

From the Closet to the Stars. Metaphoric Construals of Gender Identity in Tumblr. A Case Study.

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1. Introduction

The first two years of the 2020 decade can be arguably described as being characterised by an incipient “new LGBTQ culture war” (Douthat 2022). Probably the best-known example of social debate around the notion of gender is epitomised by what could be called “the JK Rowling controversy,” including under this term the social reaction to Rowling’s posting a number of tweets about “people who menstruate,” in which she reflected on the use, and definition, of the word “women.” This is just one of the examples that shows the importance of newly defined gender identities in the 21st century, at a time when the number of people who identify as LGTB+ in the US continues rising (from 5.6% in 2020 to 7.1. % in 2021) (Jones 2022). Several interpretations can be provided to explain this trend, although two are of particular importance (Douthat 2022). On the one hand, there is a wider social acceptance of LGBTQ+ identities. Likewise, topics such as sexual fluidity, transgender or non-binary experiences seem to be more widely understood as an intrinsic part of human experience, while still acknowledging that gender is a social construction (Douthat 2022; Yenor 2017). On the other hand, however, this statistical change in the self-attribution of gender and sexual identities seems to partly be explained as a consequence of the influence of online social communities of imitation - especially identified within Tumblr and TikTok (Douthat 2022).

Two key aspects, thus, lie at the core of this chapter: the increasing importance of social media in contemporary communication and the pervasiveness of ongoing debates in how and why gender is discursively and socially constructed. At the intersection of both ideas lies the increasing body of research which does not only try to explain how teenagers and young people communicate via social media (García-Gómez, 2017, 2019, 2020; Ringrose and Renolds 2012), but also the (negative) impact of Internet practices in the development of teenager’s gender roles (García-Gómez 2010, 2020). The importance of social and discursive practices that may help to express, reinforce, or construct the self’s identity is particularly prominent in the month of June, coinciding with the commemoration of the Stonewall Riots on June 28th (usually known as the Pride celebrations). On that day a number of marches or collective events are organised with the aim of not only making visible the existence of different gender and sexual identities but also of fighting for equality and dignity between them all. Previous studies have shown that there seems to be some kind of relation between members of the LGBTQ+ community and their reference to LGBTQ+ dates and celebrations (Goodman and Garcia, 2021). While the content in these posts ranges from superficial references to the day to deeper reflections about how the members of the community are marginalized, the importance of social media in the construction of LGBTQ+ identities cannot be neglected.

Generally speaking, social media offers a particular sense of liberty, stripped of the pressure and the expectations present in conventional social interactions. In this environment, users are encouraged to freely express themselves and to show some authenticity (Oakley 2016). Thus, in the last decade, social media has played “a key role in the individuals’ understanding of gender, race and

ethnicity” and, consequently, in the construction of their identity, as it allows the emergence and the consolidation of new discourses that defy or modify the social norm (Ghaffari 2020: 162; McMahon & Batsleer 2016 as cited in Ghaffari 2020). The case of Tumblr seems of particular importance of this, with its relevance in the development of gender and sexual identities being frequently highlighted (Dame 2016; Haimson et al. 2019; Sharp & Shannon 2020). Previous research on Tumblr and gender identities has focused on the role of tags in the creation of (gender) identities (Jacobsen et al. 2019: 64), but seldom has research focused on the explanation of the cognitive background that is activated for constructing gender identities in this particular social media, and on how these are interpreted by different members of a community of users (cf. Andoutsopoulos 2006; Dayter 2016).

It is this relation between the discursive construction of (gender) identities and the activation of cognitive background that this chapter seeks to explore. Following a cognitive linguistics approach, the main objective of the chapter is thus identifying the cognitive constructs which are discursively activated by Tumblr users when referring to gender. And specifically, the chapter seeks to explain how these constructs can be explained as being related to cultural knowledge shared by the online community of users and/or by the metaphorical potential. Three research questions underlie this chapter: i. Which are the most commonly activated frames by Tumblr users when referring to gender and how do these relate to the construction of the (self’s and other’s) gender identity?, ii. how do these frames contribute to profiling particular aspects in the construction of gender identities in Tumblr, hence resulting in a particular representation of those identities?, and iii. how do different domains interact with the co(n)textual knowledge shared by Tumblr users hence allowing for a possible intersubjective alignment of users via ambient affiliation?

2. Constructing collective identity in social media

A significant number of studies have been done in the last fifteen years which have tried to explain how social identities are constructed on the internet (Andoutsopolous 2006: 423). One of the earliest studies on the construction of online identities was Herring’s (1993, 2003) work on language and gender, though her focus was on variation in patterns of language use, depending on gender variables. With a clear sociolinguistic focus, these early studies aimed at unravelling how identities are related to patterns of language use. More relevant for this chapter is the work by Zappavigna (2018), who explains how collective identities may result from users’ engaging in “ambient affiliation” in social media. This is related to the participation in collective practices - such as using hashtags or reproducing memes - which allow users to align with an imagined audience with whom a number of beliefs are shared. Because of this shared background between users, a collective identity may be arguably created. Thus, the concept of “ambient affiliation” together with other concepts such as “community of practice” (Wenger 1998; applied in Dayter 2016; McGlashan 2019) are of key importance in as much as they can help us explain how online communities are created.

While different social media could be analysed, some authors (Dame, 2016; Haimson et al., 2019; Sharp & Shannon 2020) have pointed out the relevance of Tumblr in the development of gender and sexual identities in the past years, for “Tumblr is a site where users experience freedom specifically related to gender and sexuality” (Oakley 2016: 7). Tumblr’s absence of a concrete system of categorization facilitates the creation of (queer) communities around its ubiquitous tags (Dame 2016, as cited in Haimson et al. 2019), since it leads to “non-normative, fluid, non-linear and multiple

identity presentations” (Haimson et al. 2019: 346). Arguably, Tumblr defines both the online and the offline existence of the subject as “a site of identity label creation” and debate which helps the individual to better understand themselves and others (Jacobsen et al. 2019: 64). At the same time Tumblr, allows its users to align along “common, passionate affective and progressive interests” (McCracken 2017: 153). In these studies, an implicit claim seems to be made about the creation of (social) identity being performative, and closely related to how users behave in the online context. It can be, however, argued that how this identity unfolds depends on the actual context (Dayter 2016: 12), and hence on the specific affordances of each social media platform (Flanagin et al. 2010, as cited in Oakley 2016).

Tumblr is characterized by its tag system (Dame 2016) and its “cycle of knowledge generation” (Sharp & Shannon, 2020: 339). On the former, Dame (2016: 23) highlights that the function of Tumblr tags is not limited to mere content organization, but also to the identification of the audience the post addresses, the goals of that post, or the author themselves. These findings seem to be consistent with Zappavigna’s (2018) identification of four functions of hashtags: searchability, expression of affection, creating networked publics, and expression of the self and of interpersonal relations. While these similarities could point towards a number of overlaps between Tumblr and Twitter (the platform analysed by Zappavigna), Sharp and Shannon (2020) reflect on those features that set Tumblr apart. Users are not required “to generate original content or have a public profile attached to their names” in order to participate (Sharp & Shannon 2020: 338 -339), and posts do not appear to be bound to an algorithm of time or space, as posts which were uploaded years ago can still be viewed, shared and commented on. Other differences can be seen in how users are organized, as the circulation of posts does not depend on the number of followers a user has (McCracken 2017). It is also important to mention that posts are not necessarily associated with real-life persons, as pseudonyms abound in Tumblr, which frequently results in the creation of alternate online identities (Jakobsen et al. 2022).

A review of the academic literature shows a growing awareness of the role of social media in the construction of collective identities. Early studies took a descriptive approach to the study of language in social media, rather equated to descriptive linguistics (Crystal 2006); however, more recent work has successfully acknowledged the importance of looking at how communities and identities unfold and are discursively created. This allows us to better understand how particular social groups behave and construct their identities in discourse (Androutsopoulos 2006: 421). Three main approaches have been followed for explaining the construction of such identities (Rüdiger & Dayter 2020: 5-7): multimodality (Caple 2019, Zappavigna 2016, Collins 2020), sociolinguistic variation (Androutsopoulos 2006) and the creation of communities of practices (Dayter 2016; Dayter & Rüdiger 2020; McGlashan 2019). It is the latter group that is of particular importance for this chapter. It shall be noted that these studies justify how and why the concept of offline “community of practice” (Wenger 1998) can be applied to the study of online communication. In these, the main focus falls on how users within a social media platform (Twitter, in most of the cases under study) align and bond by relying on the use of a shared lexis, the activation of shared topics in discourse, or the use of particular kinds of evaluative language (Dayter 2016; Dayter & Rüdiger 2020; McGlashan 2019, Leuckert and Leuckert 2020). While these studies are some of the very few that have been produced by linguists, they all share a corpus-based methodological approach, in which they try to identify salient patterns in the use of language and discursive strategies that could result in the construction of (collective) identities. These studies are mostly based on the identification - and subsequent qualitative explanation - of frequency wordlists.

A call for a further and closer qualitative approach has been made by some scholars working on “Social Media- Critical Discourse Studies” (SM-CDS) (Koshravinik 2022). For these authors, the focus is not so much on the identification of patterns of use but on developing how meaning is (co-)created by different users. SM-CDS accounts for two processes of contextualisation - the one of the “communities of practice” (as described above) and the analysis of how these communities interact in the broader socio-political societal contexts. It is this broader interaction that can also help us interpret how and why particular ingroups and outgroups may be discursively constructed. The importance of interdiscursivity and intertextuality are likewise acknowledged in SM-CDS: Not only shall one explain the socio-historical or cultural frames that are activated in discourse, but these shall be explained taking into account the wider socio-cultural context in which social media posts are produced (Kopf 2022: 198).

What the studies mentioned above have in common is an emphasis on the importance of context for understanding how collective identities unfold in discourse, as they all highlight how the meaning of discourse practices in social media is determined by the situational and broader socio-cultural context in which discourse is produced. Identities are thus performative. Context is equally important for socio-cognitive understandings of collective identity, which is defined as “a mental model that comprises cognitive and affective components and is further to change through negotiation in discourse” (Koller 2012: 19). While both this understanding of identity (see also McGlashan 2019) and the notion of “community of practice” stress the idea of discourse (meanings) being jointly negotiated and stemming from a shared repertoire, we have not found any study which solely focuses on the kind of knowledge which is activated in discourse on gender identities on social media. If we follow Koller’s (2012: 24) explanation, it can be argued that the studies mentioned above thus either delve into the relation between the macro- and meso-level of communication - i.e. on the influence of social factors and how those relate to participants involved in the discourse practice and the influence of social media as a genre (particularly for those studies within SM-CDS) (Koshravinik 2022; Kopf 2022) - or on the micro-level - i.e. the identification of the textual resources that can help in the construction of particular identities (McGlashan 2019; Dayter 2016, Dayter & Rüdiger 2020). This difference is also reflected in the kind of approaches applied with the former being qualitative and the latter focusing rather on the quantitative identification of patterns of language use. This paper does try to establish a link between the three levels of analysis (as originally proposed by Fairclough 1989) by looking not only at a concrete textual and semiotic cue - the activation of particular knowledge frames and their explanation as being metaphorical or non-metaphorical (see Koller 2012 for a depiction of the role of metaphor as a discursive strategy in the construction of collective identities) - but also at how the meaning potential of those frames may vary depending on the knowledge shared by the participants (Filardo-Llamas 2019) and on the broader socio-cultural knowledge in which these discourse practices are embedded.

3. Data and method

In order to carry out this study, an English corpus of one-hundred Tumblr posts was compiled¹. The corpus is subdivided into four subcorpora of twenty-five Tumblr posts each. This division relies on gender terminology and its use in social media. Following previous studies on how gender labels help creating identity in social media (Dame 2016; McCracken 2017; Oakley 2016), we elaborated a list of

¹ While the original corpus had 100 posts, in the analysis we found that these were in fact 97. Because Tumblr posts tend to have more than one gender-associated tag, there were some coincidences in the final compilation and 3 posts were retrieved via the “queer”, “trans” and “nonbinary” tags.

possible terms we expected to find in the tags of the posts. These were understood as an entrance point which would allow us to gather enough material for the qualitative study. To guarantee that those selected words would offer enough material to carry out this study, we conducted a preliminary search on Tumblr. Terms with a small number of posts, or with content deemed inappropriate (e.g., naked, or semi-naked bodies) were discarded. The four most popular tags (i.e., the terms which fostered the largest number of posts) were chosen to perform the final search that would allow the compilation of the corpus: “cis(gender),” “trans(gender),” “(gender)queer” and “nonbinary (gender).” This terminological choice also covers a broad construction of gender identities within the gender spectrum. It might be debatable whether this corpus has “representativeness” - understood as “the extent to which a sample reflects the patterns in a larger population” (Zappavigna 2012: 16), and traditionally equated to having a larger number of texts. However, we consider that the corpus does fit the research goal of this study, as it offers a precise documentation of its texts, and it has an adequate size that fits the research objective (Tagg 2012; Zappavigna 2012; Page et al. 2014). Likewise, the process of compilation has tried to be as objective as possible, trying to avoid any bias in the selection of texts (Baker et al. 2008; Page et al. 2014). Still, the findings in this corpus shall not be understood as providing a generalization, but just as reflecting the particularities of the texts under analysis, which are also presented as a case study which may offer preliminary findings that would need to be further tested.

The compilation of the corpus spread across five weeks in 2022, from June 14th to July 14th (International Nonbinary Day), which coincide with the celebration of Pride Month in different countries. A particular date (June 28th, the commemoration of the Stonewall Riots) was taken as a reference, and the decision was made to cover the two weeks prior and subsequent to June 28th, on the assumption that a greater number of gender-related posts would be produced due to Pride Month. Searches were separately conducted by two researchers, located in two different countries at the time of compilation and with different interests and levels of knowledge of Tumblr (hoping to counteract the effects of the Tumblr algorithm). Each researcher was in charge of two tags, of which they extracted five different posts every week.

For the compilation of posts, the search on Tumblr was limited to the most popular (and public) posts of that particular week, so as to guarantee the emergence of new posts in every search. A maximum of two posts by the same user on the same week was established, to gather a greater variety of discursive instances. Except for some posts which were considered inadequate or irrelevant for the research (e.g., nudity or private information of the user), the first five posts to appear on the search were selected for the corpus. The data of each tag was organized in three different folders. First, any form of multimedia content was downloaded and saved. Then the post itself was screenshot. Finally, the actual text (if any) and the tags of the post were copied and pasted in a Word document, which would be incorporated to the corpus. This document was labelled according to a two-part code: a letter, related to its tag (Q, for queer; T, for trans; NB, for nonbinary; and C for cis), and a number, connected to the position it occupied within the subcorpus of its tag. Such code also aimed at the full anonymization of the user behind the post. For example, the fifth post which was extracted from the nonbinary tag would be name “NB_005.” It is this code that will be used when citing in the examples. Information about the metadata of each post, engagement and a link to the original post were also stored in an Excel database.

Once the corpus had been compiled, it was uploaded onto Atlas.ti, a software aimed at helping with the qualitative analysis of data. Instances of uses of figurative language were identified in each post. After a preliminary analysis, it was observed that metaphor alone would not be enough to ensure

a broad description of how the choice of different linguistic expressions could trigger multiple “viewpointed meanings” (Dancygier & Sweetser 2014: 3). Following the definition of figurative language proposed by Dancygier & Sweetser, metaphor and metonymy were identified (ibid: 4). This decision is supported by claims in previous studies that both metaphor and metonymy involve the activation of some kind of mapping: within the same domain in the case of metonymy, and across different knowledge structures in the case of metaphor (Lakoff & Turner 1989; Croft & Cruse 2004; Dancygier & Sweetser 2014)). The notion of “frame,” defined as “prefab” chunks of “conceptual structure which get evoked together” (Dancygier & Sweetser 2014: 18), equally underlies how both metaphor and metonymy function in discourse, as metaphors project one structure from one frame to another while metonymy grants access to a particular frame by focusing on a part of it (ibid: 104; Demjén & Semino 2020: 215).

In order to understand the importance of metaphor and metonymy in discourse, the concept of frame is essential. Multiple definitions of this term have been provided in the literature (Dancygier & Sweetser 2014; Demjén & Semino 2020; Hart 2021), but three main aspects shall be highlighted: i) frames tend to be associated with particular verbal expressions, ii) frames may generate inferences and expectations in communication, and iii) they are related to particular aspects of the world, and hence require background knowledge to be shared between discourse participants for them to be effectively activated (Demjén & Semino 2020: 215).

Once they were extracted, the metonymies and metaphors identified via Atlas.ti were classified according to their semantic field. Using the UCREL Semantic Analysis System (USAS) (Rayson, 2008), the components of the different nominal or verbal groups which made up the metonymy or the metaphor were tagged. This was done to facilitate the qualitative analysis, while also providing a steady framework that could be used as reference by the two researchers. The classification of USAS is based on twenty-one categories (one per letter of the alphabet) which are at the same time further divided into various subcategories. USAS has already been employed as a reference for previous qualitative works in CDS, such as Dayter and Rüdiger (2020). In the first stage of the analysis, a new category was also included in the analysis: cultural frames. The automatic semantic tagging was not applied to cultural frames because they require further intertextual and interdiscursive knowledge for their interpretation.

The inclusion of cultural frames in the analysis is not only justified by preliminary findings, but it is also substantiated in a number of prior studies. While the focus within cognitive-linguistic approaches in Critical Discourse Studies has traditionally been on metaphor and images schemas (see Hart 2018 for an overview), more media-oriented studies have argued that it is important to consider how framing interacts with interdiscursive mechanisms, amongst which cultural myths (Kelsey 2019) or other kinds of knowledge schemata (Van Dijk 2008) can be highlighted. These cultural frames do not only result in meaning reflecting a particular point of view, but their activation (and the resulting inferential structure) may also render specific evaluative meaning and may trigger affective responses (Kelsey 2019; Filardo-Llamas 2019, 2021; Dancygier & Sweetser 2014). The inferential structure will be influenced by how much knowledge is shared between discourse participants and might strengthen particular intersubjective identities too, mostly due to (shared) ambient affiliation. Following the methodological decision to include three types of frames within the analysis of figurative language, the analysis section below will be organised along these parameters.

4. Analysis

4.1. Metonymy

While not frequently the object of analysis in CDS, the importance of metonymy in explaining how individuals and groups perceive the world cannot be underestimated (Catalano & Waugh 2013). Like metaphors, metonymy is a cognitive mechanism which guides our conceptualisation and understanding of the world by drawing inferences (Ruiz de Mendoza Ibáñez & Perez Hernández 2003). However, metonymy implies a relationship between two correlated entities, A and B (Dancygier & Sweetser 2014: 100). The notion of correlation is defined as referring to two things that occur together in experience (Dancygier & Sweetser 2014: 5), i.e., two things that are drawn from the same frame (Littlemore 2017: 409). Thus, metonymy does not only have a referential function in as much as it singles out a particular frame, but it also foregrounds specific aspects of that frame which may result in a potential evaluation of reality, in given social attitudes being spread, and on the strengthening of group cohesion (Littlemore 2017: 415-418).

Metonymy has been frequently understood as establishing a synecdoche relationship between a part and a whole (Catalano & Waugh 2013; Littlemore 2017). However, other types of metonymies can be found in the literature (Littlemore 2017: 411) and have been successfully applied in CDS (Catalano & Waugh 2013). Of particular interest in this analysis have been two: defining property for category and trait for person. While both of them are very similar in scope, a distinction has been made so as to determine whether a specific feature was foregrounded to define a particular gender (in the case of the former) or whether users were stressing concrete features of the self (in the case of the latter). However, this distinction is not always clear-cut, and a metonymic relation is at the same time established between the two, with the person whose trait is emphasised also being a metonym indexing a particular gender group. Examples of this can be seen in (1), with “my masculine hairy ass” being a self-referential trait-for-person metonymy which, when combined with the post-modification “in a dress”, also addresses an external property in the construction of gender by its group.

(1) i see AMAB people with huge beards, bald heads, muscular builds and thick deep voices who go apeshit telling me they love what i'm doing when they see my masculine hairy ass in a dress [Q_013]

A similar use can be found in (2), where the deictic “I” in the sentence can help us understand “an any pronoun user” as a trait of that person, while at the same time the reference to “any pronoun” as premodifier activates metonymically a particular property in the conceptualisation of gender.

(2) TO BE CLEAR: I am still an any pronouns user... [C_016]

The two examples above also show two of the most commonly activated frames when defining the self and gender identity: the physical/outward appearance of a person, including its biological attributes (which have been tagged as activating the body frame in our corpus), and what we say of/about a person, which has been analysed as activating a discourse frame. The idea of perception is thus prominent when looking at how gender identities are metonymically constructed and seem to activate a further metonymy in which gender - what is contained - is to be understood by the surface properties of the person - or the container.

A particularly interesting use of the body frame emerges when biological properties are used as a means of defining - or redefining - particular attributes. The phrase “people who can get pregnant” (C_011, C-024) is used in attempts to refer to any person who might get pregnant (including, among others, some cis women, trans men or nonbinary people), and it’s metadiscursively reflected upon and “highly recommend[ed]” (C_011) as the language to employ when trying to “include as many people as possible” (C_011) in its referential scope. Interestingly, the use of such phrase (in [3]) shows

how metonymy works as a cognitive mechanism. Metonymy allows people to rely on their shared knowledge of the world to communicate with fewer words (Littlemore 2017: 407) - something explicitly acknowledged in C_011. However, for communication to be successful, such knowledge must be shared among all participants in the communicative situation (Van Dijk 2008). For this reason, the use of this kind of phrase is also a marker of group membership and cohesion, and it functions as a “discourse-community specific metonymy” (Littlemore 2017: 417), hence contributing to ambient affiliation - bonding within a co-present community (Zappavigna 2012)- between users who align with particular gender identities.

(3) also there are many groups of people who can get pregnant who deal with the opposite, who are encouraged not to have children or even forcibly sterilized. (C_024)

The importance of shared knowledge also appears in relation to specific aspects of being trans or of transitioning. This is the case of abbreviations such as “T” (T_004, T_014), standing metonymically for “testosterone”, “HRT” (also spelled hrt) (T_001, T_004), standing for “hormone replacement therapy”, or “top surgery” (T_007, Q_017, NB_013). The latter phrase also illustrates how that particular knowledge is activated via tags: It does not only index a given gender by foregrounding specific medical procedures, but it also functions as a discourse-community specific metonymy which may help in creating ambient affiliation which is associated to specific gender identities. A similar use of “top surgery” can be found in some of the images that accompany the posts (see figure 1 below), where those aspects which can be visually perceived, such as the scar from top surgery, short hair, or white pubic hair, are foregrounded as metonymic traits possibly indexing any gender outside of the binary. The importance of shared knowledge and its relevance as a marker of group membership can be seen in the meme reproduced in figure 2, where humour results from the communication breakdown produced by an incorrect shortening of the phrase “top surgery” to “top”, and the subsequent meanings associated with the latter.



Figure 1. A representation of non-binary gender [NB_013]




Figure 2. “Top surgery” as a marker of group membership (T_021)

Another metonymy similar to the ones above can be seen in the (self-)referential use of words like “pronouns” (C_005, C_006), or specific combinations of pronouns such as “he/they” (NB_017) or

“they/them” (NB_025), which are used to metonymically index gender². Likewise, it is frequent to see the term “label” as a means of referring to the self, or others, gender. The process of ascribing the self to a specific gender is also found in the use of the word “tag”, which seems to profile the importance of assigning defining properties to a particular gender so that they can be identified. The complexity of these metonymic uses may be seen in (4), where the correlation between gender and pronouns/tags can be observed.

(4) of course YOU don’t see a reason to have to tag. you don’t get violently ill when you accidentally read something that doesn’t adhere to your pronouns. (C_005)

A final metonymy shall be noted, although its frequent use might be a consequence of the corpus having been compiled during Pride month: the textual, and visual reference to flags. It shall be noted that the visual reference to flags does not only include these appearing in the visual material attached to the posts (pictures, photographs, etc.), but also those appearing as emojis and the writing of tags in different colours which reproduce the multiple colours included in the LGBTQ+ flags (see figure 3). Both the textual use of the word and the creative play which emerges in the coloured tags function as an object for event metonymy in which the word “flag” activates the frame of protests and celebrations during Pride month. As in previous cases, this metonymy does not only contribute to enhancing cohesion in the LGBTQ+ community but it also increases ambient affiliation between its members.



#pride month #pride flags
 #pride...moths #moths
 #illustration #aedox' art #gay
 #lesbian #transgender #nonbinary
 #bisexual #asexual #aromantic
 #pansexual

4,3 mil notas

Figure 3. Flags as object for event metonymy (NB_007)

4.2. Metaphors

Like metonymy, metaphor could be employed as a mechanism for framing identity. Given the complexity of explaining something as abstract as gender, it can be argued that the use of metaphor does not only work as a means of indexing identities from a particular (ideological) perspective, but they also serve to explain concepts that are not “clearly delineated in terms of the naturally emergent dimensions of our experience.” (Lakoff & Johnson 1980: 177). Metaphors are thus useful for explaining something which we all experience - i.e., gender identities - but which does not have its own language. Besides having an explanatory function, metaphors also frame that reality in a given way (Hart 2014a) and result in specific construals of that reality. As will be shown below, different kinds of metaphors can be identified by their higher degree of schematicity while others may reproduce more complex mental spaces (Kövecses 2017). These different levels of schematicity are not only contextually

² The controversial nature of metonymic uses of particular pronouns such as “he” or “she” with the wider scope indexed by the word “person” has already been discussed in the literature (Dancygier & Sweetser 2014: 116). Still the use of the pronouns in the analysed posts seems to be different, and even opposite in nature. In the analysed posts, the choice of a particular pronoun or emphasising the importance of pronouns seems to be a mechanism for stressing the need to foreground the person’s gender.

determined but are also of use for explaining how different conceptual structures may be activated in order to achieve different communicative goals. As in the case of metonymy, it is worth noting that the labels used to classify the fields of these metaphors were directly extracted from the UCREL Semantic Analysis System (USAS) (Rayson 2008).

The analysis of posts in Tumblr shows that gender identity is frequently framed as a CONTAINER which can be entered or abandoned. The activation of this image schema (Kövecses 2017) explains the use of expressions such as “moving, coming and going,” as well as “location and direction”, and “putting, pulling, pushing and transporting” when referring to gender identity. Since identity is constructed as a closed space, in which one exists, and which one might not easily exit. Still, the analysed posts show a constant questioning of gender identities, which is often shown in attempts to leave such a space. This can be seen, for example, in the use of the verb “fall” in (5), indicating movement in a direction “outside” the container within which traditional binary conceptualisations of gender are included. A similar attempt to contest such traditional understandings of identity can be seen in (6), where the boundaries of such a gender container are profiled through the use of the word “walls.”

(5) Some intersex people have genitals or internal sex organs that fall outside the male/female categories — such as a person with both ovarian and testicular tissues. (C_006)

(6) Any woman who doesn't know this, in my opinion, has not pushed very hard on the walls around her and other women, or has been, so far, very privileged and very lucky. (Q_008)

Containers are not only spaces to be individually, but also socially occupied. The possibility of identity being shared by members of one group which inhabit a given space explains the number of metaphorical expressions which are labelled by USAS (Rayson 2008) as being related to the fields of “belonging to a group,” “kin” or “exclusion.” This idea can be also seen in changes of identity being referred to as “transition.” This lexical choice activates the idea of movement between multiple containers/spaces, while profiling the semantic fields of “change”. The notion of movement between spaces is also entailed in the use of terms such as “ftm” (female to male) and “mtf” (male to female) which the users employ to discuss their trans identities.

While containers are schematic in nature, a richer frame is activated in the use of the word “closet” in (7). This lexical choice does not only convey a conceptual space, but also construes it as being related to the “architecture, houses and buildings” (Rayson 2008) domain. Closets and its doors being opened -hence allowing other entities to (be)enter(ed) or exit(ed)- profiles the possibility of gender identities being included within social conventions or even being hidden. Likewise, the use of “closet” as a verb in (7) activates a FORCE DYNAMIC schema which profiles the agency of the subject in defining their gender identity. A similar notion of agency can be observed in the use of the verb “ripped away” in (8) where T (testosterone), as the object defining the identity of the subject, is stolen from them. Not only is the action relevant in the shaping of such an identity, but also the fact that the verb is in the passive voice allows for the agent of that removal of T as an identity-marker to be backgrounded (Van Leeuwen 2008).

(7) not how it sucks for people who are not a girl but could easily still closet themselves and pretend to be a cis woman if their life was on the line. (C_010)

(8) im scared of getting back on T only to have it ripped away from me again. (T_014)

The use of the verb “ripped away” in (8) also shows how the spaces occupied by identity are frequently combined with backgrounding strategies (Van Leeuwen 2008). Thus, like any property, the container of gender is objectivised - i.e., presented as an object which can be given and taken. For example, in (9) “their right to transition” is introduced as an inherent property of the individual which is stolen (“taken away”) by the government. Likewise, it is very common to find descriptions of gender as being “assigned”, or “assigned at birth”, by an unmentioned social actor. The choice of the verb “assign” implies a metaphorical correspondence between gender identities - frequently ascribed at the hospital - and other entities such as “name, use or value” (MacMillan Dictionary). The choice of this metaphorical expression is not only a means of explaining the abstract process of being socially identified with a gender, but it also indexes a particular “community of practice” (Wenger 1998) within the Tumblr community, as participants in the communicative act are expected to understand the meaning of lexical choices frequently used by members of -or users familiar with- the queer community (Andoutsopoulos 2006). This indexical function of the metaphor is even clearer in the use of acronyms such as “amab” (“assigned male at birth”) in (10) and “afab” (“assigned female at birth”). A similar hypothesis explains the use of words such as “explore” in (11), which is not only introduced in opposition to the idea of “conforming to a gender,” but which also foregrounds the active role of the subject whose identity is to be defined.

(9) do you really think the government who took away their right to transition is going to let them keep their disability benefits? (T_004)

(10) i see AMAB people with huge beards, bald heads, muscular builds and thick deep voices who go apeshit telling me they love what i'm doing when they see my masculine hairy ass in a dress. (Q_013)

(11) ...where I can explore the limits of my identity [...] i heart not conforming to cisgender stereotypes i heart young people exploring that more often. (C_018)

The attempt to erase the CONTAINER schema and the need to remove boundaries in the definition of gender identities seem to lie at the core of relatively recent gender labels, such as “genderfluid,” “fluidflux” or “genderflux,” which appear frequently in the analysed posts. The activation of a liquid frame shifts the conception of identity from something static to be found in a closed space to something which is not only in constant movement but may also change its shape. In the same vein, some sexual identities are also described in similar terms, as it can be seen in phrases such as “ace spectrum,” referring to those whose identity is asexual. The conceptual configuration of spectrum is also contrary to the one of a container, as the former is gradient; it again eggs and flows and it often lacks any defined limits.

Gender is also frequently conceptualised as an “umbrella,” as illustrated in (12). Activating the umbrella frame triggers two elements in the construal of gender identities. On the one hand, umbrellas provide a space which is safe from the inclement (social) weather. On the other hand, because umbrellas lack a clear boundary and because they may vary in size, many different people can fit (together) under them. This need to stick together also fosters a sense of unity among those people who are found under its protection, hence also stressing a sense of community which is pervasive in the posts analysed. Two other elements shall be noted in relation to the use of the word “umbrella”: first, the spatial understanding of this conceptual structure is frequently emphasised through prepositions of place such as “under” or “in,” which tend to precede it. Second, it is frequent for the word “umbrella” to be premodified by a lexical choice indexing particular gender identities, as it is the case of the word “nonbinary” in (12). Finally, it shall be noted that in pictorial representations

the umbrella metaphor may only reflect the shape of such an umbrella - under which different (queer) identities can be covered - while visually activating other knowledge that is shared by this community. This situation arose in some of the posts under analysis, such as gender identities being associated to plants or animals (see figure 4), which are also a metaphorical domain that is frequently activated to refer to new gender identities.

(12) in honor of nonbinary day i'm releasing a brand new gender under the nonbinary umbrella (NB_023)

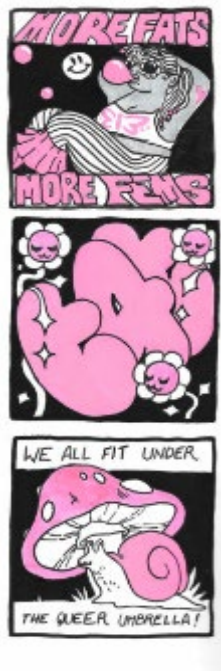


Figure 4. Textual and visual activation of the queer umbrella (Q_002)

With a function similar to the one of umbrellas, under which different identities can be found, the “rainbow” is visually activated by the rainbow flag which has been frequently found in the posts under analysis. Albeit specifically associated with gay pride, the rainbow flag covers the whole spectrum of the LGBTQ+ community too, and it’s not only textually (in (13)) but also visually activated in Tumblr posts via the use of emojis (in (14) or coloured texts (see figure 3 above)). Besides its overarching shape, according to USAS (Rayson 2008), rainbows are located within the field of “colours and colour patterns,” as they evoke a particular set of colours in the mind of the audience. As a consequence, the association between the LGBTQ+ community and the rainbow goes beyond this icon, for its colours, even when they are not depicted in an arch, come to represent different types of queerness.

(13) #fight for whats right #proud to be me #rainbow flag #allies (Q_001)

(14) #happy pride 🌈 (NB_006)

A similar attempt to counteract the CONTAINER schema and its ‘limitations’ in the conceptualisation of gender identities can be found in examples of creativity in metaphor use. Creative metaphors in the analysed posts have a “pedagogic” function and seek to explain how gender identities can be constructed and understood in a way which allows for multiple factors to be

acknowledged. Examples of this phenomenon can be seen in the depiction of transness as “building your own car from scratch” (C_007). This idea of creating a car is related to a prior description of the self’s identity in the post as being “cis” but having been “modded by gender”. This action of “modding gender” is metaphorically illustrated as “talking nitrous oxide. Hydraulic lowrider suspension. Underbody neon lights” (C_007). A similarly creative example of the implications of the construction of one’s gender is retrieved from the exposition of the process in another post: “I dont talk a lot abt my identity bc im still exploring but hey. act of creation. its not yet wine its simply grapes in the barrel” (C_018). The choice of “grapes” and its semantic relation to “wine” profiles the idea that creating the self’s identity requires not only the right ‘ingredients’ in the barrel/container, but also the required time until it ages. Other examples of creative metaphors include referring to the process of creating one’s identity as making ‘pizza’ (in (15)) and defining what such a food is.

[15] Being ANYWHERE under the gender umbrella is like describing what type of pizza you are / A pizza like this but not that [...] A pizza with only this but nothing else [...] A pizza that has nothing. And so many other types of pizzas. (C_022)

What the example above shows is that creative metaphor is not only pedagogic and used for explanatory purposes, but it also has a performative function which may hopefully result in socio-cultural changes that could contribute to the reshaping of society (Hidalgo-Downing 2020: 8). Likewise, creative metaphor could also have an evaluative function, which contributes to profiling the positive features of the self and the negative traits of the other. Examples of the latter can be seen in references to the need of “detoxing” from “the radfem juice” (Q_016), detrans communities being “terf infested” (Q_022), or the right to abortion being “desecrated” (T_010).

4.3. Cultural frames

Closely related to metaphorical frames, some Tumblr users seem to rely on the activation of cultural frames as a means of explaining their gender identities. While not explicitly described in the literature as such, we understand cultural frames as a particular type of creative process which depends on the activation of cultural knowledge shared by the discourse participants. When this knowledge is activated, such frames may function as interdiscursive mechanisms which do not only profile particular elements in a given construal of gender, but which also strengthen the sense of belonging to a discourse community through shared cultural referents (Kelsey 2019; Filardo-Llamas 2019, 2021). Cultural frames are thus the least schematic use of figurative language as they are not only highly specific, but their understanding relies on “a variety of different kinds of contextual information” (Kövecses 2017: 329). While the terminology adopted in this chapter understands cultural frames as a means of creating particular kinds of metaphorically determined mental spaces, other authors refer to the same process as the creation of ‘metaphoric scenarios’ (Musolff 2016) which are fully contextualised.

The posts under analysis show different sources of cultural knowledge being activated: films, video games, music and socio-political events. It shall be noted that many of these cultural references appear as parts of tags in (16). They can also be visually activated (figure 5). As we can see in (16), the activation of such cultural knowledge sometimes serves as an anchorage point which can help build new metaphorical spaces or interpret other metaphorical expressions used in the posts. This example reproduces one of the tags found in post C_007 in which, as explained in section 4.2 above, transness is compared to tuning a car. This metaphor acquires a richer and more contextually significant meaning if the reader understands the reference to the TV show *Car Masters: Rust To Riches*, as examples of “real car changes” may be also activated by the implicit evaluation in the title of the show.

Identities are thus evaluated with the former gender identity being presented as “rust” which is ameliorated when it is “modded” (C_007)

(16) #i dont know a lot about cars but ive seen all seasons of Car Masters: Rust To Riches so i can at least put words together#just wanna put it out there: I LVOE AND RESPECT TRANS PEOPLE AND THINK THEY'RE COOL AS HELL AND THEY INSPIRE ME EVERY DAY (C_007)

The use of “Kirby” as a tag accompanying the images in figures 5a and 5b explicitly refers to the knowledge required to understand the memes it is accompanying. Kirby is the main character in a Nintendo video game and, as shown in figure 5a, it is a pink spheric creature. While it is referred as “he” in the localised version of the video game, its gender is unknown in Japan. This explains it becoming a means of constructing non-binary gender. Likewise, knowledge is required to understand the reference to “stars”, which appear in the game after an enemy appears. These stars can be inhaled by Kirby who spits them on their enemies afterwards. When there is no shared knowledge about Kirby, these stars can still be metaphorically interpreted as being the prize to win in an empty and open space.

The reference to the enemies of Kirby can be seen in figure 5b, where we have the tags Gorimondo (visually, in the image accompanying the text “congrats on the pronouns”) and Bonkers Kirby (also pictorially present in the bottom part of figure 5b). Both Gorimondo and Bonkers Kirby are the ‘bosses’ to be beaten by Kirby. What the use of cultural frames in the examples below shows is that such framing creates a very rich mental space in which not only non-binary gender identities are positively evaluated but are also presented in opposition to those who reject the existence of such identities. The reference to pronouns as the item to be achieved by non-binary Kirby is just a metaphorical representation of one of the battles to be won by queer identities.

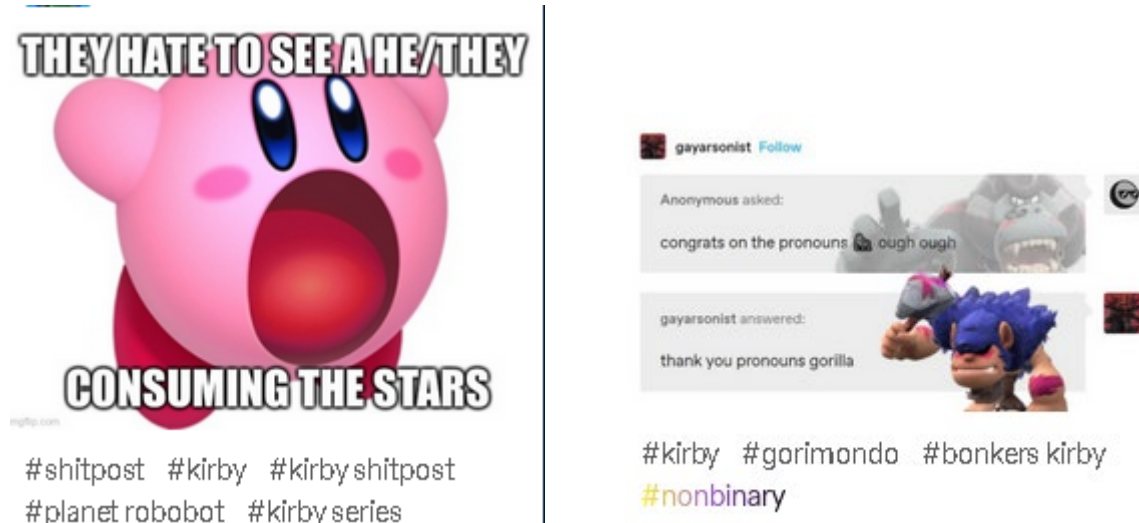


Figure 5a and 5b. Videogames as a source of framing nonbinary identities (NB_017; NB_018)

A further nuance is introduced when socio-political cultural frames are activated, as interdiscursivity is established with the political realm, hence adding another layer of ideological meaning. The use of these socio-political frames is, however, slightly different, as they do not construe a particular vision of gender by relying on correspondences between entities belonging to different domains. Socio-political frames perform two main functions in the analysed posts. On the one hand, they have a similar “pedagogical” and evaluative function to the cultural frames explained above. They serve to establish correspondences between current and past events from which readers/the LGBTQ+ community is expected to learn. Examples are sometimes preceded by the conjunction “like” and

establish clear similarities between “the situation in america right now” [T_008] and prior events in Poland when regulations about reproductive rights were introduced³. Other examples rely on the use of visual cues and reproduce images taken from the 1994 *FTM Newsletter* (T_016), which was published by FTM International, an organisation serving the transmasculine community in the United States.

On the other hand, the activation of cultural frames also has an indexical function which serves to legitimise the claims of participants belonging to the LGBTQ+ community by linking them with other social movements and endowing them with some historical legitimacy. Examples of this include references to the 1980s AIDS crisis (Q_006; Q_025), which do not only frame an ongoing struggle for the rights of queer people, but also stresses the suffering of this community.

(17) The only other option is radical acceptance of our queer selves. The only other option is solidarity. [...] we’re queer, get used to it just the way we did 30 years ago [...] Either it's all of us or it's none of us, because if we leave the answer up to **the Reagans** of the world [...] the answer is none of us (Q_025; our emphasis)

Cultural frames in (17) function as extended metaphors upon which the interpretation of the whole post is based. This idea can be also seen in the use of tags which further evaluate the historical events which are being mentioned. This is the case, of phrases like “ronald reagan's grave is a gender neutral toilet” (Q_025,) which metaphorically delegitimises the socio-political role of Ronald Reagan by referring to the effect of his political action on the queer community, and to the contempt the progress made on LGBTQ+ rights would provoke on the former US president.

5. Conclusion

Three main research questions underlie this paper, which are mainly aimed at identifying the most commonly activated frames used by queer users on Tumblr, explaining which aspects of reality are profiled through the use of figurative language, and reflecting about how these uses may be related to the creation of a community of practice characterised by a shared intersubjective identity. The analysis shows that users tend to construct their identity by relying on metonymic, metaphoric and cultural frames which may counteract prior and constrained understandings of gender. Thus, both metaphors and cultural frames profile the lack of boundaries in the constructions of gender, as can be seen in lexical choices related to “fluidity”, or “explorations” of new spaces, and on the inclusion of examples that rely on the comprehension of intertextual and interdiscursive references. Both kinds of frames render a construal of multi-layered mental spaces, and they do not only have a pedagogic function, in their attempt to implicitly explain how queer identities are constructed, but also a performative one via the creation of a new shared lexicon - such as “genderfluid”, “nonbinary” or “AMAB” - which seeks to change traditional, fixed binary worldviews in relation to gender. Likewise, the understanding of those shared references by a specific group of users does not only contribute to creating an intersubjective identity which is collectively built, but it also stresses the existence of a “community of practice” which uses and understands those terms. Knowledge of their meaning implies belonging to the community. The fact that many of these uses of figurative language are found in tags contributes to creating ambient affiliation as these tags do not only serve to express the self, but also to create interpersonal relations with other users (Zappavigna 2018).

³ A significant number of posts were related to the 1973 Roe vs Wade case, which was paramount in establishing female rights in the USA, and which was overruled in June 2022.

While different from metaphors and cultural frames because they do not establish correspondence between two domains, metonymies are also important for understanding how gender identities are discursively constructed by Tumblr users. Metonymic uses tend to highlight the perceptual aspects of gender identities, foregrounding those aspects of gender identity which are concrete in the conceptualisation of gender (compared to the abstract understanding of what gender is). Thus, there are references to physical appearance or medical treatments as metonymically activating different identities, with which users may feel aligned or whose existence they try to legitimise. The most common use of metonymy is the foregrounding of particular properties as means of stressing the existence of given genders/categories. A similar pedagogic and performative function to the ones found in the use metaphor and cultural frames can be thus identified.

On a methodological level some concluding thoughts shall be also mentioned. While the paper follows a qualitative bottom-up approach which would need to be further tested with more data, we consider that it contributes to advancing the study of figurative language in CDS. As mentioned above, most studies on the socio-cognitive impact of metaphor have mostly focused on the analysis of metaphoric frames. We consider that a wider scope in the study of framing in social media communication is not only necessary but also sheds light on how different levels of schematicity are activated in discourse. The study of all of them together can also help us understand the multi-layered nature of meaning-making and how that is another aspect that is to be acknowledged in sociolinguistic studies of how members in a community of practice interact.

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