

To Carve Out Space: Transgender Visitors' Experiences in Museums

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Abstract

TO CARVE OUT SPACE:

TRANSGENDER VISITORS' EXPERIENCES IN MUSEUMS

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Museology

Although museums have recently moved in the direction of increasing diversity, equity, access, and inclusion (DEAI) in their initiatives, these efforts have not yet significantly focused on transgender audiences, which face disproportionate and unique discrimination in public life. The purpose of this phenomenological study was to understand transgender visitors' experiences of inclusion and exclusion in museums. Qualitative data were collected through semi-structured interviews with 20 participants identifying as transgender or non-cisgender who visited a local museum as part of the study. Results showed that experiences of inclusion and exclusion were related to exhibit content, interactions with staff, and access to restrooms. The data also indicated that transgender visitors' experiences of inclusion and exclusion were influenced by the intersections of other aspects of their identities, and their perceptions of how other underrepresented groups experienced the museum. This research has implications for practice in curation and interpretation, staff training, facility planning, and community engagement.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

Transgender individuals face disproportionate discrimination in public life (Grant, Mottet, Tanis, Harrison, Herman, & Kiesling, 2011). This includes injustice in education, employment, healthcare, family services, housing, and treatment in policing and the carceral system, as well as overall safety in public. At the same time, museums have recently moved in the direction of addressing discrimination like this, trying to increase diversity, equity, access, and inclusion (DEAI) in their initiatives. For the most part, transgender inclusion efforts in museums have focused on the workforce. For example, the American Alliance of Museums recently released toolkits for trans inclusion and equity in the museum workforce (2019), supporting the work of trans advocates in the museum field. This set of three toolkits provides guidance for institutions to set internal policies and guidelines, staff to actively create and uphold an inclusive workplace culture, and transitioning individuals to build support systems and plan for various transitioning stages.

However, formal research has not been done on trans *visitors'* experiences in museums. While much has been written in the field on “queering the museum,” references to transgender populations specifically are few and far between, and research on LGBTQ experiences in and attitudes towards museums are, in fact, generally about gays and lesbians, and do not include or are not specific to transgender experiences. Additionally, because many researchers and evaluators do not fully account for gender diversity in their demographic data, much of the research that does exist does not provide information about trans visitors (Lussenhop, 2018; Mertens, Fraser, & Heimlich, 2008).

Much of the existing research on museum visitor experiences is focused on white, abled, cisgender, affluent, heterosexual people; as a field, there is a clear picture of dominant cultural

experiences in museums. Over the last twenty years, research has demonstrated that underrepresented groups, including racial minorities, low-income individuals, and gays and lesbians, are often negatively impacted by their experiences in museums, and are thus unable to engage with museum content as fully or safely as their white, affluent, or straight counterparts (Burgard & Boucher, 2016; Dawson, 2014; Heimlich & Koke, 2008). Low-income minority visitors felt excluded from participation when they did not meet staff expectations of an “ideal” visitor, or felt unable to “correctly participate,” finding that their cultural ways of participating in social settings were at odds with the unstated norms of participating in a museum (Dawson, 2014). African American students on field trips to historic sites dealing with narratives of slavery and desegregation came to different conclusions about the historical information than intended — conclusions that were also different from and more complex than those of their white peers (Burgard & Boucher, 2016). Gay and lesbian visitors felt discomfort with implicit social messaging reinforcing heteronormativity, which influenced their visitation habits, more often visiting in groups of friends or with their children than as couples, indicating that unstated heterosocial norms present in the museum may make queer couples feel unwelcome (Heimlich & Koke, 2008).

The specific experiences of transgender individuals in museums are worthy of study in order to continue meaningful progress towards inclusive museums. The purpose of this study was to understand transgender visitors' experiences of inclusion and exclusion in museums.

Specifically, two research questions framed this study:

1. In what contexts and in what ways do transgender visitors experience inclusion in museums?

2. In what contexts and in what ways do transgender visitors experience exclusion in museums?

For the purpose of this study, the term “transgender” or “trans” describes individuals whose gender identity differs from their assigned sex, including binary (i.e. trans men and trans women), nonbinary (e.g. genderfluid and genderqueer), and agender individuals. “Cisgender” refers to individuals whose gender identity and assigned sex are the same; the term “non-cisgender” is used in this study interchangeably with “transgender.”

Additionally, it is important to note is that gender identity is only one aspect of identity, and that transgender people and communities are not homogenous. Intersectionality, the concept that factors such as sexism and racism (or here, transphobia/cissexism) factor into people’s lives in ways that “cannot be captured wholly by looking at [...] the dimensions of those experiences separately” (Crenshaw, 1991, p. 1244), is used as a frame here to understand trans people’s experiences in light of the totality of their identities

This research supports museum workers at all levels to understand barriers that trans visitors may face at their institutions, in order to create accessible, inclusive public spaces. It also provides empirical backing for trans advocates looking to support their work with data.

Understanding the experiences of transgender visitors is necessary for museums to do successful DEAI work, as well as enact meaningful, positive change in the public lives of trans people.

Chapter 2: Review of the Literature

Understanding the context for studying the phenomenon of transgender visitors' experiences in museums requires investigation into three major bodies of literature. These are: 1) the experiences of transgender individuals in public life; 2) the transgender-inclusive work currently being done in museums; and 3) the experiences of underrepresented visitor groups in museums.

Transgender experiences in public life

In order to understand the ways in which transgender individuals experience museums, it is helpful to first understand the ways in which their life experiences, in general, are unique.

Some research into transgender experiences tends to lump this population into the LGBTQ (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer) community as a whole, which makes separating out trans experiences difficult in some instances. For the purposes of this literature review, studies that do not break down results to highlight transgender-specific findings are not included.

The National Center for Transgender Equality and the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force conducted an extensive survey of American transgender individuals to determine the scope and scale of the discrimination faced in the community (Grant et. al, 2011). Researchers collected responses from 7,500 participants in a 70-question survey, administered through trans-led or trans-serving organizations and online listservs. Results show that 63% of transgender participants had experienced a serious act of discrimination. More specifically, the nature of this discrimination was both pervasive and interconnected. For example, transgender participants reported disproportionately experiencing a range of structural barriers, including living in extreme poverty; higher risk of suicide attempts; harassment in school; higher risk of

unemployment; mistreatment or adverse job outcomes while at work; housing discrimination, homelessness, and harassment, discrimination, or assault at homeless shelters; unequal treatment in public places and by government officials; harassment by police and assault in jail or prison; discrimination by medical providers; and poorer health outcomes overall.

Other studies confirm these findings of disproportionate violence, financial difficulties, and adverse emotional health outcomes. A study of LGBTQ and HIV-affected communities found these communities often experienced verbal harassment, threats and intimidation, and physical violence (Waters, 2016). This study also found increasing incidences of online harassment, finding that transgender and gender nonconforming survivors of violence were nearly three times as likely to experience violence online than cisgender survivors. Stolzenberg and Hughes (2017) broke down a national study of college freshmen to compare transgender students to the overall sample and found that the proportion of transgender students facing major financial concerns was over 50% higher than the national overall sample, due to factors such as additional transition-related medical costs, loss of parental financial support, as well as higher unemployment and homelessness due to workplace and housing discrimination. Additionally, just under half of transgender students reported feeling depressed frequently, as compared to 9.5% of the national overall sample overall.

The National Center for Transgender Equality conducted a follow-up study, the U.S. Transgender Survey (USTS), in 2015, which collected 27,715 responses in the largest study of transgender experiences to date (James et. al, 2016). This study confirmed and expanded upon the previous findings, examining areas of particular impact for transgender people, such as immigration, police interactions, sex work, and HIV/AIDS, as well as painting a more complete picture of trans experiences in general, not just with discrimination (for example, at what age

participants began to think they were transgender, experiences with transitioning, and how often non-binary respondents correct strangers who incorrectly assume what their gender is).

Discrimination against transgender individuals was (and is) systemically embedded and institutionalized (Grant et. al, 2011). Research has shown, for example, that while transgender people often experience discrimination in health care, they also develop resilience and positive coping strategies. For example, McCann and Brown (2017) reviewed the results from 19 quantitative studies to examine transgender discrimination and resilience in health services responses. Their findings suggest that transgender individuals may be more frequently rejected by family or friends and/or feel the need to hide their identity, causing social isolation. Healthcare providers may be unaware of health needs of the group (or may be outright discriminatory and harmful), causing physical or mental distress. Positive connections with the transgender community, however, may mitigate negative social and health outcomes. The conclusions of multiple transgender health, discrimination, and other trans experience studies advocate for policy development that is sensitive to the specific needs of the community, making discrimination against transgender people explicitly illegal (rather than up to interpretation) (McCann & Brown, 2017).

It is also important to note that transgender individuals' experiences vary and are impacted by intersections with race, class, and sexuality, as demonstrated by de Vries (2012), who writes that the generalized notion of transgender people "perpetuates a white and predominantly middle-class transgender experience, identity, and collective." De Vries' research on trans people's intersecting identities shows the numerous ways that their experiences of the world are impacted by their social and cultural context, for example, gaining or losing access to cultural gendered spaces, or being newly impacted by cultural gender roles post-transition. Key

findings from the NTDS confirm the impact of intersectional identities, noting that respondents of color “fare worse than white participants across the board” due to the combination of anti-transgender bias and structural racism (Grant et. al, 2011, p. 2).

These studies detailing transgender experiences with discrimination also point to strong social networks, acceptance, and support as powerful influences in mitigating these negative impacts. Factors such as family acceptance lessened the frequency of overuse of drugs or alcohol, suicide attempts, working in the underground economy, incarceration, or homelessness (Grant et. al, 2011). Other studies confirm that social support systems, as well as accessing gender transition-related services, positively affected psychological health outcomes and overall resilience (McCann & Brown, 2017). A study of 129 transgender and gender nonconforming (GNC) youth investigated connections between the use of their chosen names by others, a major aspect of gender affirmation and social transition, with mental health risks (Russell et al., 2018). The results indicated that when youth were able to use their preferred name across various contexts, such as school, home, work, and with friends, they were less at risk of negative mental health impacts such as depression and suicidal ideation. Similarly, social involvement, such as connection with supportive transgender networks and friend groups online or in person, appears as a consistent factor in transgender individuals' strategies for resilience (Stolzenberg & Hughes, 2017).

Transgender-inclusive work in museums

The museum field at large has started to make diversity, equity, access, and inclusion (DEAI) a priority in recent years; the American Alliance of Museums (AAM) made DEAI its first area of focus in its 2016-2020 strategic plan (American Alliance of Museums, 2018).

LGBTQ-specific DEAI efforts in museums have focused in three major areas: 1) approaches to museum content; 2) workforce conditions, and 3) the visitor experience.

In 2008, *Museums & Social Issues* produced a special issue titled “Where Is Queer?” which focused on queer issues, particularly with regards to approaches to sexuality in museum exhibit content. It is a rich resource for discussions of use of language, implicit messaging about sex and sexuality, museums and queer theory, and highlights and case studies of various museums’ approaches to LGBTQ exhibition content. However, much of this literature refers to “LGBTQ” content, but in fact only directly addresses sexuality, not gender diversity (in other words, the LGB and Q, but not the T). AAM and its task forces, professional networks, and working groups have, however, continued to do LGBTQ work, so the more recent literature consists mainly of reports, guidelines, and other resources from AAM.

LGB(T) content in museums

Museum and gallery exhibits featuring LGBTQ art, culture, and history are becoming more frequent, as documented by projects such as the Proud Nation Survey in England and Wales and the “Out There” project by the National Archives and the London Metropolitan Archives (Frost, 2008). However, museums overall are late in reflecting societal shifts in attitudes towards sex and sexuality. Museums did not, on a wide scale, begin to meaningfully address sexuality until the 1990s; while museums had objects in their collections related to sexuality, they did not incorporate sexuality directly in their interpretive frameworks until that point (Frost, 2008). Paul Gabriel uses the term “queer junk” to describe the reasons institutions find it problematic to represent or reflect queerness, “junking” queerness away as too Other, too niche, too irrelevant (Gabriel, 2008). Steorn’s (2012) experiences curating a queer heritage exhibit reveal similar issues; curators considered art of “artistic quality” fundamentally divorced

from queerness, which was seen as a special interest topic, privileging heterosexual norms of artistic production.

The 1990s-2000s proliferation of sexuality-related exhibits was aimed at LGBTQ audiences, addressing specifically “gay” or “queer” topics. High-profile examples include *Pride and Prejudice: Lesbian and Gay London* at the Museum of London, which coincided with Gay Pride in 1999; *Hidden Histories* at the New Art Gallery Walsall in 2004; *Queer is Here*, also at the Museum of London, also coinciding with LGBT History Month; and *Hello Sailor! Gay Life on the Ocean Wave* at the Merseyside Maritime Museum (Frost, 2008). These were all temporary exhibitions. Some writers argue that there is something problematic about only discussing sexuality through LGBTQ content, pointing out that this equates queerness with sex, painting heterosexuality as “normal” and queerness as hypersexual, and limiting visitors’ understanding of sexuality as a common human experience (Gabriel, 2008). Gabriel instead makes the case for integrating, rather than segregating, queer content and interpretation into museums.

AAM’s LGBTQ Alliance published *Welcoming Guidelines*, a resource for making museums more inclusive from their organizational structure to facilities management (LGBTQ Alliance, 2016). These guidelines promote purposeful and strategic inclusion; for collections and curatorial, they advocate for staff in these areas to foster a deeper understanding of the community and legal conditions that may affect collections care and interpretation, and to take full advantage of growing scholarship about LGBTQ people and experiences to grow, interpret, and exhibit collections (Leitch et. al, 2016). This includes guidance on including LGBTQ perspectives and content, ensuring language and imagery is inclusive, and taking an active role in respectfully representing LGBTQ voices. The publication of this guidance from a (if not *the*)

major museum-based professional association helps solidify LGBTQ audiences as an important demographic and encourages inclusion of LGBTQ content and representation.

Since much of the literature discussed here truly only addresses sexuality, and not gender identity specifically, it raises questions about what approaches make most sense for exhibiting content addressing gender identity and transgender experiences. On the one hand, taking an approach similar to addressing sexuality in the museum could seem reasonable. On the other hand, gender identity and transgender experiences are different enough from LGB experiences that a separate (though related) approach may also be useful to develop. Middleton & Greene's (2018) case study of the exhibit *Mimi's Family: Photographs by Matthew Clowney* at Boston Children's Museum, which told the story of a family with a transgender grandparent, describes the strategies used to present trans narratives in this space. While the impetus for creating the exhibit was inspired by a previous photography exhibit about a lesbian family, the intended impacts and outcomes of the exhibit were different, focusing on children's understanding of gender expression. The exhibit had internal implications for the museum, which conducted "Trans 101" staff trainings, ensured staff could answer questions about trans issues and the exhibit's relevance to the museum, and revisited internal policies to make the museum more transgender-friendly. Clearly, there are positive ripple effects due to the inclusion of transgender content in museums that directly benefit the transgender and gender non-conforming community.

Transgender workers in museums

A decade ago, Paul Gabriel recalled experiences at museum professional conferences of feeling the need to advocate for the "relevance of queer" in museums, seeing other attendees uncomfortable in his presence and noticing that sessions about queer issues were attended solely by other LGBTQ professionals (Gabriel, 2008). This fight for relevance and the relegating of the

discussion only to the people it directly affected—rather than cisgender, straight professionals working to include their LGBTQ colleagues and their concerns—is relevant for transgender workers as well. In other words, the work of queer and trans inclusion should not solely be the work of queer and trans workers. AAM's welcoming guidelines support this, advocating for human resources policies that fill in the gaps created by inconsistent legal protection from discrimination, as well as an overall workplace culture of inclusion (Leitch et. al, 2016). While the guidelines give some examples of what an “welcoming and inclusive” informal workplace culture might include, more information may be needed to meaningfully assess whether an institution is working towards or achieving such an inclusive culture.

More recently, AAM released an additional set of toolkits for transgender inclusion in the workplace, especially regarding gender transition, for trans individuals, their institutions, and their coworkers (Taskforce for Gender Inclusion, 2019). These toolkits are more specific than the LGBTQ *Welcoming Guidelines* on what inclusion looks like. The toolkit for coworkers focuses specifically on allyship, meaningful ways to create a trans-friendly workplace culture, and to advocate for the trans community in their work. The toolkit for institutions focuses on internal policy and practice, with particular emphasis on procedures for transgender front-of-house staff, and development of internal resources and guidelines for transitioning employees. For transgender individuals, the toolkit outlines considerations and suggestions for sharing information, finding or building resources, handling discrimination, as well as advocating for additional trans-inclusive practices in the workplace. The document, however, makes it clear that this work is not the sole responsibility of transgender employees, which is supported by the fact that the documents for coworkers and institutions contain the brunt of the policy and practice recommendations.

LGB(T) visitors

As with museums' work with LGBTQ inclusion on the human resources level, much of the work done to include LGBTQ museum visitors has been recent within the last several years. AAM's LGBTQ *Welcoming Guidelines* outline the ways in which museums can focus on the LGBTQ guest experience and gain awareness of what their messaging communicates to LGBTQ individuals and communities (Leitch et. al, 2016). It makes recommendations for guest services and hospitality management, education, interpretation, and ensuring staff are informed on LGBTQ issues across the board (LGBTQ Alliance, 2016). It also advocates for evaluating LGBTQ visitor experiences.

“Underrepresented” visitors’ experiences in museums

While the resources from AAM are clear about the ways in which museums can practice LGBTQ inclusion in multiple aspects of their work, they present best practices. They do not reference in depth the ways in which these populations have experienced exclusion or discrimination in museums. Another body of research that informs transgender experiences in museums is one that focuses on understanding the experiences of other minority groups in the museum. This section will discuss common experiences of low-income individuals, racial or ethnic minorities, and gays and lesbians in museums.

For instance, a study investigating a student field trip to historic sites found that the racial identity of the student had a bearing on what students understood and interpreted about the site. African American students made more complex meanings in two sites significant to Black history than white students as a result of making connections with their own cultural experiences (Burgard & Boucher, 2016). This research suggests that the personal narratives, life experiences,

and cultural structures people bring to a museum influence their understanding and interpretation of information.

Dawson's (2014; 2018) research of low-income minority ethnic groups in informal science education (ISE) institutions revealed experiences that reinforced these groups' sense that institutions like these are "not for us;" groups that already did not visit institutions like this were not inclined to return, feeling an implicit sense of exclusion in the design of the institution and in the expectations for participation. Participants experienced feeling as though they were participating "incorrectly," unable to access the activities as designed due to cultural barriers and sometimes creating their own ways of meaning-making that were seen as "wrong" for that setting. Similarly, a study of disadvantaged families visiting ISLEs found family members struggling to access content in an unfamiliar language or in overly scientific language, having their means of cultural meaning making undermined by the authority of the institution, and missing opportunities to learn and engage when their cultural habits mismatched the expectations of the ISLE (Archer, Dawson, Seakins, & Wong, 2016).

Research into lesbian and gay visitation, membership, and donorship to cultural institutions, including museums, demonstrates lack of comfort visiting these institutions due to implicit messaging that reinforces norms of heterosexuality and gender conformity (Heimlich & Koke, 2008). In this online survey of 75 lesbian, gay, and bisexual visitors of cultural venues such as museums, zoos, ballets, and symphonies, participants reported facing unique challenges from the other minority groups discussed in this literature review. They reported being more comfortable attending cultural venues in groups, rather than with a partner, feeling unable to be as open with a same-sex partner in those public spaces as heterosexual couples. They also noted that inconsistency in how welcoming they perceived cultural venues to be from geographic

location to location, especially for visitation sites such as museums (rather than performance sites), and strongly felt that they are not reflected in the content offerings or other materials, such as marketing materials, of cultural venues. These respondents wished to see more representation, staff support and acceptance, and inclusive marketing and pricing (such as membership levels that do not assume the gender or marital status of a partner).

Transgender-inclusive research and evaluation

One potential reason there is not available research on transgender visitors' experiences is because often times research and evaluation studies conducted in museums do not collect meaningful information about participants' gender. For example, many studies still only give participants the option of "male" or "female" when describing their gender. Creating an inclusive "gender question" requires a nuanced, evolving understanding of broader concepts of gender identity. Developing an instrument that accurately and meaningfully capture this data is important for two major reasons: one, it allows researchers (or evaluators) to assess impacts and outcomes specific to the trans community, and two, it reduces harm for transgender respondents by validating and understanding their identities.

The Gay, Lesbian, and Straight Education Network (GLSEN) argues that trans-inclusive instruments can better assist decision-makers in ensuring equal access and "creating programs and implementing policies that meet the particular needs" of the trans community (GLSEN, 2012, p. 3). Any given institution, program, or resource "is already serving transgender people—they just aren't counted," so research or evaluation instruments should be formulated in a way that recognizes all respondents (Greene & Greytak, 2013). Data collected without consideration for gender diversity and the language used to ask about it can "exclude and mislead," and researchers or evaluators should consider why and how those data are collected (Lussenhop,

2018, p. 194). Asking about gender in a way that makes people of all genders feel welcomed or seen can help researchers, evaluators, and institutions better connect to trans communities and visitors.

Chapter 3: Methods

The purpose of this study was to understand transgender visitors' experiences of inclusion and exclusion in museums. The study was guided by two research questions:

1. In what contexts and in what ways do transgender visitors experience inclusion in museums?
2. In what contexts and in what ways do transgender visitors experience exclusion in museums?

This chapter describes the design of the study and the context of the participants' museum visits. It also describes the sample, data collection, and data analysis procedures, and addresses limitations to the study.

Study design

This study drew upon a phenomenological design, which aims to describe the common meaning for multiple individuals of their lived experiences of a phenomenon (Creswell, 2012). The goal of this study was to understand the lived experiences of transgender museum visitors as described by them. Qualitative data were collected from semi-structured interviews with transgender individuals who were asked to visit their choice of one of three museums local to them. The researcher drew upon phenomenological questions developed by Moustakas (1994)—what participants have experienced, and what contexts affected their experiences—to develop the interview guide. Demographic quantitative data were also collected through these interviews.

Sampling

Participants were recruited through a mix of online affinity groups and snowball sampling. The researcher posted recruitment materials in several closed queer and transgender community groups on Facebook in two different locations - Seattle, WA and Raleigh/Durham,

NC areas. These locations were selected because the researcher had direct connections to the transgender communities there, and more specifically was a member of Facebook groups for queer and transgender people in those areas. Recruitment materials were also passed around within the community and among participants' personal connections.

Participants

Criteria for participation in the study were self-identification as transgender or non-cisgender adults at least 18 years old, residing in either the greater Seattle, WA or Raleigh/Durham, NC areas. 20 participants completed visits and interviews. Participants included nonbinary (including genderfluid and genderqueer) individuals, trans men, trans women, agender individuals, and individuals still figuring out their gender, as well as one participant who gave another description of their gender. Participants were also asked to describe their gender presentation; presentations included masculine or masc, feminine or femme, varying presentations, and gender nonconforming, as well as some participants who described their presentation another way. Some participants also reported that they do not think about their gender presentation.

Additionally, participants were asked how they thought strangers generally perceive their gender. Half felt that others' perception of their gender generally differs their own perception of it, a quarter reported that others generally perceive their gender correctly, and a quarter reported that either others are generally unsure how to perceive their gender or that others' perception of their gender is inconsistent.

Participants' ages ranged from 21 to 37, with a median age of 29. Just under half reported they had a disability. Participants' racial or ethnic identities included white, Latinx/Hispanic,

Asian or Asian-American, Indigenous or Native American, and Black, and included several mixed-race individuals.

Participants were asked to contextualize their relationship with museums in three ways: 1) to estimate the number of times they visited a museum or like institution within the last 12 months, 2) to describe the kinds of museums they visited within the last 12 months, if any, and 3) to describe their relationship with museums, i.e. the place museums have in participants' lives. Most participants had been to at least one museum (excluding the visit for this study) within the last 12 months; responses ranged from "none" to "probably twenty," but most fell within the 1-6 range. Frequent types of museums visited include art, history, science, cultural, and zoos & aquaria.

Participants' relationships or associations with museums fell into four categories: strong positive, slightly positive, neutral, and negative. About three quarters reported strong or slightly positive relationships. Strong positive relationships included associations such as professional interest, personal importance, and childhood importance. Slightly positive relationships included casual interest and an expressed interest in visiting museums more. Those who reported a neutral relationship expressed that museums are not a priority in their potential activities and reported no personal relationship. Negative relationships included expressed feelings of distrust, skepticism, or feeling out of place.

Participants were also asked to contextualize the visit they completed for this study in three ways: to report 1) whether this was their first visit to the museum, 2) whether they went with anyone to the museum, and if so, with whom, and 3) about how long they spent at the museum. For about three quarters of participants, the visit they completed for the study was their first visit to their chosen museum; the rest had been to that museum previously. There was a

fairly even spread among participants who went to the museum by themselves, were accompanied by a friend or friends, and were accompanied by a partner. Some participants completed their visits together; these comprised of two groups of two, and one group of three. Participants were interviewed separately. About half of the participants spent 1-2 hours in the museum; about a quarter each spent more than two hours or less than an hour.

Data collection

Participants were first asked to visit one of three pre-selected museums in their area. Participants visited their choice of museum on their own time without the researcher, though they were not required to visit alone. Admission was either free, provided complimentary by the museum, or reimbursed by the researcher. Participants were encouraged to treat the experience as a regular museum visit. Seattle area museums were the National Nordic Museum (the Nordic), Seattle Art Museum (SAM), and the Museum of History and Industry (MOHAI). North Carolina museums were the Nasher, the North Carolina Museum of Art (NCMA), and the North Carolina Museum of History (NCMoH). The sites were chosen to represent large cultural institutions (displaying and interpreting art, history, and/or culture) with a variety of content, giving participants the ability to have some control over what they would see during their visit.

The majority of participants visited SAM, the Nordic, or MOHAI in a fairly even split. Two visited the Nasher; none chose to visit NCMA or NCMoH. One participant had recently visited the Bellevue Arts Museum (BAM) but was unable to complete a visit to one of the assigned museums in the allotted timeframe; they were interviewed about their visit to BAM, which fit the criteria by which the other museum sites were chosen.

Data were collected through semi-structured individual interviews after each participant's museum visit. The researcher conducted interviews through Zoom videoconferencing software,

which were audio recorded for transcription. The questions (see Appendix A) were intended to explore the experiences of transgender individuals through feelings of inclusion and exclusion during their museum visit to understand what aspects of the museum were most important to these individuals' experiences.

Data analysis

This study obtained qualitative data and quantitative demographic data through open-ended interview questions. Interviews were audio recorded, transcribed, and analyzed. In order to maintain the anonymity and confidentiality of participants, only the primary researcher had access to audio recordings and transcripts and performed all coding. This study allowed for multiple coding of responses where appropriate to holistically honor participants' responses. The researcher identified themes through emergent coding within responses to each question, as well as across them when appropriate.

Limitations

One limitation of this study is the nature of recruitment. The majority of participants were recruited through Facebook groups for queer and trans communities; individuals active in these groups may be more connected to their community. Recruitment materials had little to no way to reach transgender individuals who had no connection to other transgender people. For this reason, the study results are generalizable only to transgender individuals with some kind of connection to a trans community.

The relatively small age range does limit to whom the study is generalizable. There were no trans individuals in the study older than late thirties; older trans individuals may have different experiences in museums than this relatively younger group. Similarly, trans youth were

excluded from the sample, and may have different experiences than the group included in the study.

The self-selected nature of participants may have created several biases. Participants were willing to take time out of their lives to visit a museum; individuals with no interest in visiting a museum would likely not have participated, perhaps precluding individuals with overwhelmingly negative museum experiences. They also were people who were comfortable exploring and sharing their personal experiences and emotions that they felt during their visit, as well as their gender identity, with the researcher, precluding individuals who may not be as comfortable sharing their emotions or discussing their trans identity even confidentially. Lastly, the self-reported nature of the interview means that the data only reflect participants' reflections on their own experiences. The quality of the data may vary depending on how self-reflective participants were during the interview.

Chapter 4: Results & Discussion

This phenomenological study presents the lived experiences of transgender individuals visiting a museum. Examples and quotations offer a variety of perspectives in the participants' own words. When participants described moments in their visit during which they felt included and excluded with regards to their gender identity, three major contexts for these moments of inclusion and exclusion emerged: 1) exhibits and other museum content, 2) interactions with frontline staff, and 3) restroom access.

Participants' priorities for change generally mirrored what they reported overall as impacting their experiences of exclusion. Primarily, participants pointed to implementing gender-neutral restrooms as top-of-mind when thinking about what changes they would like to see in the museum to become more inclusive for trans visitors. They also expressed interested in more trans-inclusive content in exhibits and training for frontline staff, as well as opportunities for local trans communities to be in dialogue with the museum. This chapter will discuss each primary context—exhibits, staff, and restrooms—in terms of what participants found inclusive, what they found exclusive, and what they considered priorities for change to make the museum more inclusive for trans people.

Context 1: Exhibits and other content

Moments of Inclusion

Many participants referenced aspects of exhibits and museum content that contributed to feelings of inclusion during their visits. Participants sometimes referenced exhibit content that featured trans or generally LGBTQ related content. However, the amount of content relevant to trans identities and LGBTQ identities in general in these museums was fairly limited. These

remarks therefore may not be representative of how trans visitors might feel when encountering an exhibit dedicating *significant* space to trans creatives, culture, or history.

For some participants, objects or images in the exhibits representing trans, queer, or gender-diverse identities contributed to feelings of inclusion. One representation a participant saw was a photograph prominently featuring a Pride flag; the participant who mentioned this noted it was the only time there was “outward” or explicit inclusion in the museum. Another participant discussed a photograph a person he described as “a butch lesbian” by photographer Zanele Muholi, who is known for photographing Black LGBTQ South Africans. The participant who mentioned the Muholi photograph found it stuck with him “because it did highlight the ‘masculine’ in what appeared to be a female subject,” signaling a divergence from the gender norms he saw reinforced elsewhere in the museum.

Participants connected to exhibit content not only through LGBTQ-related objects, but also through the re-interpretation of gendered themes, interactives that encouraged connection among visitors, and the contents of the museum store, which can also be considered a curated space. One participant’s experience of inclusion in an exhibit came from the interpretation strategy, rather than the objects. He visited a Georgia O’Keeffe exhibit and noted that

As a trans guy there can be a lot of uncomfortability [sic] with female themes, or themes that are expressly about women [...] When it’s women focused or specifically about women’s bodies [I feel like] this is not my space, this is not for me. And Georgia O’Keeffe has that reputation in art history and art studies that she’s the ‘flowers-as-vaginas’ painter [...] so when I saw that, I actually thought it was going to be a dysphoric experience.

However, the exhibit was framed around how O’Keeffe moved away from abstractions to push back against critics’ readings of her work as anatomical. The participant remembered a quote from O’Keeffe saying something like “ ‘I really hate that critics read this gender essentialism into my work, so I moved to being more specific in my painting so that it would be harder to

read that kind of thing into it' [...] It felt more comfortable for me to look at it in that way than any time that I've been presented with Georgia O'Keeffe." Presenting a narrative that pushed back, whether purposefully or inadvertently, against gender essentialism, enabled the participant to connect more fully with the art on display and make meaning based on his own experience.

One participant found that an exhibit's interactive portion connected her indirectly with another transgender visitor. She said, "You could write on a value card, and then you could put them up on the wall, and they would hang there for a certain amount of time, but one of them was related to trans issues from a [...] transgender person, it looked like." She described it as "unexpected but it definitely feels nice to see something overt, not something kind of under the table."

Trans-inclusive or affirming content sometimes fell outside of the exhibit context: in the museum's gift shop, one participant found a queer literature section, including a book marked as a staff highlight that discussed "how gender's not binary and they/them pronouns." "It's nice to be validated and to acknowledge that I exist in such a normal way [...] it's nice to exist in a setting where my personhood is considered valid."

More often, however, participants referenced feeling an atmosphere of inclusion because of the "progressive" themes in many of the exhibits, regardless of whether they had any direct connection to their own gender identity. One participant discussed an exhibit "talking about different kinds of progressive movements, different kinds of social justice issues and those kinds of things," noting that "it seemed there was a lot more openness to talk about these socially progressive, sometimes politically charged, issues [...] that openness was definitely more welcoming than I'm used to." Similarly, another participant said they felt the "overarching story" of a culture's progressivism in a culturally specific museum created an implicit sense of

inclusion. Others noted that the publicly visible results of an interactive survey of opinions on social issues made it “feel like it was a more progressive place and engaging in more progressive ideas,” even though none of the survey items touched on gender identity—seeing answers “skewed on the progressive side” signaled that the museum is “a safe-ish space.” Another exhibit on empathy signaled to the participant a “sense that the people behind it probably have thought about gender inclusivity [...] it just seemed like it gave off the sort of farther left vibe” even though it didn’t touch on gender identity.

Similarly, some participants also mentioned feeling included when they saw other marginalized or underrepresented groups featured in the museum, even if it didn’t relate to their own social identity. One participant discussed an exhibit “that focused on Black identities [...] like they’re actually reaching out to include other groups, so I felt a little bit more comfortable in that space even though I’m white.” Similarly, another participant noted the presence of Indigenous art in the museum and said that “I’m not Indigenous, but it was nice to see other oppressed groups represented and respected there, so by proxy I felt included.”

Another participant referenced an art exhibit on empathy, “even though the exhibit didn’t seem to be questioning or focused on gender. It was an examination of how we can sometimes not feel like ourselves in our skin or how other people can sometimes Other us. And while it felt like it was more from the perspective of race and racism, that Otherness still resonates.”

Participants also were asked if there were other moments they felt included in relation to any other aspect of their identity or sense of self, beyond gender identity. Many participants connected what they experienced in exhibits with various facets of their own identities, including race, age (“I can see that relating to our generation of how we watch things like this [...] they did have some stuff featuring younger individuals”), religious background (“I always feel a strong

connection as an Ashkenazi Jew seeing mention of that in a country's history"), and family heritage, as well as personal narratives such as immigration or military service.

Personal narratives included one participant who connected her own history of immigration with the immigration narrative presented in the museum – "We crossed a different ocean to get to the US [...] that's really cool hearing about this again from literally a different angle," or another participant who felt connected on a personal level to an exhibit on empathy: "[It was] very interesting and moving, and I've been called an empath before and I consider myself very empathetic [...] it really got to me where it didn't really get to my friend so much." Another connected their racial identity more generally with the overall themes of the museum: "As a biracial person, there was a lot of information about inclusivity for oppressed people and people of color or people from different backgrounds."

Moments of Exclusion

Exhibit content impacted participants' feelings of exclusion in two primary ways: participants felt excluded by 1) narratives they found problematic within museum exhibits, as well as 2) the absence of content related to their identities and experiences.

Some participants who came across LGBTQ-related content reported feeling some sense of discomfort with the narratives presented. One participant described their view of an LGBTQ display: "It was trying to be inclusive, but from an outside perspective [...] it feels slightly inauthentic [...] they didn't have someone that really has their finger on the pulse of the LGBT community." Another described similar feelings: "I'm not even sure what they were trying to get at exactly, but I didn't feel as though I'm getting a representation over here at this museum [...] they're making an effort to try to be inclusive, but in a way that's misguided, in my view." Participants also noticed when LGBTQ content was compartmentalized or given unequal weight

as a subject; one participant observed that while the museum they visited was full of flashy interactives, the LGBTQ history content was confined to one panel display of text and images.

Other participants described similar experiences with exhibit content that was relevant to other aspects of their identities but missed the mark in a way that resulted in an exclusionary experience. A commonality among these was discomfort with their identity group being associated with a single traumatic narrative, rather than on the larger culture of the group. For example, one participant said, "It wasn't talking about gay people, it was talking about AIDS, talking about gay people dying. It wasn't talking about things that queer people have *done*. It was about death. It's pretty common for that to be the one narrative that gay people get." Another participant had a similar view of a display describing people who had helped save Jews in their community during the Holocaust: "I appreciated the mention of the fact that Jews exist there, but it was only mentioned in the context of the Holocaust, so that is a little bit narrowing. I would be curious to have had context outside of just that."

Participants also experienced exclusion where they found cis/heteronormative perspectives, narratives rooted in binary gender roles, or heavily male-dominated stories. Language usage was a factor: one participant recounted, "It was very binary, like 'every *woman* that gets an ultrasound to see *her* baby...' but women aren't the only people getting ultrasounds and women aren't the only ones having babies."

Participants also noticed overarching narratives seemingly from a cis male perspective: "It was very male cisgender dominant in the way that it portrayed its information and the way they portrayed women; it just had most of this general information that was tipping its hat toward white male dominated society and then would have, like, 'Oh, and women did stuff too [...]' Okay, we acknowledged it, let's move on.' "

Others noted that exhibit narratives perpetuated binary gender roles through representations of men and women: “There were just lots of traditional representations of men and women [...] There wasn’t really that space for someone who’s not traditionally male or female to see themselves in the art necessarily [...] I think [the Hercules figure] and other representations of men and women there highlight the traditionally ‘ideal’ traits of each gender without making space for recognizing the other way. In other words, ‘masculine’ traits in men are emphasized but there are no depictions of men that highlight ‘feminine’ traits.”

Similarly, some participants described narratives not directly related to gender, such as capitalism and race, that felt exclusionary; these participants described ways in which issues of class, race, and gender are intertwined. For example, one participant visiting a history museum remarked that “the colonial stuff that was in there was obviously very cis normative,” referring to the framing and interpretation of settler history of the area. Another participant felt that the history museum’s focus on settler colonialism and innovation promoted a problematic “idea of who is valuable in society, and who is valued under capitalism—trans people are not.” Another described their reaction to the framing and interpretation of industry and capitalism throughout the museum: “My gender identity and the way I think about my identity cannot be weighed in capital.”

Participants described similar experiences of other dominant narratives they felt were at odds with other aspects of their identity or worldview. For example: “[The history museum’s overarching narrative] promotes a lot of colonialism, it promotes a lot of ideas like manifest destiny.” Another participant had a similar experience: “[The history museum’s overarching narrative] was justifying all the colonial...like Gold Rush settlers [...] erasing the native peoples that were there.” They also described an interactive featuring a mock communist trial: “I don’t

think you should put people on trial for being communists, and I didn't get any kind of narrative from the museum that they thought that was problematic." Another participant described the same interactive: "I honestly couldn't tell if the exhibit was like, 'This is horrific that we did this,' or if it was like, 'Look at how we caught people,' I couldn't really make that distinction, but it definitely felt like pushing the norms of capitalism everywhere."

Participants also described feeling excluded by the absence of content related to gender identity. One participant explained that "there were lots of opportunities for them to talk about queer and trans issues in [galleries focusing on social justice and social values], but even when they're talking about social justice [...] that wasn't on there at all."

Participants gave examples of specific queer and trans topics pertinent to the museum's focus that they were hoping to see, such as specific historical figures and gender variance in the cultures discussed in the museum, particularly in museums with indigenous objects. One participant asked, "Where is the information on two-spirit indigenous people? [...] There's this whole other aspect of their culture that you're completely ignoring because it doesn't fit in the heteronormative mold and the binary mold."

Others described trans-inclusive ways of re-interpreting exhibits' existing themes: "I could totally see something about the innovative technology in drag performances for drag kings and queens, especially with the prevalence of Seattle's drag culture, would be, in my head, perfectly reasonable as an exhibit there about technology, innovation [...] looking at the innovations people have made to better express themselves, or lost expressions of self that have been uprooted and destroyed because of colonialism—harmed or marginalized."

One participant described the implications of not seeing oneself represented: "If it's not amongst the multitude of curated and carefully selected pieces of art in a museum, then when it's

out there to be chosen it seems like an active choice to me to exclude groups of people from being able to see themselves in what is a prestigious art institution. So the absence feels like a judgement on what is okay and what is good and what is not.”

Participants particularly noted the absence of transgender-related content in displays specifically labelled as “LGBTQ.” One participant who noticed this described, “Even the one section that they had about community organization and LGBTQ activists specifically said ‘men and women,’ and gay people, so it may include the ‘T,’ but there’s nothing about the ‘T’ there [...] it was nice to see that there was a section acknowledging that there was a whole queer rights movement, but I don’t think that it necessarily hit the mark on trans and non-binary presence.”

Participants described similar feelings with regards to other aspects of their or others’ identities. Examples of this included the following comments:

“If I were a person of color, I think I would have felt really alienated in that museum [...] it was overwhelmingly white.”

“There weren’t any pieces that felt like they embraced queer sexuality, because most of the things that were about sexuality were more traditionally focused.”

“I don’t think they really talk about race issues.”

Some participants also noted that they are accustomed to their stories being absent. For example, one participant said, “I’m so used to [transgender narratives] just being ignored by the world that I don’t think it fazed me because I’m just so used to it just not being addressed [...] it’s such a foundational part of who you are, but you just get used to being ignored.” Another described a similar sentiment, but nevertheless expressed discomfort with not seeing trans representation: “I’m socialized to accept not a lot of representation, but [...] sometimes the ‘neutrality’ reads more like placating to the ‘old ways’ or a more conservative crowd.”

Some participants also expressed frustration that content relevant to their identities, primarily gender identity and race, was often part of temporary exhibits or special events, rather than integrated into a museum's main content:

When I've gone to the Erotic Art festival, I always feel included because there just are trans people who are represented; there are photos of us and our bodies and us living our lives, but they're not a special exhibit [...] I had the realization that oh, I probably won't see trans art in [this museum] unless it's a special exhibition [...] it's not a part of the 'regular' 'normative' experience, but it also sucks sometimes to have to wait and see if I'll see art done by people like me or of people like me [...] Otherness can be celebrated but also seems to be kind of a temporary thing as well.

Another participant's primary experience with the museum they visited is an event for QTPOC (queer and trans people of color) hosted by the QTPOC community once or twice a year. They expressed similar frustrations:

It makes me mad that people even need to have these events to make people feel like they can be in spaces. It's great when those events happen. [The event] doesn't happen that often [...] that's one of the only events when the whole museum is open, and I know that the organizers work their asses off to make that happen [...] Everyone's minorities and it's great that folks are doing this, but it's exhausting, people are exhausting themselves just to carve out space for people.

Another participant noted: "[The special exhibition] was kind of the only time you ever saw or read any mention of people that were people of color."

Priorities for change

Many participants expressed an interest in seeing queer and transgender-related exhibits in the museum, including exhibits featuring trans and queer content (e.g. artists, historical figures) specifically, as well as content exploring or discussing gender, including gender diversity. For example: "I would love to have a trans artist exhibit there someday." Another participant proposed, "It would be nice to have a temporary exhibit looking at different ways of representing gender throughout different cultures and how it's represented in art." One

participant noted, "I hope that they could have more exhibits that are explicitly queer-related.

Maybe they could mention that the artist is queer, because I think that would be interesting, and how that queerness impacts their work."

Other participants took issue with trans-related content featured only in temporary exhibits:

I would like to see more exhibits that either talked about or even just displayed gender. I'd like to see more works by trans artists, as incorporated pieces and not necessarily special exhibitions, which are difficult because you don't necessarily have the time to go out to see them and you don't necessarily have the financial capability to access the special exhibits.

The problem with only featuring trans-related content in special exhibits was also present in other participants' uncertainty that perhaps the kinds of exhibits they wanted to see had happened in the past: "Maybe it's happened, and I didn't hear about it." Having a past exhibit with content relevant to a visitor's identity does very little to include them during their actual visit.

Instead, many participants wanted to see trans-related and trans-inclusive gender-related content integrated into existing exhibits and displays, rather than solely being relegated to temporary exhibits. One participant said they would want to see "more mentioning of trans folks in general, at all" in the cultural history museum they visited. Another suggested, "Just integrate it throughout [...] A little sign or artifact here or there in the other sections and I would have felt represented. They don't have to put a special section." Another participant wanted to see

more of a focus on that inclusion of Two-Spirit individuals in their indigenous exhibits as well as trans, non-binary, and gender non-conforming individuals [...] Even though that's not the only thing that defines us, knowing that they were [queer or trans] makes their accomplishments cooler to me personally because it's representation, like we're here too, so it normalizes it.

Some participants also expressed interest in seeing inclusive exhibits featuring other marginalized groups. One participant suggested that “whenever they consider bringing in different exhibits consider other groups [...] it was really cool to be there to see the exhibit on black identities.” Others expressed similar interests in seeing the museum “highlight different communities.”

Context 2: Staff

Moments of Inclusion

Participants often referenced frontline staff as contributing to their experiences of inclusion in the museum. Participants noticed when frontline staff were generally welcoming, particularly noting when they perceived equal treatment with other guests. One participant visiting with a friend noted that “both of us [...] are visibly queer and so it was nice to be able to have this casual dialogue with the front desk staff [...] and not feel alienated or anything because of my gender presentation.”

Others mentioned frontline staff as being inclusive, but more in the sense that they were not actively exclusionary: One participant noted, “I feel like the staff was very nice and they didn’t treat me or [my friend] different. They were just very accommodating.” Another described that “the people were nice which is cool because I guess I’m never sure when people have reactions to me—like being rude or negative—I’m never sure if it’s because I look trans or queer or if it’s because I’m black.”

Participants were also appreciative of staff either gendering them correctly or using non-gendered language to refer to them. However, some felt that this was “not so much inclusion as the lack of exclusion.”

Additionally, seeing and interacting with staff who were visibly queer or gender non-conforming was a contributing factor for some. In the words of one participant,

A fair chunk of [the museum employees] seem to have the stereotypical queer haircut sort of vibe [...] I felt super included just seeing people who were like me, who are on the staff and who I knew would be minorly probably included [...] knowing that there was some level of guiding hand on the wheel that was tangential to me.

Moments of Exclusion

Several participants reported instances of frontline staff misgendering them. One reported that a frontline staff member “continuously was misgendering me. If you don’t know somebody just use they/them pronouns.”

Others reported perceiving different or negative treatment by staff. For example, one participant reflected,

There were many moments of being stared at, and I don’t even know *why* I’m being stared at. There were moments of, ‘Do I belong here?’ in terms of the museum staff. Or I catch a look out of the corner of my eye [...] Are they looking at the cis-presenting white man the same way? [...] I remember the woman at the gift shop giving me a ‘why are you here?’ look.

Others perceived an unwillingness on the part of staff to interact with them:

Whenever it’s a cis-assumed heterosexual person I see them saying, ‘Hey, can I help you?’ or ‘Hey, how are you doing today?’ or at least saying hi, versus me walking in and them not really saying anything, or what they say is different. I noticed those interactions a lot and I definitely felt like there were some people that were maybe a little bit more willing to interact with some of the guests that are cis-assumed heterosexual. There was [a staff member] standing in one of the exhibits that I kind of nodded and tried to say hi to, but they didn’t seem too willing to want to talk, but I did see them say hi so someone else.

An important commonality among these responses was the uncertainty on the part of the participant of whether what they perceived as different, negative treatment was actually

happening. Another participant described a similar experience, associating the encounter with a racial bias as well:

I don't know if this just might be paranoia because I'm used to people racial profiling me or just being weird. But it felt like the minute I walked in there, one of the security guards came into the same room, so I don't know if there was a shift change and there was already someone in there, but I just [saw] right out of the corner of my eye someone quickly moving into the same room [...] Was this just a shift change or did they just move in because I'm in here? And I was starting to get upset because I'm just trying to look at art.

Some also expressed uncertainty as to what about their person was causing that treatment.

For example, after the researcher asked if she had a sense of what the strange looks she mentioned were about, one participant said: "No. Sometimes I wish they would tell me. Is this homophobia, transphobia, racism, fatphobia? Or a mix of them?" (She jokingly added, "Is your hate intersectional?")

Priorities for change

Participants were interested in seeing staff being more cognizant of the use of gendered language, most notably pushing for the use of non-gendered language to refer to people. One participant advocated for "reminding people to assume they/them for literally everyone [...] literally cannot assume [what my gender is] at all, you shouldn't ever, so just default to gender neutral." Participants also wanted interactions with staff where gender was not invoked at all: "There's ways to interact with people without assuming pronouns [...] without even having that in the equation."

Additionally, participants expressed interest in staff being more cognizant of their own implicit biases and adjusting behavior accordingly. "Be aware of how they're reacting to people, and their own bias, and checking that [...] Train everybody with queer and trans issues, because

if there are staff who are queer and trans it shouldn't be only their job to try to look out for folks. Train everybody, not just on politically correctness, but humanizing folks.”

1. Context: Restrooms

Moments of Inclusion

Some participants mentioned the presence of gender-neutral restrooms as contributing to their feeling of inclusion. One participant noted that not only did the museum have a gender-neutral restroom that they were able to find, but that staff had previously been welcoming and allowed them to use the restroom at a previous date when they were in the area, but not visiting the museum.

Moments of Exclusion

The most consistent factor in exclusion across the board was restroom access. Many participants noted either that the museum they visited had no gender-neutral restrooms or that they were unable to find them if they did exist. (Several participants who *were* able to find gender-neutral restrooms also noted that they were particularly difficult to find, sometimes located far from the easy-to-find gendered restrooms.)

Some participants mentioned that assessing the restroom setup and determining which one to use is a regular part of their routine when going to public places such as museums. One participant said,

I just want to pee in peace, so the first thing I do when we go places is usually look at the map [...] When I go somewhere I specifically don't drink beforehand and I make sure that I pee before I go, because I don't know if I'm going to be able to safely pee when I get there. And that's something that cis people don't have to do. [...] It's disappointing that it's 2020 and I still have to worry about where I'm going to pee and whether or not I will be safe [...] it makes me a little bit more hesitant to go certain places.

Another voiced similar concerns:

That's the calculus of which bathroom am I going to use, and how do I get in and get out without having to interact with anyone else. Because I was visiting with somebody else it was less of an issue because I'm much more aware of bathroom issues if I'm by myself [...] I brought my own safety net—there was not one provided for me.

Another noted that they themselves don't have a problem with picking a restroom, but that other trans friends in their social circle do:

I don't have a huge issue just going to 'women,' but I think about my friends who have to make that decision [...] I think about the safety of my friends and also their emotional safety; I know that can be really jarring to have to choose which one to go into, and then also the one they *want* to go into versus the one they're going to be safest in.

Restroom visits take additional energy and planning, even fundamentally shaping participants' visits (as one participant described her thought process in cutting her visit short: "Do I want to pee here? Where do I? Where would I? I don't know. I'm just going to go to the library.")

Additionally, some participants had issues with unclear signage or suggested that institutions add signage to existing restrooms to clarify their policies to actively include gender diversity when adding or changing facilities isn't possible. One participant described their experience with unclear signage:

The second-floor restrooms I believe were single-stall, so [by local laws] they have to be gender neutral, but I did not go in them because the signage was kind of unclear, both on the map and on the restrooms themselves [...] the signage was just vague as to whether or not it was single-user or multi-user.

Another described the impact of gendered restrooms without clarifying signage:

They did not have any sort of acknowledgement, like 'please use the bathroom that best fits your gender presentation,' and there wasn't a single stall labeled anywhere on the map [...] that is the most functional form of alienation to me, that you're not providing adequate facilities for diverse guests.

Priorities for change

Overwhelmingly, participants wanted to see gender-neutral restrooms available in the museum. Some also suggested ensuring maps and signage are clear and that the restrooms are easy to locate:

“That prevents a lot of the barriers [...] just make it more obvious that it exists.”
 Many acknowledged that facilities may be difficult to change but suggested that “it’s very easy to put a sign on a door, even if it’s still a gendered bathroom, to say, use the bathroom you feel is best for you.”

Other moments of inclusion

Several participants reported experiencing no moments of inclusion in relation to their identity as a trans person. Others noted that what they experienced were not necessarily moments of inclusion, but rather the absence of (sometimes expected) exclusion.

Other moments of exclusion: Accessibility

Another theme that emerged was that of accessibility and experiencing or noticing exclusion due to lack of access (including physical and monetary). These moments pertained to participants’ own needs and experiences, but also included instances of participants considering the needs of others. Accessibility issues included:

- Language (“All of the signage, including the map, everything was in English”);
- Physical access (one participant described a “carefully curated path” through the museum that relies on the visitor taking the stairs to access exhibits in the apparently intended order: “If you’re taking the elevator, you don’t get that experience”);
- Neurodiversity (“I have ADHD and one of the big things that [causes] museum fatigue [...] was too many interactives, too much noise going on, too many lights”)

- Financial access (“I know so many friends who really would have loved that exhibit, and it just makes me mad because people that really value it can’t access it because it’s expensive”);
- and access to knowledge or information to be able to understand the content (“It’s always hard to access sometimes more modern pieces of art, or art that is referencing other pieces—if you aren’t studied in art, sometimes some pieces can be harder to understand”).

These responses indicate that transgender individuals’ experiences do not exist in a vacuum but are affected by and compounded with other aspects of their identities. One participant summarized how they perceive their identities functioning together: “I am intrinsically a queer *and* disabled person, and so my disability is part of the queer community, and when you exclude that specific part of me you are also being queerphobic because I’m a queer person.”

Other priorities for change: Dialogue with community

Some participants also expressed that the museum making efforts to be in dialogue with their local trans communities would show steps being taken to make the museum more inclusive for trans people. One participant wanted the museum to “actually consult with queer and trans people more about how do we make this accessible [...] ask open ended questions of the community.” Another noted that “just reaching out to our community would be really cool—cool from any museum.”

Chapter 5: Results and Implications

The purpose of this research was to understand transgender visitors' experiences of inclusion and exclusion in museums. Specifically, this study explored the contexts in which transgender visitors experienced moments of inclusion and exclusion during a museum visit in order to describe the points of greatest impact on trans visitors' experiences.

This study took a phenomenological approach. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews with 20 participants identifying as transgender (or not cisgender) in the Seattle, WA and Raleigh/Durham, NC areas. Participants visited a local museum before interviewing. This chapter highlights conclusions from the study, situates the findings within the literature, and suggests implications for further research and for museum practice.

Conclusions

Transgender visitors' experiences of inclusion and exclusion often occurred in the same contexts.

Participants indicated that exhibits, interactions with staff, and restrooms were points of impact in both their inclusion *and* exclusion experiences. Depending on what occurred or what was present in that context, the experience could foster feelings of inclusion or cause feelings of exclusion.

Exhibits

Seeing content reflective of gender diversity and trans and queer experiences contributes to feelings of inclusion.

In this study, the museums that participants visited very rarely featured overt representations of trans and queer experiences. However, the objects and interpretation strategies participants viewed as relevant to their experiences of gender did contribute to inclusion feelings. This is in line with literature indicating that queer representation in content offerings of cultural

institutions such as museums contributes to a sense of belonging among lesbian, gay, and bisexual audiences (Heimlich & Koke, 2008).

Content in exhibits that led to feelings of inclusion was not limited to exhibits about or by trans people but applied to gender-inclusivity overall; participants valued exhibit content that actively created space for multiple narratives about gender, such as depictions of gender nonconformity and interpretation subverting gender essentialism or “traditional” gender roles, which enabled them to make their own meaning based on their experience. The value of having space for personal meaning-making is reflected in studies that focused on other minority groups. One such study observed that African American students found more complex meanings in sites significant to Black history than white students as a result of their ability to draw on and connect with their own experiences (Burgard & Boucher, 2016). Another included observations about a Sierra Leonean group in a science museum using song and dance to interpret an object relevant to their own culture (Dawson, 2014).

These observations also resonate with AAM’s LGBTQ Welcoming Guidelines regarding strategies for LGBTQ inclusion in exhibits, which advocate for relevant content to be integrated throughout the museum, rather than added as an afterthought (LGBTQ Alliance, 2016).

Representation for other traditionally underrepresented groups as well as a focus on social justice or progressive themes contributes to feelings of inclusion.

Participants often discussed progressive themes and representations of other minority groups—including ones unrelated to their own identities—as making them feel included and comfortable in the museums they visited. While most literature on underrepresented groups in museums lacks discussion on intersectional identities and representation, this does resonate with Therese Quinn’s (2001) reflections on her study participants’ relationship to their own identities

as being complex and informed by more than one “primary” identity. Quinn’s participants, majority-Black high school students visiting museums and creating their own exhibit in response, were interested in exploring the fullness of their identities, rather than representing themselves solely through a racial lens.

Trans and queer content perceived as inauthentic or misguided contributes to feelings of exclusion.

Participants’ experiences with trans and queer content in their visits did not always necessarily create feelings of inclusion. LGBTQ narratives that seemed disconnected or irrelevant to participants’ lived experiences led instead to feelings of skepticism and exclusion. Participants also noticed and took issue when LGBTQ content was confined to a small display or disconnected from the interpretive strategies of the rest of the museum, registering its unequal “weight” as a subject.

These experiences of exclusion resonate with AAM guidelines that direct museums to “actively deconstruct stereotypes/ misinformation/past erasure of LGBTQ voices” and “guarantee that the quality of scholarship, writing, presentation, and interpretation in LGBTQ activities and programs is identical to that in other areas of the museum. LGBTQ inclusion should be woven into the fabric of the museum’s production values, and not be an afterthought” (LGBTQ Alliance, 2016, p. 36). There is, however, an important distinction: trans visitors have an interest in *trans-specific* content; content labeled as “LGBTQ” that in fact contains nothing about transgender subjects, the “T,” reads as absence, not representation, and contributes to exclusion feelings.

Participants’ discomfort with a singular narrative or treating LGBTQ subjects as a “special” topic to be relegated to a temporary exhibit, special event, or single panel in the

museum is reflected in literature cautioning against approaches that compartmentalize and Other LGBTQ art, culture, and history rather than taking a more integrated approach (Gabriel, 2008). Content that reinforces cissexism, heteronormativity, binary gender roles, or male-dominated perspectives contributes to feelings of exclusion.

Participants were highly critical of narratives and perspectives that reinforced dominant narratives of gender and sexuality. This awareness of implicit messaging around gender resonates with gay, lesbian, and bisexual audiences' awareness of heteronormative messaging in cultural venues in previous studies (Heimlich & Koke, 2008).

The absence of content reflective of gender diversity and trans and queer experiences contributes to feelings of exclusion.

Participants generally had an awareness of topics or themes that related to the museum they visited and exhibits they saw that had to do with gender diversity or trans and queer culture, and were able to make specific suggestions as to gender-diverse subjects the museum could explore, such as specific historical figures or aspects of trans culture, or had ideas for ways of re-interpreting existing subjects through a trans-inclusive lens. They thus noticed a distinct absence when gender diversity was not present in the museum's exhibit content. This resonates with literature indicating that lesbian, gay, and bisexual audiences in cultural venues feel they are not reflected in the content presented, contributing to a lack of personal connection between the cultural offerings and the visitor (Heimlich & Koke, 2008).

Staff

Equal and equitable treatment by staff contribute to feelings of inclusion.

Participants noticed when staff were generally welcoming and were aware of whether staff treated them similarly to other guests with more heteronormative gender presentations.

Particularly, participants felt more comfortable when they were able to relate to staff in some way, including when they perceived or knew staff were also trans or gender nonconforming. This finding is supported by gay, lesbian, and bisexual visitors to cultural venues who felt that “staff support and acceptance” of queer identities would contribute to their sense of belonging (Heimlich & Koke, 2008, p. 100). The importance of equal treatment is also stressed in AAM’s LGBTQ Welcoming Guidelines, which stress emphasis on “basics of professional customer service: cordial and affirmative greetings accompanied with the offer of information of assistance” (LGBTQ Alliance, 2016, p. 35).

Additionally, participants appreciated when staff gendered them correctly or used non-gendered language. Trans-inclusive design guidance, meant for web and app developers and designers, recommends using non-gendered language wherever possible, and allowing for multiple options when asking for gender-related information, such as pronouns or honorifics, is necessary (White, 2019). Similarly, the Welcoming Guidelines recommend gender-neutral language on any membership or data-collection forms, such as using “spouse” or “partner” rather than “husband or wife” to avoid assumptions of gender as well as marital status (LGBTQ Alliance, 2016). Studies stress the importance of correct name and pronoun usage for transgender wellbeing, associating the ability to use chosen names and pronouns with affirmed identity and better mental health (Russell et al., 2018).

Unequal treatment by staff contributes to feelings of exclusion.

Participants experienced feelings of inclusion when staff misgendered them or treated them differently from other guests, including staring or unwillingness to interact. The US Trans Study indicated trans people faced high incidences of negative treatment when using public accommodations if staff knew or thought they were transgender (James et al., 2016); while the

experiences of exclusion in this study involving staff did not include outright harassment or denial of service, the microaggressions many experienced, including misgendering and feeling watched (or ignored) by staff, nonetheless have a deleterious effect on trans visitors' museum experience. Another important commonality was participants' uncertainty as to whether what they perceived as different, negative treatment was actually occurring; it is possible that due to the prevalence of exclusion and mistreatment in public accommodations by staff, trans audiences may have a heightened awareness of their interactions with staff.

The AAM Welcoming Guidelines confirm, however, that LGBTQ audiences do often experience the kind of negative treatment participants in this study described. The document describes microaggressions similar to ones that participants in this study experienced, such as “the look,” lack of professional customer service, and judgmental or dismissive tone or glances, that negatively impact visitor experience especially for visitors whose appearances differ from heterosocial norms (LGBTQ Alliance, 2016).

While much of the literature on minority visitors' experiences in museums that touches on staff interactions is centered on facilitators in informal science learning, many of these studies do reflect the impact interactions with museum staff can have on a visit. Archer et al. (2016) and Dawson (2014) both described staff unable to facilitate interactions across cultural barriers, including ethnic background, class, and language.

Restrooms

Trans visitors highly value access to restrooms that are appropriate and safe; appropriate, safe restrooms contribute to inclusion, while the lack of appropriate, safe restrooms contribute to exclusion.

In this study, visitors often described planning their museum visits around restroom access. Participants' overall interest in gender-neutral restrooms and clear signage resonates with findings from the US Trans Study (James et al., 2016), which demonstrated barriers trans people face when accessing public restrooms such as harassment, assault, and denied access, and revealed that trans people often avoid using public restrooms or take measures to avoid needing the restroom, such as eating or drinking. The results of this study imply that in museums, the presence or absence of appropriate, safe restrooms shapes trans audiences' visits, from cutting a visit short to choosing not to bring their children.

Restrooms are also discussed as a point of impact in AAM's LGBTQ Welcoming Guidelines, which advise museums to provide unisex or family restrooms and use fixtures-based, rather than gendered, images where possible (i.e., a toilet symbol to represent the restroom, rather than men and women stick figures) (LGBTQ Alliance, 2016).

Additional conclusions

Transgender audiences want their communities to be involved in museum practice.

Participants wanted to see the museum reach out to and consult with their communities to make the museum more accessible and equitable for trans audiences. Additionally, most participants expressed an interest in the outcome of this study and gratitude for being able to candidly share their experiences of being trans in the museum.

AAM's LGBTQ Welcoming Guidelines similarly advise museums to actively build relationships with LGBTQ communities, including "seeking input from the community [...] to gauge levels of trust among LGBTQ staff and audiences. Assessment happens on the visitor's terms, and the visitor is helped to feel safe offering candid observations and evaluations of the LGBTQ experience with the museum" (LGBTQ Alliance, 2016, p. 36). The guidelines also

advise museums to ensure LGBTQ voices are represented in museum planning processes and community forums such as advisory councils or committees.

Transgender audiences' experiences are interconnected with their other identities.

Many participants spoke about their gender identity and sexual or romantic orientation as linked. While gender identity and sexuality are different, for many participants, these two aspects of their identities inform each other. For example, seeing heteronormativity reinforced in the museum also reinforced cissexism, and vice versa; visitors looked to queer representation as a potential signal of transgender inclusion. Therefore, trans inclusion should not necessarily be treated as a separate effort from inclusion of queer sexualities but should be actively and explicitly included when doing LGBTQ DEAI work. Similarly, when some participants spoke about their experiences of exclusion, they did not differentiate between moments that affected them in relation to their gender identity and other factors such as race.

Participants were aware of the ways in which their multiple identities shaped their experiences and were interested in experiences that are inclusive to the intersections of their identities. This resonates with research on the interconnections of race, class, gender, and sexuality for trans people, which found that the “frame” that others used when interacting with trans people of various races and genders were “not just about race *or* social class *or* gender *or* sexuality” (de Vries, 2012, p. 60). The finding also resonates with findings of the US Trans Study, which found that across many aspects of transgender people’s lives, disabled people or people of color often faced more negative impacts than abled or white transgender individuals (James et al., 2016).

Implications

For research

This study focused on naming the contexts of the museum in which inclusion and exclusion happen for transgender visitors. While it captured some of the impacts that inclusion and exclusion had on participants, that was not the primary aim of the study; a similar phenomenological study in future focused on the impacts on transgender visitors' mental/emotional state, learning experience, and relationship to museums would complement this study's findings and would similarly be useful to trans advocates looking to support their arguments for active inclusion strategies in museums.

Similarly, one limitation of this study is that it purposefully did not include museums with dedicated queer- or trans-specific exhibits or with integrated queer- and trans-inclusive interpretation throughout their content. Another potential area for future study is the impact of queer- and trans-specific exhibits and what makes them more or less impactful.

A descriptive study more deeply exploring transgender individuals' attitudes towards and relationships with museums may assist in filling in the gaps of this study's limitations. As this study inherently attracted participants at least somewhat interested in visiting a museum, shedding light on perceived or real barriers to entry may provide more strategies for meaningful inclusion for this audience.

For practice

Practitioners involved in curation and interpretation should focus their attention on ensuring gender diversity is reflected throughout and integrated into the museum, rather than solely on bringing in temporary trans exhibitions or events. Museums can examine their existing exhibits and interpretation for ways in which they reinforce dominant cultural narratives about

gender and actively include gender-diverse art, culture, and history in their exhibits and interpretation.

These practitioners should also examine any LGBTQ content already present in their exhibits and determine whether it compartmentalizes trans and queer experiences, and whether gender diversity is present in those narratives.

Museum leadership can invest in cultural competency training for staff to become more familiar with gender diversity and the needs of transgender visitors for both frontline staff and staff who do not generally interface with the public. Training should include guidance on refraining from using gendered language when referring to guests to avoid misgendering visitors. Training can also be implemented to emphasize maintaining the same level of professionalism, welcoming, and care for trans and gender nonconforming visitors is provided for cisgender visitors. In this same vein, museum organizations and associations can prioritize the development and dissemination of these trainings and look to ensure consistency of quality among trainings.

Wherever possible, museums can make their restrooms more equally accessible by officially designating single-stall restrooms as gender-neutral or all-gender and ensuring that policy is clear on relevant signage, maps, and in places such as the website where a museum might list other information to assist visitors in planning their visit. Signage should clarify whether a restroom is single-stall or multi-stall and refrain from including gendered pictograms (such as stick figures representing men and women). If gender-neutral restrooms are not located near gendered restrooms, signage should indicate where to find the gender-neutral ones. For museums without single-stall restrooms, adding signage to indicate visitors are welcome to use the restroom that best aligns with their gender identity can help mitigate concerns trans visitors

have when using the restroom. Again, this policy should be made on maps, signage, and the website.

Museum leadership should take an active approach to reaching out to and listening to local transgender communities. This might look like internal evaluations similar to this research, for example, conducting focus groups, interviews, or community listening sessions. Museums should look for feedback on current museum offerings, policies, and other aspects of the experience, as well as what the community is interested in seeing, and should compensate community members and leaders for their time whenever possible. As transgender audiences' needs are similar to but unique from their queer cisgender counterparts, museum organizations and associations can invest in creating and promoting welcoming and inclusion guidelines specific to gender diversity and transgender audiences.

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Appendices

Appendix A: Interview Guide

Getting started

So, to get started,

In the last 12 months, how many times have you visited a museum, not including the visit for this study? What kind of museums have you visited in the last 12 months? [*Can prompt – art, history, children's, zoos, aquariums, science, historic sites, national parks*]

How would you describe your relationship to museums in general? What place do they have in your life?

How would you describe your gender identity & presentation?

How do you think strangers or other people you don't know tend to perceive your gender? [*Probe to confirm difference or similarity to self-description*]

I'd like you to reflect on your most recent museum visit (the one for this study).

What museum did you visit? Have you been to that museum before this visit?

Did you go to the museum with anyone?

About how long did you spend at the museum?

Moments of inclusion

So let's dig into your experience with your most recent visit!

I'm most interested in when you felt included and excluded in the museum, as a transgender person, and I'd like to start with when you felt included - I'm defining inclusion as feeling respected and valued for who you are, treated fairly, and feeling like you belong as a transgender person. So,

- a. Can you tell me about a moment during your museum visit when you felt this way?
 - a. How did that feel for you?/What does that feel like?
- b. Were there any other moments during your visit when you felt included?
 - a. How did those feel for you?/What does that feel like?

We talked about your experience of inclusion during your visit in relation to your identity as a trans person. Are there any other aspects of your identity or sense of self, such as race, ability, sexuality, class, age, religion, or something else, that you felt were at play in your experiences of inclusion?

Moments of exclusion

Let's now talk about when you felt excluded during your museum visit. I'm defining exclusion as the opposite of inclusion, so feeling not respected or valued for who you are, treated unfairly, or feeling like you don't belong as a transgender person.

- c. Can you tell me about a moment during your museum visit when you felt this way?
 - a. How did that feel for you?/What does that feel like?
- d. Were there any other moments during your visit when you felt excluded?
 - a. How did those feel for you? What does that feel like?

We talked about your experience of exclusion during your visit in relation to your identity as a trans person. Are there any other aspects of your identity or sense of self, such as race, ability, sexuality, class, age, religion, or something else, that you felt were at play in your experiences of exclusion?

Impact

Did you talk with anyone about these feelings, either of inclusion or exclusion? Can you tell me about that conversation?

What is one thing you would like staff at the museum you visited to know about your experience? *rephrase* what is one thing you'd like to pass along to staff about your experience?

What is one thing you would like to see change about the museum to become more inclusive for transgender people?

Demographics

As always, you're free to skip any of these – just say “pass” and I'll move on.

What year were you born?

What is your race/ethnicity?

Do you have a disability?

Follow-up

Once my manuscript is available, would you like me to send you the results?