017; Wulf et al., 2022).

When we follow the debate away from the platform and towards technology news sources, the positioning of trans and nonbinary identities becomes clear. The firing of a moderator is called "punishment for crimes against 'wokeness'" in the more alt-right leaning news comments. Invocation of "woke" alludes sarcastically to what is seen as a left-wing youth movement that has a performative approach to inclusion, implying that performing "wokeness" is about appearing morally superior without doing any of the work. If the traditionally right wing, anti-trans corners of the internet think that these actions are produced as part of a theatre of inclusion, it may be a surprise that LGBTQ+ communities within SE agree in some sense

with this position. In these circles, while the rhetoric of "woke" isn't invoked, the conversation is about how the policy conceived by SE is only a lip service the real work and doesn't go far enough to meet the needs of the community.

From this, two different discursive moves become apparent. The first discursive move occurs on SE. In this move, the story of the original resignation is gradually erased from the various accounts, and instead the change to the code of conduct is framed as the disruptive force that symbolises the growing disconnect between SE as a business and SE as a community. The second discursive move happens outside of SE. This move lionizes the fired moderator and positions them as an oppressed voice of reason and a lone warrior against so-called politically correct language movements – perhaps against their own intentions.

### *3.2.1 Global Contexts*

Iterations of the discussion about the code of conduct on SE Meta make clear that one thing was sorely lost in the production of the code of conduct: how those with English as a second or other language understand pronouns and the politics of pronouns. In the below example, I present a typical exchange:

> Tomer: In my native language, the same pronoun is used for both he and for gender neutral purposes. I sometimes have to correct myself, but I still try.
>
> AndrewL: Imagine how hard this is for speakers of languages that don't even have pronouns! At least you know where to start. SE can't teach every user how to write in English.
>
> AI_dragon: Sometimes I see posts where the grammar is so bad, I don't think users are capable of understanding being corrected on their pronouns. We'd have to ban everyone.
>
> null: Average users will be so confused by all this

*Conversation re-enacted from SE Meta*

Those who speak English as a second language were learning for the first time that "he" is not a gender-neutral term or reveal that they were taught to use "he" as a gender-neutral term as part of their English language education. To a specifically US and anglophone audience, the subtext of introducing this pronoun discourse was that of inclusivity, but without a knowledge of the US context this subtext becomes difficult to grasp. It represents a reliable ignorance (Dotson, 2011), but not a pernicious ignorance, on behalf of users who are speaking English as a second language. It is a reliable ignorance because we should expect that an audience outside of an anglophone context does not know about the contemporary issues around pronouns.

The audience for SE is global, with results from a survey of users suggesting that the top three nations who use the site are: the US, with approximately 20% of users; followed by 13% from India, and 6% from Germany (*Stack Overflow Developer Survey*, 2020). Despite this, the discourse of the site makes apparent the assumption that everyone shares a US frame of reference for societal issues. This ignoring of the global context allows a hermeneutical injustice (Medina, 2013, p. 91) to surface, as the parties involved in conversation lack access to the same conceptual knowledge.

Global contexts include a wide variety of different understandings and approaches to gender and gender roles. For example, some cultures and contexts already include concepts for diverse and nonbinary genders, the existence of which are often erased or changed through colonialism (Benson, 2020; Chatterjee, 2018). The second largest audience for SE is India, as noted above. India and South Asia have a unique cultural context for gender diversity, and recognise a variety of gender identities outside of the westernised binary, with varying degrees of legal protection (Dutta et al., 2019). The use of the word trans in the Indian discourse is contested, carrying substantial colonialist baggage (Chatterjee, 2018), with the preference being towards using gender diverse as the umbrella term (Jain & Rhoten, 2020). Despite the strong presence of India in SE, there didn't seem to be room for Indian and South Asian perspectives to emerge within the discourse around pronoun policies.

### *3.2.2 The Risk of Speaking Up*

A clear case of testimonial smothering emerges from this debate. *The Lavender Letter* states that the nature of the debate around pronouns caused harms to the trans and nonbinary community, at times in the form of direct bullying and harassment. However, the risk for someone within that community to speak outwardly on SE Meta about their experiences is high.

In this environment, risks can have very real consequences, for example, posting something that is heavily downvoted can cause reputation loss and could therefore cause the poster to lose access to important site functions. For those who use their real identities when posting, as is encouraged by the entanglement of SE with social media and job markets, this can also pose genuine threat to personal security. Being identifiable in real life from such posts could easily lead to trans people encountering physical threats and harassment in the real world (Scheuerman et al., 2018).

As previous interactions about the matter are very visible, a user can quickly assess for themselves how likely it is that the audience is competent to hear their testimony. If they see mostly repetitions of familiar bigoted strategies, they will surmise that the audience is incompetent. In this case the audience is incompetent because it has a reliable ignorance about the importance of pronouns within the trans and nonbinary communities. This ignorance is pernicious because it can cause

harm to individuals by resulting in misgendering. When a user is aware that the message they want to send will be rejected by the community, they are likely to simply not post and therefore are subject to smothering their own testimony (Dotson, 2011).

### *3.2.3 User interventions*

SE contains and encourages multiple ways for users to interact with the API and data that is housed on the platform. Among these is a subsite known as Stack Apps, where users can share scripts and browser extensions that they have written in order to in some way extend or modify their experiences of the site. These scripts can be understood as ways in which the users resist the affordances of the site and co-create their experiences and opportunities on the site by applying their technical expertise.

Popular user scripts are varied and creative, for example, one automates writing common comments, one allows you to virtually "punch" annoying users. Among the most popular of these scripts is an extension that allows users to display the preferred pronouns of other users next to their usernames on posts.

The post that presents the instructions for installing this script directly references the incoming code of conduct, so we could see this as a community response. This oppositional action shows that what the community want is to be able to exercise some active agency over the terms by which their pronouns and known and used. If it were a standard function of the site to enable users to prominently display their pronouns, it would also enable the community to hold others accountable for ignoring this information. My experience of using this script while browsing the site was that while it was relatively rare to spot someone stating preferred pronouns on Stack Overflow, it was more common on the non-technology oriented subsites of SE, such as SE Meta.

## 3.3 Common anti-trans argumentative strategies

In this part of the analysis, I put forward two of the more common anti-trans argumentative strategies that users invoke: constructed imperilment and compelled speech. These argumentative strategies are in no way unique to anti-trans rhetoric, but will be familiar to those studying hate speech against many marginalised groups. The similarities between these tactics when used in transphobic settings and in racist, anti-immigrant, and nationalist settings are indicative of power relations that benefit from constructing some lives as more worthy than others (Snorton, 2013).

### *3.3.1 Constructed Imperilment*

Something I commonly observed in discussions was an appeal to ways in which people might be wronged by using the correct pronouns. The effect of these argumentative moves is to imply a hierarchy of being wronged and prevent others

from asserting their preferences. It purposefully ignores that people might occupy multiple marginalised identities. The following example shows a typical exchange:

> RegEx_Fan: Some people might be made really uncomfortable by having to use certain pronouns, and those people could have that problem on account of having autism or being a good Christian. Why do we prioritise the discomfort of trans people?
>
> HappyShark If I don't feel comfortable saying "they", I should be allowed to not write pronouns at all.
>
> Fimbrethil: Totally agree.
>
> RegEx_Fan: It seems like making a mountain out of a molehill, not like we can tell who anyone is online anyway.

*Conversation re-enacted from SE Meta*

The typical focus for discomfort in these conversations is on the use of the pronoun "they" as a singular personal pronoun, and it was very rare to see other pronoun strategies mentioned. In these exchanges, using "they" in this way is imagined to cause difficulties for either religious or personal reasons.

The argumentative moves shown above fit well with the "constructed imperilment" (Marcks & Pawelz, 2020) tactics also seen in far-right discourse; it is a movement towards denying trans people's rights to exist by implying that their existence endangers the existence of others. Constructed imperilment has been studied in the context of anti-immigration rhetoric (Marcks & Pawelz, 2020), but here we see the same kinds of rhetorical strategies used against pronouns.

If we accept that others might be wronged by using the correct pronouns, we must then choose who we wrong, and who it is more important to not wrong. This falsely presents a situation wherein asking to be respected constitutes a wrong. This is an argumentative move toward pre-emptively silencing someone from making their preferences known. It is also possible to observe in these interactions a fear of the disruptive other. Introducing these disruptive others disrupts the comfort of male hegemony by presenting a reminder of contested and divisive real-world issues in otherwise sheltered online bubbles (Nakamura, 2002, p. 37).

### *3.3.2 The "Compelled Speech" Argument*

A commonly repeated argument against mandating the use of preferred pronouns is that would constitute a class of "compelled speech". An appeal to "compelled speech" is specifically an appeal to the US 1st Amendment, which protects the freedom of speech for US citizens. The below reconstruction is typical of an exchange on the matter. Very similar exchanges occurred on SE Meta, and in other sources.

> DiverChuck: I don't want to be in a community where I have to use modern pronouns. It's against my preferences. No way I'm making an account there.
>
> Chris72: It should be ILLEGAL. It is COMPELLED SPEECH. They FORCE people to LIE.
>
> STEMhamster: The "activists" should be helping to protect our freedom of speech instead of wasting our time by inventing a new gender every day.

*Conversation re-enacted from comments on technology news websites*

In recent lawsuits, the US 1st Amendment has been used to argue for the right to not use trans inclusive language, and has not succeeded (Eckes, 2021). Appealing to laws such as this may offer an individual protection to speak as they wish, but they do not offer protection from other laws that are targeted to prevent discrimination.

A question remains as to whether implementing a pronoun policy really can be understood as compelled speech. From a social epistemological point of view, we can view compelled speech as speech that has been elicited from an agent, where the speech does unjust harm against the agent (McKinney, 2016). The flaw to arguing that a pronoun policy elicits unjust speech in the context of SE is twofold. Firstly, such speech is not coerced or manipulated from the poster. There is always a possibility of writing an exchange in a professional format that does not make use of pronouns at all. Secondly, all questions and answers on SE are to some extent co-owned and editable by anyone else, making literal forms of compelled speech – someone changing your own words – inevitable. Regardless, a poster always retains the ability to delete a post or remove their username from a post if it is too popular to be deleted. There is always a way to retain control over the speech act if the poster feels that they are harmed by the way that their speech has been altered. In this case, the speech does not seem to meet the requirements to be compelled speech.

Recourse to "freedom of speech" has been noted elsewhere as a common strategy to avoid using preferred pronouns by those that identify as within the alt-right and men's rights movements (Haslop & O'Rourke, 2021). Significant in the case of SE is that the same discourse is used outside of these contexts. Whether this indicates a deeper relation of ruling between the extreme men's rights movements and geek masculinities is uncertain. Similar relationships have been noted between anti-trans hate campaigns and liberal democratic positions (Gill-Peterson, 2021). Arguably, such alt-right and anti-trans frames act as a coordinating force in these discussions, with the exact same arguments and logics repeating themselves in professional contexts.

Situations like this open up to "mixed legibility", a common feature of microaggressions (Schroer & Bain, 2020). Utterances with mixed legibility are instances where statements are deliberately intended to convey different messages to different audiences, in a way that enables the speaker to plausibly deny any intended harm (Schroer & Bain, 2020). Some may choose to read these appeals to

freedom of speech as a fair-minded, classically liberal approach to public discourse; but those trans and nonbinary people who are familiar with this rhetoric and their harms will understand it as an attack on their position as knowers. These attacks on the embodied knowledge of gender held by trans and nonbinary people presents misgendering as simply exercising free speech.

### 3.4 The Burden of Proof

Ignorance about women and gender minorities experiences online and in the workplace is a reliable ignorance that can become a pernicious ignorance when it is used to stifle debates that are invoked to improve those experiences. In many contexts, the primary mechanism by which such debates are shut down is a recourse to the burden of proof.

"Proof" is itself a discourse that surfaces on SE about discussions on discrimination or exclusion. Vocal, usually male-presenting users demand "proof" that women and gender minorities have a worse experience on the site. Individual experience, within this discourse, is not considered "proof". It is not always clear what would constitute satisfactory "proof", but the consensus appears to be that "data" would be considered proof. Commentors suggest that admissible "data" might be text mined from posts in a uniform, "objective" way. However, "data" from the internal Stack Overflow survey that shows women, gender minorities and people of colour saying in larger numbers that they do not feel that they belong to the Stack Overflow community (*Stack Overflow Developer Survey*, 2020) is not considered admissible "data" in support of this claim.

I suggest that this kind of argument shows "data" as part of an ideological ordering of the social (Smith, 1990b, p. 145). From this perspective, in order for something to go from observation to fact it must be rendered objective through "data" (Smith, 1990b, p. 45), the possibility of knowledge that arises from situated embodiment is completely closed off.

Not only do woman and gender minorities need to be resilient to experiences of harmful behaviours, but they also have to "prove" that these behaviours happen if they want to speak about them. Limiting the concept of "proof" to a very rigid and perhaps unattainable set of standards is a way of silencing talk about what discrimination means in this environment. By some accounts of epistemic ignorance, this kind of action could be considered a way of discrediting testimony before receiving it (Mills, 2017), which can also be understood as a form of testimonial injustice.

In addition to that, people who are harmed by these behaviours are also expected to be the ones who correct it. Reading posts by members of the LGBTQ+ community shows repeatedly that people feel that the institution stirs up controversies, then abandons potentially vulnerable people to speak out and police behaviour themselves. We see this as evidenced by the timeline, with SE outsourcing the FAQs for the code of conduct to the community, expecting that

trans people and their allies will fill in the silence about the meaning of pronouns. This is a problematic positioning, and does not consider the safety of the community (Menking et al., 2019).

There have been numerous incidents on SE of male posters creating female-presenting alternative accounts in order to gather evidence about the state of discrimination on the site. While some have chosen to remain silent about their experience, there is one well known instance where the user posted a detailed breakdown of their interactions on the site as a female user, concluding that his experience was the same, if not better, than his experience as a male-presenting user. The user claimed that in many cases the community was more willing to help them under their new female guise. This post was presented as "proof" that the site has no issues being welcoming to women.

While these behaviours might be understood as "identity tourism" (Nakamura, 2002, p. 40), the recreational appropriation of identity in order to take a vacation from one's real life, I would argue that this is not the case here. These incidents take the shape of espionage, a secret mission to capture the view of the other and expose their perceived lies. They are not a vacation; they are a fact-finding mission.

For women and trans people wanting to challenge this idea of proof, the task may seem impossible. The risks of engaging in this debate are twofold. One - for some, engaging this debate means coming out as a female, trans, or gender diverse user on the site, who might be choosing to occupy a gender neutral, or even deliberately masculine user persona. Two – with this disclosed, the user potentially faces harassment from others for occupying a marginalised gender position, as is clearly demonstrated when others have tried to explain what the gender diverse user experience is like. We see here a pernicious ignorance among the user base. They are reliably ignorant about the experiences of others but are also excessively defensive about the possibility of a difference in experience. Their need to preserve their ignorance about misogyny and harassment faced by gender diverse users in these spaces causes them to violently shut down these conversations.

## 4 LIMITATIONS

This paper concentrates on the implementation of a code of conduct in one professional knowledge sharing setting, which is heavily weighted toward male participation. Communities that are less international and that have a different balance of gender might encounter completely different challenges in implementing pronoun policies.

Further research in this area could be enriched by including interview data. In the context of this paper, I felt that using interview data was ethically problematic, as it may have presented issues of privacy violation to participants who occupy vulnerable positions (Korn, 2019).

## 5 CONCLUSION

In this paper, I have explored the implementation of a pronoun policy, and examined the rhetoric and tactics used to discredit pronoun policies. I found that the rhetorical strategies that are used to discredit pronoun policies draw on the same argumentative concepts often seen in alt-right settings, and have marked similarities to the strategies of hate that are used against other marginalised groups.

In the case of SE, a conversation that should have been about an online platform can do justice for trans people became obscured by a debate about how an institution should balance priorities between its business model and its volunteer moderator staff. In this way, pernicious ignorance is mobilised an institutional setting as a tactic to silence oppositional discourse.

Strikingly, this paper shows trans and nonbinary people cast in the role of the disruptive other, bringing with them the threat of expulsion for not following the pronoun rules.

Among the various silencing tactics, this paper reflected on ways in which different ideological deployments of the notions of proof can distort opportunities for discussion by purposefully devaluing embodied experiences. Such renderings of data as the ultimate bearer of truth are ultimately used to silence and stifle discussion about lived experiences. These discourses are often complicit in preventing marginalised groups from making epistemological contributions.

Transmisogyny has long been recognised as a phenomenon, but intersectional understandings of anti-trans hate speech often fall by the wayside (Scheuerman et al., 2018). In this paper, I find that hate speech is directed equally to trans people and to people who prefer to use the gender neutral pronoun "they". In line with Scheuerman et al (2018), this study finds that there are missed opportunities to design and co-create policies that disrupt intersectional marginalisation. An inadequate understanding of how gender and cultural dynamics play out on SE led ultimately to an implementation of policy that caused harm, which might have been avoided by properly engaging with the community.

Other research has found that low levels of content moderation and pseudo-anonymity are key ingredients in helping alt-right spaces to flourish (Jasser et al., 2021), and has shown that alt-right discourse uses emotions to mobilise hateful actions (Marcks & Pawelz, 2020). In this paper, I demonstrate that these tactics exist in internet settings that are not considered radicalised or aligned with the alt-right. While this paper could not investigate the relationship of coordination between sites like Stack Exchange and sites like 4Chan or Reddit, future work could focus on the bleed through and propagation of alt-right views into the everyday internet.

This paper raises important questions about pronoun policies that require further research and investigation. Firstly, a question arises regarding what kind of information should be included in a pronoun policy. For example, within the data corpus of this paper, I found that neopronouns (such as ze or ey) were seldom

mentioned, and other pronoun strategies used by queer people (such as dropping pronouns entirely) were mostly absent from discussions. Further research could explore introducing other pronoun strategies to online communities. Secondly, a question arises regarding intercultural communication and pronouns. There exists a strong tension between the dominant westernised, anglophone interpretations of trans and nonbinary gender issues, and the manyfold, nuanced expressions of trans and nonbinary gender issues on the global stage. These tensions deserve research attention in order to improve approaches to inclusivity in large, international online communities.

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