Navigating Safety and Technology: The Everyday Safety Labor of Transgender Black, Indigenous, and People of Color in the United States

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Abstract

Technologies like online support networks and safety apps hold promise for improving personal safety. However, these tools often fail to address the widespread violence against gender-diverse individuals, particularly transgender Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (TBIPOC) in the United States. To better understand technology's role in managing safety among TBIPOC individuals, we conducted 22 semi-structured interviews. We found that participants engaged in what we call *safety labor*, the emotional and cognitive work of managing misrecognition, assessing risk, and downplaying discomfort to maintain self-preservation. Visibly-trans participants faced greater vulnerability and tended to feel safer when their trans identity was not visible. Technology enabled sharing locations and rides, and sending coded messages. Findings highlight the need for tailored technologies that protect privacy and help TBIPOC individuals when they experience violence. Our research contributes a deeper understanding of TBIPOC experiences and informs technology development to promote TBIPOCs' safety.

CCS Concepts

• **Human-centered computing** → **Human computer interaction (HCI)**; **Empirical studies in HCI**; • **Social and professional topics** → **Race and ethnicity**; **Gender**;

Keywords

safety, transgender, non-binary, Black-Indigenous, persons of color, non-binary, TBIPOC, social media, violence, femme, trans, physical violence, online violence

ACM Reference Format:
Denny L. Starks, Hibby Thach, Aloe DeGuia, Tawanna Dillahunt, and Oliver L. Haimson. 2026. Navigating Safety and Technology: The Everyday Safety Labor of Transgender Black, Indigenous, and People of Color in the United States. In *Proceedings of the 2026 CHI Conference on Human Factors in Computing Systems (CHI '26), April 13–17, 2026, Barcelona, Spain.* ACM, New York, NY, USA, 16 pages. https://doi.org/10.1145/3772318.3791838

CHI '26, Barcelona, Spain

ACM ISBN 979-8-4007-2278-3/2026/04
https://doi.org/10.1145/3772318.3791838

Content Warning

This paper contains material on the following: **transphobia, homophobia, racism, transmisogyny, and transmisogynoir**. We advise readers who may be sensitive to this content to be prepared for potentially distressing material.

1 Introduction

Ensuring physical and online safety is particularly challenging for transgender (hereafter shortened to trans) [1] and nonbinary Black [2], Indigenous, and people of color (TBIPOC) in the United States (U.S.). Transgender women and nonbinary people of color face disproportionately high rates of gender-based violence (GBV), shaped by intersecting systems of racism, transphobia, and misogyny [49]. In the U.S., lifetime prevalence estimates of GBV against trans women range from 58% to 89% [62, 123], which likely underestimate the true rate due to misgendering in law enforcement and media reports, as well as incomplete surveillance systems [32, 62, 95, 123]. The trans community, especially in the U.S., faces persistent harassment and violence, with transgender victims overwhelmingly being BIPOC [27, 65, 78]; these victims are predominantly Black, and 85% identify as people of color [95].

These patterns stem from a broader context of social and legal marginalization, where anti-trans violence is often tolerated or normalized [123]. TBIPOC experience compounded harm at the

[1] Transgender refers to a person who identifies as a gender different than the one they were assigned at birth. Although not all non-binary people consider themselves trans, the term "trans" encompasses non-binary trans people. When we use "trans" in this paper, we intentionally include non-binary trans people. About 1.3 million Americans adults identify as trans, of which 39% are trans women, 36% are trans men, and 26% are gender non-conforming [63]

[2] In this paper, the term "Black" will refer to persons of African heritage throughout the diaspora, including those born in Africa, the Caribbean, North and South America, Canada, Europe, and Asia. In the United States, racial discrimination against people of African descent is centered on the color of their skin rather than their country of origin. Nevertheless, we recognize that we cannot speak for all Black people because they represent a variety of viewpoints and experiences in life. We acknowledge that there is no single Black experience and that the term "Black" does not account for different ethnic and cultural experiences. We are committed to understanding the nuances of the Black experience and representing Black people's various perspectives with respect and dignity.

intersections of racism, sexism, misogynoir, homophobia, and transphobia [6, 15, 28, 67, 85]. This reflects Kimberlé Crenshaw's concept of intersectionality, or the compounding impact of entwined identities and power structures [24, 25]. Yet, many interventions against GBV are grounded in narrow understandings of "gender" that center White womanhood [105]. This exclusion extends to safety technologies, which may fail to address, or even perpetuate, the structural violence TBIPOC face.

Achieving safety for TBIPOC requires dismantling intersecting systems of White supremacy, colonialism, and capitalism [106, 107]. While technology cannot resolve these systemic injustices, HCI and CSCW research has explored its potential [19, 72, 89, 109, 122, 126]. However, much of this research often centers white and/or cisgender users [40, 74], leaving gaps in understanding how technology can, or cannot, support the safety of those at the margins. Prior work suggests that TBIPOC are already integrating safety technologies into their practices [58, 109], yet little work examines how trans people of color specifically use technology to navigate threats to their safety [26, 42, 102, 103, 109, 110, 113]. Even fewer tools are designed for their safety needs [47, 50, 55, 56, 77, 87, 92, 109]. We address this gap by studying TBIPOC's unique safety challenges and providing insights that can inform technology design to support them, building on prior work suggesting interest in co-design approaches [58, 109].

Our research questions directly address the pervasive violence and safety threats faced by TBIPOC:

- How do TBIPOC in the U.S. navigate safety in response to violence (e.g., physical, verbal, emotional, structural, etc.)?
- How do TBIPOC in the U.S. leverage technology to support their safety?

We conducted 22 semi-structured qualitative interviews, primarily with trans women and non-binary BIPOC participants. Participants reported numerous safety concerns, ranging from verbal harassment and physical violence to criminalization and systemic barriers to healthcare and housing. Many downplayed experiences of verbal and emotional abuse, viewing them as normalized and inevitable. Nonetheless, they adopted precautionary measures like carrying weapons, using digital safety codes through text messages to discreetly communicate to others that they felt unsafe, and relying on community support. Feminine-presenting participants felt some protection from passing [3], or from being read as cisgender women, while participants experienced heightened risk when appearing visibly trans. Technology, including location sharing, safety apps, and trusted online spaces, played a key role in their safety practices, often paired with community-based strategies for navigating danger. We call this *safety labor*: the emotional and cognitive work of managing misrecognition, assessing risk, and downplaying discomfort in the name of self-preservation.

This study contributes: 1) insights into TBIPOC's lived experiences with violence and safety, and 2) recommendations for designing technologies that address both physical and online threats in ways that center those most affected, and 3) the concept of safety labor, which is often invisible to others but deeply felt and expected by the participants themselves, that highlights the hidden costs of navigating everyday safety.

[3]A trans person is said to "pass" when others perceive them to be the gender they are presenting, not the sex they were assigned at birth, and not being recognized as trans [4, 46].

2 Background and Related Work

Our work builds on earlier research that examined how communities suffering from violence use social technologies to communicate and secure safety in CSCW, CHI, and Gender Studies. We review prior work on TBIPOC experiences with non-physical (e.g., emotional, psychological, verbal, etc.,), physical, and online harm. Our review of the literature highlights the substantial violence they face in physical settings, exacerbated by systemic racism and transphobia, often forcing them into poverty and vulnerable positions like sex work. Although online spaces such as social media present unique challenges, including targeted harassment, they also serve as a vital resource for community-building and activism. Insights from prior work underscore the importance of applying an intersectional lens to understand how multiple oppressions intersect and shape the violence experienced by TBIPOC, the potential role of technology in supporting their safety, and safety labor; the invisible labor of navigating safety in their daily lives.

2.1 Race, Intersectionality, and HCI

Violence against transgender individuals stems from broader social marginalization, creating environments where anti-trans violence is tolerated or normalized [123] and reinforced by cultural beliefs that justify or minimize gender-based violence (GBV) [100]. While GBV affects many, women and trans individuals are disproportionately impacted [90, 123]. Patriarchal norms associate femininity with vulnerability and masculinity with dominance, reinforcing violence against women [16, 48, 84, 108]. TBIPOC face even higher rates of violence due to intersecting racism, sexism, and transphobia, [86] highlighting the need to examine how overlapping oppressions create unique experiences of discrimination.

Pioneers such as Kimberlé Crenshaw, Sojourn Truth, and Anna Julia Cooper described how Black women face compounding oppression from racism and sexism [20–23, 52, 53, 114]. Intersectionality is a theoretical framework and analytical tool for understanding how overlapping systems of power, like racism, sexism, and transphobia, interact to shape lived experiences based on interdependent social identities such as race, gender, and ethnicity [21, 22]. As trans rights gain visibility, studying transness alongside intersectionality in HCI is increasingly crucial [103], helping to guide inclusive design and support for TBIPOC individuals.

In HCI, intersectionality challenges traditional technology design by emphasizing how social inequalities such as disproportionate policing, financial barriers, and limited healthcare emerge from intersecting power relations [35, 61, 104, 112, 124]. Concepts like misogynoir, or the intertwined racism and sexism Black women experience [4, 5], and transmisogynoir, or the compounded oppression against trans women of color [73, 96], center the specific harms and normalized violence faced by TBIPOC communities. Recent work in HCI documents how sapphic and trans users experience constraints that reproduce structural biases, emphasizing the need for safety focused, community centered design approaches [30].

Understanding these frameworks is essential for designing technology and interventions that respond to the complex realities of TBIPOC individuals' lives [17, 39, 88, 98].

Our work also builds on research from CSCW, CHI, and Gender Studies that explores how communities affected by systemic violence utilize technologies for safety. Examples include prior work on how gender diverse individuals use online communities for support surrounding harm, stigma, and identity visibility [43]. Additionally, research on abolitionist community care infrastructures examine how marginalized communities build systems of mutual aid, crisis response, and protection outside of state based institutions [69, 71]. Our work extends these insights to enhance safety practices among TBIPOC communities by uncovering the opportunities and challenges technologies can present, which creates opportunities for future co-design work with communities.

2.2 Defining Safety and Harm

Safety is an increasingly prominent topic in HCI [81, 117], approached through various lenses including physical, psychological, and sociotechnical safety [2, 3, 8, 58, 87, 97, 109, 113]. It is widely understood as relational and context-dependent [79]. In one study, participants defined safety not merely as the absence of harm, but as something sustained through connections with both human and non-human actors [79]. This broader perspective reframes safety in the digital age as an inclusive and evolving concept grounded in care. This aligns with prior work on community care that argues for building safety through collective imagination, mutual accountability, and systems of care rather than punitive ones [10, 68]. Building on this work, we find that safety involves more than violence prevention; it also requires creating environments that foster joy, connection, and well-being.

Despite this, many existing safety technologies primarily prioritize harm reduction [93, 119]. Our work considers violence as multidimensional, encompassing not only physical harm but also verbal, emotional, structural, and systemic harms [59]. Violence is defined as both physical and non-physical harm, including emotional, psychological, verbal, and digital abuse; violence is shaped by societal perceptions, systemic oppression, and the intersecting realities of race, gender identity, and visibility [59]. It includes harm that is both overt and insidious, especially for TBIPOC individuals. This definition recognizes that violence is not always visible or acknowledged by dominant systems, but is often felt in the daily experiences of erasure, misrecognition, and hostility. Emotional and psychological forms of violence are frequently minimized or dismissed, yet they carry long-term consequences for one's mental health, safety, and sense of self. Digital spaces also facilitate violence, where anonymity and platform structures allow transphobia and racism to thrive [57, 75, 125]. However, for TBIPOC individuals, violence is not always a singular event; it is often ongoing, relational, and shaped by environments that fail to protect or affirm them. Work on crisis response and digital mental health tools demonstrates how marginalized individuals navigate difficult technical systems while seeking safety and support [91]. Understanding violence in this way requires centering lived experience and recognizing how power, perception, and structural inequity shape what is considered harmful, and who is allowed to name it. This includes direct acts of discrimination, harassment, and abuse, as well as broader societal conditions that normalize and perpetuate harm against TBIPOC individuals, such as barriers to employment, housing, and healthcare [41]. Other work shows how marginalized communities engage in labor to manage risk, prevent infrastructure breakdown, and mitigate safety threats [38, 70]. This expansive view of violence acknowledges both immediate acts of violence and the institutional structures that create and sustain unsafe conditions for TBIPOC communities.

In this study, we examine TBIPOC's lived experiences and strategies for navigating physical, emotional, and online violence. Our findings contribute to the literature by offering suggestions for designing technologies that not only mitigate harm but also nurture the conditions necessary for TBIPOC communities to thrive.

2.3 TBIPOC's Experiences with Harm

Black trans women face severe discrimination, violence, and harassment due to their gender identity and race. Systemic racism and transphobia exacerbate these challenges, severely limiting their access to critical resources like employment, housing, and healthcare [86]. Many Black and Latinx trans women, facing employment discrimination and few job opportunities, are forced into extreme poverty and homelessness [45]. As a result, many turn to the sex industry, where barriers are fewer, but they become more vulnerable to violence [12, 101, 115, 118]. The legal system often reflects societal biases, from neglect to outright hostility toward Black trans women, leading to under-reporting of violence due to past traumatic experiences with law enforcement [45, 49, 120, 123]. Other state systems, such as policing and child welfare, are documented to systematically fail Black communities, which gives important context as to why TBIPOC individuals often avoid formal reporting systems [99]. Underreporting of violence against Black trans individuals can also be attributed to several systemic issues. First, the current policing and reporting systems often fail to recognize trans lives, leading to cases of violence not being classified as trans violence [33]. Second, racial discrimination and historical violence against Black communities contribute to distrust of law enforcement, resulting in Black individuals, including Black trans people, being less likely to report violence. Lastly, violence affecting both groups, individually and at their intersection, may not only be underreported but may also go unnoticed altogether. These realities emphasize the importance of examining such challenges through an intersectional lens [33]. This work aims to explore how to support these women's safety better and encourage them to report violence.

The focus on violence against transgender women of color underscores how societal perceptions of gender expression influence who receives justice [121]. Black trans women, often forced into highly visible and vulnerable positions by their gender expression, face significant obstacles to accessing justice. Perpetrators often use transphobia to exert control, often extending that control through digital means, with mobile devices and social media platforms. These technologies play complex roles in Intimate Partner Violence, including being used for stalking and surveillance [44, 80, 111].

In addition to physical violence, TBIPOC individuals are disproportionately targeted by online harassment, particularly in social media spaces [18, 36, 76, 116]. Online harassment disproportionately affects women, LGBTQIA2S+ (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer or questioning, intersex, asexual or aromantic, two-spirit) individuals, and people of color, with nearly half of Black (54%) and Hispanic (47%) victims believing they were targeted because of their race or ethnicity [36, 116]. For Black trans women, this vulnerability is even more pronounced. Online platforms often serve as spaces where they face an onslaught of transphobic and racist abuse. Despite this, their stories are frequently ignored by mainstream media, leaving social media as one of the only platforms where they can share their experiences of violence, survival, and resilience [64, 121]. However, this visibility on social media often makes them vulnerable to harassment, further complicating their safety in online spaces. Our work builds on prior research and fills the gaps by further examining physical world and online violence experienced by TBIPOC individuals and identifying community-driven technological solutions to help address these challenges.

3 Methods

To address our research questions, we conducted semi-structured interviews centered on the experiences of both safety and violence in physical spaces and online for TBIPOC community members, and their responses to such encounters.

3.1 Participant Recruitment

Participants were recruited using snowball sampling via various online channels, such as social media, digital flyers, LGBTQIA2S+ organizations, and email listservs. We also used physical flyers and personal networks in locations with large TBIPOC communities. Our inclusion criteria required that participants identified as trans and BIPOC and lived in the U.S. Using a screening survey, we collected basic information to confirm eligibility, focusing on gender, race, location. Recruitment materials highlighted that a trans individual would conduct interviews. We emailed eligible participants to schedule interviews and provide compensation information and a consent form. Participants were compensated with a $50 gift card or check. We ended recruitment upon achieving data saturation, marked by the conceptualization of consistent themes within our analysis with no further insights gained from additional interviews. We acknowledge the limited participation of trans men and Latine individuals in the study, highlighting the need for future research focusing on their experiences. Some of the participants were recruited by snowball sampling to reduce fraudulent responses (common when recruiting online), with many trans women connected within the same communities.

3.2 Participant Demographics

Participants included 50% trans women, 10% trans men, and 50% non-binary individuals. Racially, 68% were Black, 14% Indigenous, and 36% Asian, with some participants in multiple categories. Percentages add up to greater than 100% because some participants self-identified with multiple categories. The average age was 30 years old (range: 20-44). Participants were primarily located on the West Coast, East Coast, and in Midwestern states, with most residing in urban and suburban areas. Some participants chose their own pseudonyms, and others' pseudonyms were selected by the first author using a gender-neutral name generator. After a thorough review process, the study was deemed exempt by our University's Institutional Review Board.

3.3 Data Collection

The first author conducted 22 semi-structured interviews over Zoom. Using Zoom enabled access to a broader audience than in-person interviews would, though it limited opportunities to establish natural rapport and connection. Participants could choose to have their cameras on or off based on their comfort level. We conducted interviews between June and November 2023, each lasting about 60 minutes (mean = 55 minutes, range: 38–78 minutes). Interviews covered experiences with trans violence and safety practices. Interviews were recorded, deidentified, and later professionally transcribed by human transcriptionists through Rev.com.

After initially creating a list of interview questions related to our research questions, we iteratively revised and refined the interview protocol after each of the first 3-4 interviews. Questions aimed to capture times when participants felt safe and why, the self-care practices they engaged in related to their trans identity, the technologies they used daily, and how these technologies supported their safety. Participants also shared examples of online safe spaces, their experiences with violence, and how they navigated transphobic spaces and managed unsafe situations.

During interviews, the first author, a trans nonbinary, Black, and queer individual with personal experience of trans violence, shared their own experiences with intersecting oppressions to foster an environment conducive to self-disclosure and support. This approach challenged the assumptions of objectivity or neutrality often associated with research norms influenced by whiteness [61].

3.4 Positionality

Grounded in standpoint theory [60], we recognize that knowledge is shaped by the social positions and lived experiences of those who produce it. As such, we explicitly acknowledge the identities, privileges, and oppressions that inform our perspectives throughout this research. The authorship team includes Black, Asian, and white, trans and cisgender individuals, whose varied standpoints influenced the framing, analysis, and interpretation of this work. The first author, a Black, trans nonbinary researcher and member of the TBIPOC community, conducted all participant interviews and played a central role in shaping the research approach. The first author's positionality was not peripheral but deeply embedded in the research process. As someone who navigates both anti-Blackness and transphobia, their presence brought a unique epistemological lens and a level of relational proximity to the participants. Within a discipline and academic space where few share these intersecting identities, the first author's presence offered more than demographic similarity; it signaled recognition, understanding, and care.

Many participants described feeling a sense of relief and emotional safety when talking with the first author. Because the author

Table 1: Participant demographics

Participant	Race/ethnicity	Gender	Age
Shuri	Black American	Nonbinary Trans Man	29
Wave	Filipina American	Trans Femme/Trans Woman/Bakla	22
Monica	Black/White American	Trans Woman	Not provided
Sage	Black American	Nonbinary	31
Erik	Black American	Nonbinary	31
Ororo	Black American with Caribbean influence	Nonbinary	27
Luna	Mixed Indigenous/Latine American	Nonbinary	29
Cass	Afro-Indigenous American	Nonbinary	25
Yukio	Japanese/White American	Trans Feminine	30
Jubilee	Asian American	Agender/Nonbinary	31
Kris	Black American	Trans Woman	30
Emerson	Black American	Nonbinary	Not provided
Miles	Black American	Nonbinary	26
Mahari	Southeast Asian & Filipina American	Trans Woman	31
Ironheart	Black/Native American	Trans Woman	34
Vixen	Black American	Trans Woman	34
Magic	Black and Filipino American	Nonbinary Trans Man	37
Sophie	Asian American	Trans Woman	27
Saxon	Black American	Nonbinary Trans Woman	32
Shay	Blindian (Black/Indian American)	Trans Woman	44
Nao	Black American	Trans Woman	20
Jae	Black-Filipino American	Nonbinary	27

shared similar lived experiences, participants did not need to explain or translate the nuances of their stories. This trust made space for deeper sharing and contrasted with the emotional work participants often take on when speaking to researchers outside their communities. The author's identity was both a strength and a source of emotional labor, showing how who we are shapes the knowledge we produce. In this study, that connection highlighted the emotional weight of trans and racialized violence, experiences that are too often overlooked or dismissed. We view this not as a limitation, but as a vital strength of community-based research: it not only documents harm but also affirms and honors the lives at the center of these stories.

3.5 Data Analysis: Incorporating Intersectionality into Reflexive Thematic Analysis

Intersectionality guided our thematic analysis, recognizing that TBIPOC experiences are shaped not simply by the sum of their racial, gender, or class identities, but by intersecting systems of power and oppression [22]. Using reflexive thematic analysis [13, 14], we inductively developed themes and identified patterns. We constructed themes from the interview data using both our participants' accounts and our group analysis. Data collection and analysis occurred concurrently, allowing us to refine the interview protocol, codes, and themes iteratively.

We centered participants' narratives while analyzing how the broader structures of violence, transphobia, transmisogynoir, and marginalization shaped their experiences. As institutions and technological design often overlook some harms, especially emotional, verbal, and psychological violence, our analysis extended beyond explicit statements to include implied, omitted, or emotionally resonant accounts. The first author's lived experience as a TBIPOC individual who has endured similar violence further informed this reflexive interpretation, helping surface deeper layers of meaning beyond dominant understandings of violence.

To integrate intersectionality throughout the process, the first author first coded for experiences of violence and safety shaped by intersecting social positions (e.g., race, gender identity, socioeconomic status), focusing on relationality. A second coding round emphasized power and inequality, analyzing how systemic forces like racism and transphobia structured participants' daily strategies for safety and self-care. For example, we examined how approaches to safety varied with social and economic position, and how they reflected intersecting forms of discrimination.

Next, the first, fourth, and fifth authors organized codes into themes that captured the intersectional nature of participants' experiences. For instance, a theme such as "resilience in the face of compounded marginalization" illustrates how TBIPOC individuals resist and navigate multiple oppressions. Preliminary themes, including categories like "I'm privileged," "passing," and "sharing location," served as organizing structures derived from the coded data. The first author then refined these themes, critically reviewing how participants linked intersecting identities to experiences of both violence and joy across different contexts (e.g., online versus physical spaces).

4 Results

In response to how TBIPOC navigated safety in response to violence (RQ1), we found that participants often downplayed experiences of verbal, emotional, and psychological violence, describing them as routine rather than naming them as harm. Yet they still engaged in layered safety strategies that balanced both physical and emotional needs. Physical safety involved carrying weapons, using buddy systems, and sometimes passing; adjusting clothing, voice, or mannerisms so others would see them as cisgender [4, 36]. While passing could reduce trans-related violence, it came with pressure to conform and the stress of being "clocked." Emotional safety required curating social environments, setting boundaries, and practicing hypervigilance or code-switching to navigate spaces where visibility felt risky. Technology also played a key role (RQ2). Participants relied on phones, location sharing, safety apps, and group chats to quietly signal distress or stay connected to trusted networks. Together, these practices show how TBIPOC individuals combine physical preparedness, psychological resilience, and digital tools to navigate violence and uncertainty.

4.1 Anticipation of Trans Violence

Many participants, especially those often perceived as cisgender women, initially responded "no" or "I'm privileged" when asked if they had experienced trans-related violence. Yet their stories revealed a more complicated reality. While they may not have faced overt physical attacks, they described verbal harassment, emotional invalidation, constant misgendering, and the pressure to hide parts of themselves. Over time, these everyday harms became so normalized that participants came to see them as an expected part of life, rather than as violence. To cope, participants developed layered safety strategies that addressed both physical and emotional risks. Physical safety often meant carrying weapons, relying on the ability to pass, or creating quick-response systems like safety codes sent via text messages. Emotional safety required constant self-monitoring and identity management; deciding when to disclose, when to stay silent, and how to navigate spaces where visibility felt dangerous. As well as surviving, these strategies helped manage the psychological toll of being misread, excluded, or erased.

4.1.1 Conditional Visibility: Differentiating Physical and Psychological Safety. Participants overlooked emotional, verbal, and psychological violence during the interviews. Although these forms of harm aren't physical, they still pose serious risks to mental and emotional well-being [9, 34, 82]. Many participants downplayed their experiences with abuse that didn't leave visible physical marks, mirroring broader societal and media tendencies to treat physical violence as the only "real" form of harm. This demonstrates the need for greater awareness and education about the impact of non-physical violence, which can be just as damaging.

Participants emphasized that emotional and psychological harm often stemmed from everyday interactions where their identities were not acknowledged or respected. Rather than dramatic or overt abuse, these forms of violence were described as chronic and wearing, accumulating through repeated misgendering, exclusion, or pressure to hide one's identity. As emphasized by Shuri:

> *I find that there are a lot of struggles with people misgendering or making assumptions about what it means to be trans. There's gatekeeping about how you ought to look or what surgeries you should have, and deadnaming [4] when referring to a person, and just all sorts of gross assumptions.*

Several participants noted the stress of "anticipating harm" in spaces that weren't affirming, and the emotional toll of constantly navigating environments where safety and visibility felt conditional. These experiences highlight how violence is not always about singular moments of attack but can also live in the cumulative effect of invalidation, hypervigilance, and erasure. As Vixen shared:

> *I make sure I know where the exits are, wherever I'm at. I try to be somewhat vigilant, especially if I'm by myself, just looking around, making sure I'm aware of my surroundings.*

Participants made clear distinctions between physical and emotional safety. Physical safety was often about avoiding immediate threats, like harassment or assault, and involved visible precautions such as carrying weapons or relying on one's ability to pass. For example, Monica described how her sense of safety depended on *"how passing I am and whether I have a knife on me or not."* Emotional and psychological safety, on the other hand, required ongoing self-monitoring and identity management. Many participants spoke about having to hide parts of themselves, code-switch, be hypervigilant of exits within a space (both online and offline), or constantly assess whether a space was affirming or hostile. This daily labor took a toll. As Miles said:

> *There's like this disconnection from my inner reality and how I show up in the world, especially when I don't feel safe or affirmed in the spaces I'm in.*

While physical safety called for quick, reactive strategies, emotional safety demanded long-term resilience in the face of systemic invalidation. It was about the presence of affirmation, care, and belonging. For many of the participants, that kind of safety remained hard to find. These layered understandings of safety reveal that harm is not just shaped by what someone experiences, but by how they are perceived. To fully understand TBIPOC individuals' safety, we must now turn to the role of visibility, gender presentation, and societal expectations in shaping who is targeted, when, and why.

4.1.2 Perception, Passing, and the Politics of Safety. Many participants, especially those perceived as cisgender women, initially responded with statements such as "no" or "I'm privileged" when questioned about trans-related violence. Nevertheless, their narratives disclosed frequent experiences of misgendering, emotional invalidation, and verbal harassment—forms of harm so routine that they were no longer recognized as violence. Over time, these persistent experiences imposed a substantial psychological burden, leading to feelings of invisibility, exhaustion, and disconnection from self.

Safety was frequently associated not with identity itself, but with social perception. Being perceived as cisgender, or at least not visibly gender nonconforming, functioned as a protective factor,

[4] calling a transgender or non-binary person by their birth name or other former name after they have chosen a new name.

resulting in reduced scrutiny and harassment. As Vixen put it, *"I think right now, because of the kind of world we live in, being passable provides safety."* Shuri expanded on this, explaining:

> *I think it's important to understand the nuances, cause I feel like there are often assumptions that [passing] is solely tied to a one-dimensional 'pick-me' mentality. I feel like passing is first and foremost a matter of safety. It's not a choice for many, it's a preventative for some, and it's euphoric yet stressful.*

Perception as cisgender, or "passing," offered protection from overt forms of transphobic violence. Participants often described their sense of safety as contingent upon how others perceived them. Ororo supported this perspective, explaining that being treated as a cis woman due to not having medically transitioned reduced exposure to transphobic violence, while simultaneously increasing vulnerability to other forms of harm.

> *So I don't experience trans-related violence because of my trans identity. And that is largely because I'm not medically transitioning, and not on T. I have not gotten top surgery and things like that. So for the most part, people perceive me as a [cisgender] woman.*– Ororo

Jubilee offered a similar reflection:

> *So it [violence] has more to do with the level of perception [of my gender]. So let's say that I go out and it's not how I'm dressed, but how other people perceive me. And it is a high-level perception, very femme, I'm being called a girly girl, all those kinds of things all day.*

Femininity further complicated these dynamics. Even when participants were perceived as cisgender, they continued to be targeted through misogyny, misogynoir, and transmisogynoir. Ironheart recalled, *"My brothers picked on me just for being feminine. People felt like they could pick on me more, specifically because I was feminine... You're looked at as weaker, because you're feminine... I've been threatened because of my femininity."* This demonstrates that violence is not solely related to trans identity, but also to the ways in which femininity is racialized, sexualized, and devalued. Interviews indicated that femme-targeted harms varied: for Ororo and Jubilee, nonbinary or agender individuals often perceived as cis women, violence was associated with misogyny and misogynoir. In contrast, Ironheart experienced punishment for femininity prior to openly identifying as a trans woman, including gender policing and anti-femininity violence that preceded later transmisogynoir. Although all participants faced violence related to femininity (or had in the past), the mechanisms and implications differed according to gender identity, embodiment, stage of transition, and social perception. Femininity represented a shared site of vulnerability, but the manifestation of this vulnerability depended on whether it was misinterpreted as cis womanhood, penalized during boyhood, or targeted in emerging transfemininity.

Participants experienced emotional abuse, threats, and invalidation for expressing femininity, highlighting the particular risks faced by femme-presenting TBIPOC individuals. These accounts demonstrate that violence is determined less by self-identification as trans or nonbinary and more by how others perceive them within prevailing narratives of gender, race, and power. Individuals perceived as visibly queer, trans, or feminine frequently encounter increased scrutiny, harassment, and risk. This "legibility" shapes both their external experiences and internal sense of safety. As Ororo notes, *"We might not face transphobia because people think that we're women, but we definitely do [experience misogynoir], like well, at least for me."*

A comprehensive understanding of trans safety necessitates a nuanced, intersectional framework that accounts for psychological harm, gender presentation, visibility, and social perception. For many participants, safety does not signify the absence of danger, but rather the ongoing management of mental and emotional burdens resulting from persistent misrecognition, devaluation, or erasure. Despite these complex harms, numerous participants distanced themselves from the label of "trans violence" and from their trans identities, illustrating how societal definitions of violence and legitimacy influence both external threats and internal conceptions of harm.

4.2 Curating Safety: Online Harassment and the Emotional Labor of Digital Life

Participants characterized digital safety as a continuous process involving the management of visibility and the regulation of access to their online identities. Rather than emphasizing content creation, they conceptualized "curation" as a protective measure, which included shaping friend lists, blocking or unfollowing harmful accounts, adjusting privacy settings, and withdrawing from unpredictable or hostile online spaces. These environments were frequently characterized by targeted harassment, coordinated attacks, and a lack of platform intervention, resulting in digital spaces that offered both opportunities for connection and risks of exposure. Such conditions necessitated ongoing emotional labor, including decisions about information sharing, trust, and disengagement. This shows that online safety must be deliberately maintained through vigilance, selective visibility, and the establishment of personal boundaries. Monica described this violence as a routine part of being trans online:

> *I mean, the usual shit people say to you online when you're transgender and they're hiding [anonymous]: 'die you tranny faggot.' It's the usual gamut: death threats, slurs, I guess. Men have threatened to rape me over the internet. Just the usual gamut.*

Her use of the phrase "the usual gamut" highlights how online violence against TBIPOC individuals has been normalized; treated as expected and routine in both digital and physical spaces. Monica's account shows how platforms have become predictable sites of dehumanization, where rape threats and slurs are no longer surprising but anticipated. The emotional toll of this hypervisibility is heavy: what should be shocking has become ordinary, forcing TBIPOC individuals to move through online spaces with constant caution, and often with a sense of resignation.

Another way participants protect themselves online is by curating their digital presence as an emotional and psychological survival strategy. Shuri explained:

> *Being online I can remain as a little androgynous burger and keep my profile or even certain picture and info*

> *secret or shown to select folks. I can hide others from stories or block them. I can also unfollow, take breaks and report with a much easier and faster process.*

Shuri's playful tone masks the seriousness of the strategy. Curation becomes not just about aesthetics, but about safety; controlling who sees what, when, and how. This labor is constant, invisible, and deeply gendered. It reflects a broader reality: safety online is often only available to those who can shape their presence in ways that minimize risk, a privilege not always afforded to TBIPOC individuals.

Still, even carefully managed spaces cannot erase the presence of violence. Sophie shared:

> *Online, though, I feel like it is hard because I feel like, yes, I experienced these things, but I almost repress them or don't think about them to the point where it's hard for me to recall them. Because I also try to curate my spaces so much so that I don't ever have to confront the violence, even though I know it's there if I just step outside of my bubble.*

Sophie's reflection shows how repression becomes a part of online survival. The emotional labor required to maintain digital safety includes not just moderation and privacy settings, but also psychological distancing, pushing harm so far to the margins that it becomes difficult to name. This response mirrors what others shared about enduring verbal abuse in physical spaces: *"it is easier to deny the harm than to constantly sit with its weight."*

Participants also spoke to the unpredictability of platform cultures. Cass shared:

> *For example, on Twitter, just tweeting about an experience or my identity or whatever it looks like, and then you get a horde of bigots and trolls who will, you know, come and attack and antagonize you.*

Here, harm is not just about one comment or one person; it is the horde, the pile-on, the amplification of abuse that platforms like Twitter (now X) enable. This kind of online hate is not just about individual cruelty, but about structural indifference from tech companies that allow violence to proliferate in the name of "engagement." In fact, this violence often equals profit, and with platforms like X rolling back protective policies and safety measures, the abuse is not only tolerated but actively encouraged.

Some, like Vixen, found ways to exit unsafe digital spaces:

> *I don't deal too much either in my online world with transphobia or unsafe spaces because I think that, myself, I'm generally able to discern, 'okay, this is a safe space.' When it is not, then I just leave.*

But the ability to "just leave" assumes a level of detachment or privilege that is not universal. For those whose work, community, or advocacy relies on visibility, opting out is not always an option. As Magic noted: *"Sometimes I experience transphobia online, especially being more of... having public social media."*

Online publicness, which facilitates connection, community-building, and collective organization, comes at a cost. Participants often had to weigh the value of being visible against the threat of being targeted. What results is a constant negotiation between connection and exposure, between voice and vulnerability. Together, these narratives show how online harassment is not incidental; it is structural, racialized, and gendered. The internet, while offering space for self-expression and affirmation, also replicates the same systems of domination that exist offline. For TBIPOC individuals, digital curation of networks and safe spaces becomes a form of care and control, but also a heavy burden. Safety is not a default; it is built, maintained, and often precarious.

4.3 Strategies for Safety

Following the discussion of how participants anticipate harm in physical spaces (4.1) and curate their online environments to avoid digital harassment (4.2), this section examines the concrete, everyday strategies, both embodied and relational, through which TBIPOC individuals actively construct and sustain safety in their daily lives. Rather than focusing solely on the harms themselves, participants highlighted the practical labor involved in navigating these risks: preparing escape routes, coordinating buddy systems, sharing locations, adjusting gender presentation, managing online visibility, and relying on trusted networks for check-ins and support. These strategies demonstrate that safety is dynamic and situational, shaped by ongoing decision-making and collective care. Collectively, participants' accounts indicate that safety is not a static condition but an active practice, maintained through a combination of personal tactics, technological tools, and community-based infrastructures of care.

4.3.1 Physical Safety Strategies. To protect themselves from physical harm, many participants described a set of strategies grounded in everyday vigilance, preparation, and care. These strategies were not just about tools or routines; they were about navigating a world where being trans, queer, and BIPOC often means being hyper-aware of your surroundings, your appearance, and how others might perceive you.

A recurring theme was the use of self-defense tools. Several participants carried items like pepper spray, tasers, or knives. *"I have pepper spray, a taser,"* Mahari shared. Ironheart added, *"I used to carry a blade on me,"* and Miles reflected, *"Once upon a time, I used to have a knife, but that got confiscated by the police at one point."* These quotes show how common it is for TBIPOC individuals to feel the need to arm themselves for basic safety. But they also reflect a complicated truth: carrying a weapon can make someone feel safer, but it also brings new risks, especially with law enforcement. For folks who are already profiled because of their race, gender, or expression, even self-protection can be criminalized.

Participants also talked about how their gender presentation affected how safe they felt. Kris explained, *"If I'm not super passable that day… or I don't have a weapon on me… then the way I navigate [space] is completely different."* Monica put it more bluntly: *"Safety depends on how passing I am and whether I have a knife on me or not."* These statements reveal the exhausting calculations many people have to make: adjusting their appearance, behavior, or route depending on how "readable" they think they are that day. For some, passing as cisgender helped them avoid harassment or confrontation. But for others, trying to "pass" meant erasing parts of themselves to feel safer in public.

Participants described both online and in person communities as central to their safety, often sharing locations, travel plans, or

check-in times with trusted friends and chosen family. As Erik explained, *"I have an iPhone that share my location to my mom, my best friend who lives in New York. That way, you know, if shit goes down, they know where my location is."* Wave added, *"also just calling friends if I'm ever feeling unsafe walking alone or anything like that."* Technology was key in making this possible. Many relied on apps like Life360 or safety features on their phones to keep loved ones updated, or to send an automatic alert if they needed help. Erik added that he had his phone *"set up to where if I shake my phone a certain way it sends a text message to them as well."* These digital tools gave participants quiet but powerful ways to signal distress and add an extra layer of protection in unsafe environments.

Buddy systems were another commonly shared tactic. Erik said plainly, *"Buddy systems are not overrated."* Mahari reflected, *"I almost always feel safe when I have at least one person with me… someone I trust… who would be willing to do anything to save my life."* Ultimately, these strategies were about knowing someone had your back. Participants often relied on trusted friends or partners not only to help them move through space safely, but also to act as emotional anchors when a situation became tense or unsafe.

Avoidance was also part of survival. Wave shared, *"I generally try to avoid transphobic spaces or really trust my gut and leave if I'm not feeling good about a place."* For many, staying safe was not just about being prepared; it was about staying attuned to their instincts and knowing when to leave. Being able to read a room, identify microaggressions early, or recognize when something felt "off" became an important safety strategy along with carrying a weapon or sharing a location.

Beyond individual strategies, participants stressed the importance of collective safety. Many chose to move through the world with trusted friends or attend spaces like LGBTQIA2S+ gatherings where they felt seen and protected. These communal practices show that safety is not just individual but shared, built through belonging, affirmation, and care. Shuri said, *"I feel safe when I see other queer-coded individuals around my age, when I see dark skin folk who don't conform to typical expectations."* Ironheart noted, *"When I'm at LGBT functions with my friends, my guy friends, my gay friends, that's when I feel the safest."* These spaces, whether they were queer events, community gatherings, or even just being in public with trusted friends, allowed participants to exhale, even briefly, and exist without having to explain or defend themselves.

In all of these stories, physical safety was not a static condition; it was something constantly negotiated and actively maintained. Whether through weapons, tech, trusted people, or avoidance, participants showed how survival often depends on layered strategies. The picture of safety that takes shape is not just about being "strong" or "prepared," it is about having options, support, and the freedom to move without fear. For TBIPOC individuals, that freedom is still too often conditional, but the strategies they use show creativity, resilience, and deep community care.

4.3.2 Psychological & Emotional Safety Strategies. For many of the TBIPOC participants, safety also meant protecting their mental and emotional well-being. While physical safety often involved concrete actions like carrying pepper spray or relying on buddy systems, emotional safety required managing disclosure, curating environments, and setting boundaries. Participants described intentionally controlling who had access to their online profiles and drawing limits with unsupportive family or acquaintances. As Mahari explained, *"I've deliberately made all my stuff private…for my safety. Because I don't want to be harassed or bothered by strangers or people who are out to get me."* Online communities also offered affirmation and solidarity, though participants noted these spaces could still expose them to pushback and microaggressions.

Passing and adaptability were described as both protective and exhausting. Adjusting clothing, voice, or body language could provide moments of safety or relief, yet also demanded constant self-surveillance. Monica reflected, *"Can I put on more makeup, wear more feminine clothes, etc., to pass more and wield beauty as currency? Yes. But does it also have an energy cost? Also, yes."* Erik described this adaptability as being like a "chameleon," shifting to blend in while still trying to stay true to themselves. *"Being non-binary is almost like being a chameleon in some cases. You just adapt to your environment while still staying true to your nature."*

For others, like Vixen and Mahari, passing sometimes reduced immediate scrutiny but never fully erased the anxiety of being "clocked" or misrecognized. Vixen noted that when she passes, *"no one's guessing, okay, is that a man, is that a woman?"* This sense of clarity could offer physical relief, but it did not erase the stress. Many participants expressed a persistent anxiety that even if they "passed" one day, a single misstep, moment of nonconformity, or shift in tone could unravel that safety. Mahari described the toll of this uncertainty: *"I think because I've been clocked in person, in public, and on online spaces, I think that's where I have the most social anxiety."* The fear of being suddenly exposed, of having one's transness, queerness, or gender non-normativity noticed and weaponized, made even the most intentional performances of safety feel unstable. In this way, passing becomes both a buffer and a burden.

These strategies demonstrate the emotional labor of survival in spaces that often felt hostile or invalidating. Erik spoke of shrinking themselves: *"If it's like a space that I can't leave right away… I tend to shrink myself until I can leave. Like… being mad adds so much, and [is] taxing to your body… I'd rather be smaller so people don't notice when I'm leaving."* Participants also used humor or resignation, or relied on safety codes with friends, as ways to regain a sense of control. As Cass shared, the harm they faced was less about physical attacks than about being "torn down" and devalued in comparison to white cisgender counterparts.

> *I've experienced a lot of verbal abuse specific to comparing me to folks and tearing me down to say that I will never be valuable in the same way that a white cisgender feminine counterpart is. So I'm thankful I haven't experienced a lot of physical violence.*

Ultimately, psychological safety was not about feeling fully secure; it was about preserving energy, maintaining a sense of self, and carving out small spaces of affirmation in environments where full safety was rarely possible.

4.4 Phones, Not Police: Community Care Through Everyday Tech

Participants indicated that institutional systems, such as policing, frequently failed to ensure their safety and often perpetuated harm

through misgendering, criminalization, or racial profiling. As Cass stated, law enforcement represents structural harm because agencies are *"run by folks with ideologies that are incredibly harmful, or don't find space for TBIPOC folks."* For many participants, interactions with police resulted in immediate danger, either due to their gender expression or, particularly for Black and Indigenous individuals, because of race. In response, participants used everyday technologies to establish community-based safety infrastructures, including coordinating check-ins, arranging rapid exits, sharing locations, recording interactions, and mobilizing support networks via their phones. These practices demonstrate that safety is understood as a communal responsibility enabled by accessible technology, prioritizing care, responsiveness, and collective vigilance rather than punitive or carceral measures.

This mistrust was not abstract; it was shaped by firsthand experiences of criminalization, misgendering, and dehumanization. Ironheart shared, *"It's not a comforting feeling to have to involve law enforcement for anything, because you just don't know if you're going to be handled carefully."* She went on to describe a deeply humiliating incident after being jailed for defending herself:

> *I actually went to jail a couple years ago… the person that was supposed to be taking my ID, she was asleep. The officers didn't know where to put me because my ID still says male, but clearly how I present was the opposite of that… And when the guard finally woke up and saw my ID, she yelled, 'This is a man. Why is this person over here?' in front of everyone. It's like, yes, I'm in jail, but I still have dignity. I don't want to be humiliated.* – Ironheart

Given this deep mistrust of law enforcement and the harms participants experienced within institutional systems, many turned to mobile technologies as essential tools for cultivating safety. Safety, for participants, is a communal responsibility and requires mutual care networks. As stated by Miles:

> *I think it would be one of those moments of keeping track of folks, of reaching out, being like, "Hey, where are you going to be at?" And then also making sure if they haven't checked in, kind of being like, "Hey, what's going on?"*

Miles' statement highlights the deeply ingrained communal responsibility within trans and TBIPOC communities, where safety is not solely an individual concern but a collective priority. By "keeping track of folks" and routinely checking in, Miles shows how community vigilance functions as both a protective measure and a reaffirmation of solidarity, reinforcing bonds of trust and care. This form of mutual accountability is particularly significant for marginalized groups, who often cannot rely on institutional support for protection. Ironheart expands on this by emphasizing the role of technology in personal safety strategies, specifically through the use of mobile phones.

> *My phone? Well, yeah, because if there's anywhere I'm really unsafe, I'm going to Uber out, I'm going to Lyft on out of there, or just being able to call someone or even record if need be. So, yeah, my phone, definitely a big role* – Ironheart

Ride-sharing services like Uber and Lyft provide immediate escape routes when individuals feel unsafe, reflecting how access to technology can offer autonomy and rapid solutions in high-risk situations. Ororo imagined a future grounded in community-based response teams, trained in de-escalation and support, that could replace police interventions entirely.

> *I know that when things happen, … we are quick to pull out our phones and record people… Like we all know that the police are absolutely useless. And they oftentimes escalate instead of deescalating… What would be cool is if we had people in the community who are frontline types... if there was a button that could be pressed, and people nearby—who are trained—could step in and get us to safety or help deescalate very quickly... because when you're the person being faced with violence, you can't think straight. You freeze.* – Ororo

Additionally, the ability to use a phone for recording interactions introduces an element of self-advocacy and documentation, serving as both a deterrent to potential threats and a means of securing evidence if harm occurs. The ideal safety infrastructure isn't rooted in surveillance or punishment; it is rooted in care, rapid community response, and the ability to act when someone is in distress. These quotes illustrate how safety for TBIPOC is both a communal and technological practice, requiring a blend of interpersonal care and strategic use of digital tools. The reliance on both human connection and technology highlights a multifaceted approach to navigating everyday risks, demonstrating resilience through collective vigilance and resourcefulness.

5 Discussion

The findings indicate that TBIPOC individuals experience violence in both physical and digital environments, which shapes their safety strategies in response to persistent harm. Drawing on research concerning intersectionality, misogynoir, and trans safety [4, 58, 103, 109], this study demonstrates that violence is frequently emotional, psychological, and systemic; forms that are often overlooked. Participants frequently minimized the harm they experienced, illustrating the extent to which such violence has become normalized and expected. This normalization influenced their risk assessments and necessitated constant vigilance. Safety was determined more by external perceptions than by self-identification. Adhering to societal expectations, such as being perceived as cisgender, femme, or gender-conforming, provided only temporary protection and required significant emotional labor, identity management, and concealment of authentic identities. These patterns highlight the psychological burden associated with "passing" and reveal how gendered and racialized perceptions, particularly transmisogynoir, intensify risk and exhaustion.

Alongside physical and emotional strategies, participants used technology to improve safety. They relied on location-sharing, safety words (texting trusted contacts), and curated social media for communication, crisis response, and mutual support. While prior work examines trans safety tech [7, 31, 109], we show TBIPOC often adapt mainstream platforms to build informal care systems due to a lack of tailored options. These tools kept participants connected and visible, but increased risks like surveillance, harassment, and

burnout. As they balanced visibility and safety, safety became a collective rather than individual responsibility. Our findings expand safety frameworks by stressing emotional labor, community support, and systemic influences, calling for a more intersectional, justice-focused approach to safety design.

5.1 Redefining Violence and Safety through TBIPOC's Lived Experiences

Cultural norms, laws, and individual attitudes have a profound influence on violence against women and people who present themselves as femme [1], and trans people are four times more likely to experience violent victimization, including rape, sexual assault, and aggravated or simple assault, than cisgender people [46, 66]. In our study, participants' experiences with violence were felt deeply throughout the interviews. Participants described violent behavior from family members, friends, intimate partners, and strangers. Similar to prior findings about discrimination, the findings revealed a recurrent pattern where participants initially denied experiencing discrimination [11]. However, as narratives unfolded in our interviews, participants proceeded to recount instances of violence, ranging from subtle to severe. Participants struggled to categorize these experiences as violence, particularly if they lacked a physical component.

For TBIPOC participants in this study, physical violence was more often anticipated and experienced psychological, emotional, verbal violence, and digital forms of harm that are difficult to see, easy to dismiss, and rarely addressed by institutions. Participants described being misgendered by family, excluded in supposedly "safe" LGBTQ+ spaces, surveilled online, and targeted by racialized gender stereotypes in public. While these experiences did not always register as "violence" in the moment, often dismissed by others and internalized by participants themselves as "just part of life," they accumulated over time, contributing to chronic stress, hypervigilance, and emotional exhaustion. The disconnect between lived experience and institutional recognition meant that participants were forced to become experts in their own survival, constantly monitoring how they were perceived and adapting their behavior to reduce harm that might never be formally acknowledged.

While research has broadened understandings of safety, our work goes further by showing how TBIPOC individuals internalize and navigate harms that dominant systems overlook. This advances HCI and gender studies, which rarely explore how marginalized people internalize narrow framings of safety. Prior work highlights trans people's online risks and the value of safety tech [29, 51, 116], but few studies show how TBIPOC individuals come to see their own harm as not "serious enough" to count as violence. We extend scholarship on emotional and digital harm [79, 102, 123] by making visible how these harms are normalized and strategically navigated. TBIPOC participants intentionally adapted to unsafe environments, choosing when to speak up or stay silent, changing their appearance, avoiding spaces, or emotionally distancing themselves. These are survival strategies shaped by experience and risk awareness, not passive responses. Participants anticipated harm and made careful choices to reduce vulnerability, even at personal cost. We call this *safety labor*: the emotional and cognitive work of managing misrecognition, assessing risk, and downplaying discomfort to preserve self; labor that was often invisible but deeply felt.

Participants' tendency to downplay their harm is not indicative of a failure to recognize violence, but rather a consequence of safety labor. Many forms of violence experienced by participants were chronic, subtle, and often dismissed by society, leading them to minimize or reframe these harms in order to navigate environments with limited validation. This normalization becomes integral to safety labor: naming harm prematurely, frequently, or too explicitly can increase vulnerability, invite disbelief, or deplete emotional resources. Thus, safety labor functions both as a response to violence and as a mechanism through which violence is internalized and perceived as insufficiently serious. This dynamic has significant implications for safety frameworks. Affirmation should be understood not merely as emotional support, but as an intervention that disrupts this cycle by validating harm, countering misrecognition, and reducing the cognitive burden of continual self-assessment. Designing for affirmation through systems that acknowledge emotion, validate identity, and reduce the need for constant self-monitoring provides a tangible approach to alleviating the demands of safety labor rather than perpetuating them.

For TBIPOC participants, safety labor constituted an ongoing survival strategy shaped by structural conditions, rather than a one-time response to violence. Participants continuously monitored both physical and digital environments for potential threats, rehearsed responses, and regulated their emotions to prevent escalation. Many concealed discomfort, adopted neutral behaviors, or suppressed aspects of their identity to enhance their sense of safety. Unlike other forms of labor, safety labor is seldom acknowledged or accommodated, yet it imposes significant psychological strain. This phenomenon exposes a critical gap in current safety technologies, which often overlook the cumulative burden of daily emotional work. The concept of safety labor makes visible the hidden efforts TBIPOC individuals undertake to preserve autonomy, dignity, and emotional stability in unsafe environments.

This work advances intersectional HCI by centering TBIPOC experiences at the intersection of racialized and gendered harms, thereby foregrounding transmisogynoir, racialized misrecognition, and psychological fatigue in safety design [24, 25, 73, 96]. Participants demonstrated that safety encompasses not only the absence of harm but also the presence of affirmation, including being seen, valued, and emotionally supported. Prevailing frameworks, particularly within technology, continue to treat emotional labor and misrecognition as secondary concerns. This research legitimizes these experiences as central to TBIPOC survival, illustrating how participants redefine safety by reworking language, rejecting institutional scripts, and developing relational strategies. The findings underscore the urgent need to design safety technologies that address the full spectrum of violence and prioritize those most affected.

These redefinitions of violence and safety are closely linked to how participants are perceived by others. Their sense of risk and safety depended less on their intrinsic identities and more on how others interpreted their gender, race, and expression in both public and digital spaces. The following section examines how visibility and passing function as both protective mechanisms and sources of psychological strain, demonstrating how perceptions, particularly

those shaped by racialized and gendered assumptions, influence TBIPOC experiences of safety.

5.2 Visibility, Passing, and the Emotional Cost of Safety

For many TBIPOC participants, safety was determined less by self-identity and more by external perceptions. The ability to "pass" as cisgender or conform to gender norms sometimes provided protection from transphobia and harassment; however, this protection required significant emotional labor and imposed psychological costs. Passing was seldom a personal aspiration, but rather a necessary survival strategy in response to risks associated with visibility, such as violence or rejection. This finding aligns with prior research indicating that visibility for trans individuals is complex and fraught with risk [58, 103]. Participants reported continually monitoring their appearance and behavior to appear "non-threatening," while simultaneously navigating intersecting racialized and gendered assumptions. Even when perceived as cisgender, their race, body, and gender expression could still subject them to misogynoir, transmisogynoir, and harassment, resulting in a double bind that altered, but did not eliminate, risk [29, 51, 54, 83, 102].

These experiences challenge the assumptions underlying traditional safety technologies, which typically emphasize physical alerts or emergency responses [7, 11, 31, 109], while neglecting the ongoing psychological labor required to maintain safety. For TBIPOC individuals, safety labor involved minimizing aspects of their personality, suppressing discomfort, rehearsing responses, and preparing for misrecognition, even within spaces presumed to be safe. This labor was particularly pronounced for those whose identities did not align with dominant narratives of a "real" trans or nonbinary person.

The tension between visibility and protection was also evident in online environments. While social media provided access to community and resources, it simultaneously increased the risk of targeting and emotional exhaustion. TBIPOC participants curated their digital presence not only to maintain privacy, but also to exercise control, ensure safety, and protect their mental health within a hostile environment [94, 102, 116]. These dynamics parallel DeVito's work on transfeminine creators, who similarly described visibility as a double-edged condition that offered connection while increasing vulnerability [29]. DeVito shows that creators engage in ongoing curation of how, when, and to whom they are visible in order to mitigate harassment and emotional exhaustion. Our participants described comparable forms of self-management: adjusting how they presented themselves online, limiting what parts of their identity were shown, and continually navigating the tension between recognition, safety, and exposure. This parallel further illustrates that visibility is not inherently protective or harmful; rather, it requires constant labor to avoid the risks it produces.

Centering TBIPOC lived experiences demonstrates that safety is inseparable from the emotional costs associated with legibility. Safety involves not only reducing physical risk, but also managing perceptions and determining how much of one's identity must be concealed. Passing is not inherently empowering, nor is visibility inherently safe; both often function as survival strategies rather than choices. Effective safety design must address these emotional burdens, recognizing that safety encompasses both the presence or absence of harm and the emotional consequences of being seen or misrecognized in society. Community-based strategies, such as check-in systems with coded messages, can redistribute some of this burden from individuals to trusted networks.

Ultimately, participants emphasized that true safety is collective, fostered through mutual care, shared tools, and community practices that resist institutional surveillance and punishment. Safety was not located within systems, but co-created with others, both online and offline, through intentional and relational work.

5.3 Community, Technology, and Reimagining Safety Infrastructure

For many TBIPOC participants, safety was not derived from police, healthcare, or institutional resources, which frequently resulted in additional harm. Instead, safety was collectively established through networks of mutual care, including friends, chosen family, group chats, and shared updates about dangerous situations. These intentional and strategic support systems emerged in response to structural abandonment. Rather than awaiting external protection, participants constructed their own infrastructures of care.

Technology played a central role in these grassroots safety networks. Participants utilized phones to request assistance, share real-time locations, schedule check-ins, and transmit coded messages, such as a simple emoji or keyword. These practices constituted more than temporary solutions; they formed a relational infrastructure, comprising informal, trust-based systems established through social and emotional relationships [37]. Such infrastructures facilitated safety through mutual care practices, including check-ins and curated visibility, and relied on interpersonal connection and collective responsibility. In contrast to dominant safety technologies that emphasize surveillance or individual responsibility [7, 11, 31, 109], these systems were effective because they were embedded within social relationships and care.

This research extends CSCW and HCI scholarship on community-based safety technology. While tools such as HeartMob and U-Signal provide support for marginalized communities [7, 11, 31, 109], the findings indicate that TBIPOC individuals already co-design and maintain their own systems, often operating outside or by reconfiguring formal technologies. Practices such as curating social media boundaries, determining post visibility, and identifying the safest platforms illustrate that the value of technology is contingent upon context and relationships. Offline, participants employed coded group chat messages or designated peers for safe travel, integrating digital and physical practices of mutual protection.

These findings respond to calls for participatory and co-design practices with trans communities and communities of color in HCI [55, 88, 104]. Participants emphasized that safety involves being recognized, supported, and empowered to respond according to their own terms, rather than being rescued. Designing for safety should move beyond reactive tools and prioritize TBIPOC visions of care, adaptability, and collective responsibility. These perspectives conceptualize safety as a flexible, relational practice rooted in community, thereby challenging dominant paradigms of policing and formal intervention.

Participants' critiques of law enforcement and medical institutions underscored the necessity of alternative safety systems. Many reported traumatic experiences, including misgendering, denial of care, disbelief, or heightened danger when reporting harm. These experiences align with critiques in gender studies and Black feminist thought that question the legitimacy of carceral systems [33, 45, 120]. For many, mutual aid networks and digital safety rituals were not supplementary, but constituted the only trusted systems of care.

This research highlights that TBIPOC individuals are already engaged in designing community safety infrastructure. Through technology, text chains, emoji codes, check-ins, and platform curation, they construct resilient systems grounded in mutual aid. For HCI and CHI, this necessitates developing safety technologies in collaboration with TBIPOC communities, thereby shifting design values toward sustainability, trust, and collective care. Technologies rooted in mutuality are not only more effective but also more just.

Safety technologies must address the psychological and emotional labor that TBIPOC individuals undertake to minimize harm, navigate misrecognition, and manage visibility. Design must advance beyond reactive alerts to encompass systems that validate user experiences, minimize the need for self-monitoring, and facilitate shared responsibility. This approach includes features that affirm users, recognize subtle harms, and enable low-effort, relational care such as check-ins, coded messages, or shared visibility. Embedding these principles enables technology to support TBIPOC individuals not only during crises but also in the ongoing emotional work of survival.

5.4 Conclusion

This paper examined how TBIPOC individuals experience and navigate safety across physical, emotional, and digital environments. By centering their lived experiences, we challenge dominant safety frameworks that focus narrowly on physical harm and institutional intervention. Instead, we highlight how intersecting oppressions, racism, transphobia, classism, and transmisogynoir shape both the risks participants face and the strategies they use to survive. We introduce the concept of safety labor to describe the emotional and cognitive work involved in anticipating harm, downplaying discomfort, and managing misrecognition. This labor is often invisible yet central to how participants maintain psychological and physical safety.

Our work redefines safety as relational and rooted in community care, showing how participants use relational infrastructure; trust-based systems like group chats, coded check-ins, and platform curation; to build protective networks. These practices resist carceral models and expand the role of technology beyond alerts and surveillance. In doing so, we extend HCI literature on safety tech and participatory design by illustrating how TBIPOC communities are already designing their own infrastructures of care. We call for future safety technologies that are co-designed with these communities and grounded in mutual aid, adaptability, and collective responsibility. Future systems also ought to account for the structural nature of harm, support context-specific safety needs, and center TBIPOC users' experiences. We outline the need for developing tools that can coexist with and evolve alongside existing community systems. In doing so, the goal is that safety labor is redistributed away from individuals and towards collective, shared systems. Co-designed safety technologies have the potential to transform how safety is envisioned and implemented for TBIPOC communities, rather than simply making small changes to existing systems.

Acknowledgments

We acknowledge the many individuals, communities, venues, and organizations that have supported this work. We express our deep gratitude to our participants for their time, graciousness, and willingness to share their experiences. We also extend our appreciation to the members of our lab who provided feedback during the early stages of this project and offered their ongoing support.

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