Effects of Cisnormative Beauty Standards on Transgender Women's Perceptions and Expressions of Beauty

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Effects of Cisnormative Beauty Standards on Transgender Women's Perceptions and Expressions of Beauty[*]

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ABSTRACT

The authors conducted a qualitative study exploring the effects of cisnormative beauty standards on transgender women's perceptions and expressions of beauty. Twelve self-identified Caucasian transgender women completed a semistructured interview that provided descriptive data related to the women's perceptions of societal beauty standards. Analysis of the data revealed the following primary themes: Participants viewed the beauty of transgender and cisgender women as diverse or as encompassing a broad range of variability; societal beauty standards were influential on participants' expressions of beauty; and participants' viewed out-group transphobia as a factor contributing to discriminatory and prejudicial perceptions of transwomen's beauty.

KEY WORDS: Transgender; Cisnormativity; Societal Beauty Standards; Passing; Qualitative Research

According to recent estimates, approximately 1.4 million adults in the United States identify as transgender (Flores et al. 2016). "Transgender" is a term used to refer to individuals whose gender identity differs from the sex they were assigned at birth and who do not adhere to culturally defined or socially constructed classifications of gender. Conversely, "cisgender" is a term used to refer to individuals whose gender identity is congruent with the sex they were assigned at birth (Bockting 2014). Within the United States, transgender individuals experience "widespread prejudice, discrimination, violence, and other forms of stigma" (White Hughto, Reisner, and Pachankis 2015:222) because of their gender identity (Bockting et al. 2013; Grant et al. 2011). Across various

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settings in the United States, many transgender individuals are treated unjustly compared to their cisgender counterparts, as institutional laws and social constructs reinforce biases, prejudice, and discrimination that exclude and stigmatize transgender individuals.

Within the transgender population, experiences of gender-related stigma and discrimination have been correlated with psychological distress and adverse health outcomes such as high incidences of suicide, substance abuse, and depression (Bockting 2014; Chang and Chung 2015; White Hughto et al. 2015). Repeated exposure to discrimination, as well as perceived discrimination, serves as a social stressor that may influence adverse health outcomes among individuals from stigmatized populations. Research has suggested that repeated exposure to discrimination functions in a manner that lends to an accumulation of stress, which in turn decreases an individual's ability to engage in adaptive health behaviors and potentially increases involvement in unhealthy behaviors (Pascoe and Richman 2009). Accordingly, those who experience or perceive ongoing discrimination are at higher risk of poor mental health.

SOCIETAL BEAUTY STANDARDS

Transgender individuals are evaluated by society according to cisnormative gender stereotypes that include many components of gender characteristics and traits (Burkett 2015; Daniels 2012). A dominant component of gender stereotypes—and the focus of this current study—were the perceptions of beauty, particularly the perceptions of transgender women's beauty. Stereotypes related to physical attractiveness have been found to be a dominant component of gender stereotypes, as they are strongly and consistently associated with other components of gender stereotypes (Poran 2002). Representations of women in U.S. media and society are highly cisnormative, as transgender women are "underrepresented, stereotyped, or assimilated" and cisnormative ideals are reinforced (Capuzza 2014). Perceptions of beauty in U.S. media and society portray highly cisnormative standards of beauty as well. Accordingly, cisnormative beauty standards are a component from which transgender women are judged and correspondingly treated by society.

One component by which individuals may evaluate the self and others is one's beauty. Cisnormative beauty standards can influence society's perceptions and treatment of transgender women, potentially perpetuating prejudice, discrimination, violence, and stigma. Furthermore, cisnormative beauty standards may affect how transgender women view themselves, their own beauty, and the legitimacy of their gender identity. For the purposes of this study, cisnormative beauty standards are defined as beauty standards that are represented or conceptualized in a manner that is exclusionary of transgender individuals and presents the beauty of cisgender individuals as standard or ideal (Capuzza 2014).

It is imperative that the physical, mental, and emotional well-being of transgender individuals, and specifically transgender women, are seen as a priority in the United States. In the United States, the prevalence of documented suicide attempts among transgender women is 42 percent, which enormously exceeds the prevalence of suicide attempts of the overall population, at 4.6 percent. (Grant et al. 2011; Haas, Rodgers, and Herman 2014).

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The U.S. National Transgender Discrimination Survey also suggests that prevalence of suicide attempts is elevated for individuals who disclose to others that they are transgender or gender nonconforming (50 percent). Research has identified higher rates of discrimination (e.g., verbal harassment, physical assaults and/or attacks, and unequal treatment) for individuals whose transgender identity is more visibly discernable or who have disclosed their transgender identity (Grant et al. 2011). It is thus important that research and clinical professionals address factors that influence the mental health of transgender individuals, including factors that lead to the harassment, discrimination, violence, and rejection of transgender individuals. Cisnormative beauty standards are one component in which transgender women are judged and correspondingly treated by society. It is important to identify and evaluate this social component and the effects it has on the well-being of transgender women. The results of this inquiry may provide research and clinical professionals a foundation from which they can begin to establish social supports and resources for transgender women, and foster cultural acknowledgment, representation, and celebration of transgender identities.

OVERVIEW AND RESEARCH QUESTION

The purpose of this study was to evaluate the effects of cisnormative beauty standards on transgender women's perceptions and expressions of beauty. Given that the research on these topics is nonexistent, this study utilized the consensual qualitative research (CQR) approach. The CQR method utilizes open-ended questions as a means of data collection, a research data-analysis team consisting of several judges, consensual data analysis, auditors to review the work of the research team, and the use of within- and cross-case data analysis (Hill et al. 2005). The use of the CQR approach allows for a richer, more in-depth understanding of participants' inner experiences, attitudes, and perceptions regarding cisnormative beauty standards (Hill 2012; Hill, Thompson, and Williams 1997; McCormack 2014).

The aim of this study was to examine transgender women's perspectives on cisnormative beauty standards and to identify related concepts regarding societal beauty standards as they pertained to transwomen. This study sought to assess how transgender women perceive societal beauty standards for both cisgender and transgender women, how these societal standards influence the ways in which transgender women perceive and express their own beauty, and how transgender women perceive the beauty of other transgender women. This study also sought to identify and evaluate whether protective factors within the transgender community exist that serve to diminish or eliminate perceived adverse pressures of cisnormative beauty standards.

The study utilized semistructured interviews and a demographic questionnaire to explore the perspectives and experiences of transgender women with regard to cisnormative beauty standards. The authors sought to explore the following research questions:

1. What are the attitudes and perceptions transgender women have regarding beauty?

2. In what ways have cisnormative beauty standards in the United States influenced participants' perceptions of their own beauty and the beauty of transgender and cisgender women?
3. In what ways have cisnormative beauty standards in the United States influenced participants' expressions of beauty?
4. Do participants perceive any discriminatory or prejudicial factors contributing to societal perceptions of the beauty of transgender women? If so, what are these factors?

The CQR method utilizes an inductive approach that involves forming conclusions via the collection and analysis of data rather than from preconceived hypotheses or a priori notions (Hill et al. 1997); therefore, formal hypotheses were not provided.

METHODS

Participants

Participants of this study included 12 self-identified transgender women between the ages of 23 and 64. Participants resided in Indiana, Rhode Island, or Massachusetts. The sample size of 12 participants is consistent with the CQR method (Hill 2012).

Inclusion criteria also mandated that participants had undergone some form of gender transition to more authentically live their identity or express their experience of gender. This mandated inclusion criterion regarding participants' transition status was an attempt by the researchers to more accurately capture the *lived* experiences of transgender women. It is important to acknowledge that there is no single or correct way to transition and no "uniform measure of a completed transition" (American Psychological Association 2009). For many transgender individuals, undergoing some form of gender transition is a way in which they can "more accurately live their identity or express their experience of gender" (Brewster et al. 2014:160).

For the purposes of this study, the word "transition" encompasses a variety of steps that individuals may take to express their gender identity. These steps may include but are not limited to appearance-based changes (e.g., clothing, grooming), medical or physical transformations (e.g., hormone therapy, cosmetic surgeries, gender-affirmation surgery), and social changes (e.g., changing legal documentation, adopting different gender pronouns to refer to oneself, coming out as transgender; Budge, Adelson, and Howard 2013; Devor 2004).

Procedures

Participants were recruited for the study using a convenience sampling design, particularly snowball sampling methods. Snowballing methods were utilized given

documented challenges in the identification of and access to LGBT populations for research studies (Bettinger 2010; Meyer and Wilson 2009; Sullivan and Losberg 2003). Recruitment took place in the U.S. Midwest and Northeast. Participants were recruited through U.S.-based LGBT centers, college and university LGBT offices and student organizations, transgender organizations and groups, transgender blogs, social-networking websites and platforms via email, and flyers. The recruitment information briefly explained the purpose of the study, inclusion criteria, what participation would entail, and the incentives offered. Prospective participants were provided information on how to contact researchers and schedule a time to complete a demographic questionnaire and an estimated 60-minute interview. Additionally, participants were asked to forward researchers' contact information to other transgender women who would be interested in taking part in the study. Participants were provided a $20 Amazon gift card as monetary incentive for completing in the study. All participants who were interviewed met the inclusion criteria for the study, and all interview data was included in the data analysis.

Audio-recorded semistructured interviews were conducted in mutually agreed-upon settings (i.e., agreed upon by participant and researcher) that were deemed sufficient in maintaining the privacy, confidentiality, and comfort of participants. The primary researcher provided a verbal and written explanation of confidentiality. Participants were informed that they would be asked to respond to a series of semistructured interview questions designed to elicit experiences and attitudes related to their perceptions and expressions of beauty. The consent form also indicated that the interviews would last approximately 60 minutes and requested permission for the interview to be audio-recorded. Once participants provided consent, a demographic questionnaire was completed. Each participant subsequently took part in a semistructured interview that lasted approximately 30–60 minutes. Following completion of the interview, each participant was provided monetary incentive for completing the study. Participants were also provided debriefings following their interviews. During the debriefing, the participants was provided with the researchers' contact information in the event that participants had additional questions.

Measures

The study included a demographic questionnaire as well as a semistructured interview. The demographic questionnaire provided background information about participants and included a question asking participants to describe the current status of their transition process (Bockting 2014; Budge et al., 2013; Devor 2004). The semistructured interview questions were developed by the authors to assess the proposed research questions. The semistructured interview lasted approximately 60 minutes. All interviews were conducted by the same researcher. After the interviews were conducted, the researcher transcribed the interviews verbatim. Participant responses were analyzed for themes using the CQR method (Hill et al. 1997).

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RESULTS

Sample Characteristics

Twelve self-identified transgender women participated in the study and were included in the data analysis (see Table 1). Although recruitment efforts sought participants from all racial/ethnic backgrounds, the participant pool represents only those who identify as Caucasian/white. Participants ranged in age from 23 to 64 (M = 40). Participant ratings on the transition-status scale (Budge et al. 2013; Devor 2004) ranged from 3, "I have taken several steps towards transitioning but do not consider myself living full time with my transgender identity," to 5, "I have made most of the changes I have wanted to make and consider myself living full time with my transgender identity" (M = 4).

Consensual Qualitative Research (CQR) Method

The CQR process involved consensual within-case analysis as well as cross-analysis processes. Within-case analyses involved dividing responses from the interview questions into general and broad categories called domains and constructing brief summaries (core ideas) of participants' statements. Cross-analysis consisted of generating categories that represented general themes within domains and across participants' statements. Each domain and category was then organized, and the frequency of categories was assessed for representativeness across all participants. Categories were subsequently given the following frequency designations (Hill 2012): general (applied to all participants or all but one participant), typical (applied to half or more of the participants), and variant (applied to either two or three, but no more than half, of the participants).

Data analysis consisted of two auditors outside the primary analysis team. At each stage of the CQR process, the auditors reviewed and provided feedback and recommendations on the analysis conducted by the research team. The researchers then jointly decided whether to accept or reject auditors' recommendations (Hill 2012).

Qualitative Findings

The final qualitative findings included key domains, categories, and frequencies as presented in Table 2. A few general themes were identified from the collected data. Overall, participants viewed the beauty of transgender and cisgender women as diverse or as encompassing a broad range of variability. All but one participant indicated that societal beauty standards have influenced their expressions of beauty. Another common theme emerging from the data revealed that all but one participant viewed out-group transphobia as a factor contributing to discriminatory and prejudicial perceptions of transwomen's beauty.

Personal Perceptions of Trans vs. Cis Beauty. Participants were asked about their personal perceptions of beauty for transgender and cisgender women. Questions within this domain were intended to assess whether participants' perceptions for transgender and cisgender women were similar or different. All but one the

participants indicated that they viewed the beauty of all women (i.e., transgender and cisgender) as diverse or as encompassing a range of variability. One participant indicated, "Everything. I mean everybody is different so it's just like we choose to go to different places. There's as many different concepts of beauty as there are stars in the universe, and there's at least one for everyone if not more. So, I think that's how I think of beauty. I think of beauty as for everyone."

Table 1. Participant Demographics

		Number of Participants
1	**Age**	
	23–26	3
	30	2
	41–47	3
	50–57	3
	64	1
2	**Race/Ethnicity**	
	Caucasian/White	12
3	**Education**	
	High School Diploma/GED	3
	Some College	2
	Bachelor's Degree	3
	Graduate Degree	4
4	**Relationship Status**	
	Single	3
	In Relationship	2
	Married	4
	Divorced	3
5	**Transition Status**	
	1—*I have been thinking about transitioning, but have not taken any steps towards transitioning*	0
	2—*I have taken one or two steps towards transitioning*	0
	3—*I have taken several steps towards transitioning but do not consider myself living full time with my transgender identity*	2
	4—*I have taken several steps towards transitioning and consider myself living full time with my transgender identity*	7
	5—*I have made most of the changes I have wanted to make and consider myself living full time with my transgender identity*	3

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Participants spoke of more fluid assessments and considerations of beauty and described a wide range of subjectivity when speaking of their perceptions:

> I think beauty as it relates to transwomen again is strength and authenticity.

Table 2. Frequency Analysis

Domain, Category, and *Subcategory*	**Frequency**
1 Personal Perceptions of Beauty	
Broadly Defined	Variant
Physical Characteristics	**Typical**
Nonphysical Characteristics	**Typical**
2 Perceptions of Societal Beauty Standards	
Utilized for Appraisals	**Typical**
Restrictive	Variant
Unattainable	Variant
Varies	**Typical**
3 Attitudes about Societal Beauty Standards	
Utilized for Appraisals	Variant
Unrealistic	**Typical**
Problematic	Variant
Needs Modification	Variant
Positively Changing	Variant
4 Societal Perceptions of Trans vs. Cis Beauty	
Different Standards	**Typical**
Higher Standards for Transwomen	Variant
Influenced by Cisnormativity	Variant
Misconceptions of Transwomen's Beauty	**Typical**
Similar Standards	Variant
5 Personal Perceptions of Trans vs. Cis Beauty	
Diverse	**General**
Physical Evaluations of Transwomen	**Typical**
Physical Evaluations of Ciswomen	Variant
Nonphysical Evaluations of Transwomen	**Typical**
Nonphysical Evaluations of Ciswomen	Variant
Similar Standards	Variant
Passing as Goal	Variant

Concluded next page

Table 2. Frequency Analysis, concl.

Domain, Category, and *Subcategory*	**Frequency**
6 **Effects of Societal Beauty Standards on Participant's Personal Perceptions/Expressions of Beauty**	
Influence Expressions	**General**
Femininity	Variant
Increases Efforts to Pass	**Typical**
Influence Perceptions	**Typical**
Felt Pressure to Conform	**Typical**
Noninfluential	Variant
7 **Effects of Societal Beauty Standards on Participant's Perceptions of Transwomen's Beauty**	
Influence Perceptions	**Typical**
Passing	**Typical**
Noninfluential	**Typical**
8 **Attitudes about Passing**	
Viewed Negatively	**Typical**
Recognizes Utility	**Typical**
Goal	Variant
9 **Discriminatory or Prejudicial Factors Contributing to Perceptions of Transwomen's Beauty**	
Out-Group Transphobia	**General**
Negative Evaluations of Transwomen	Variant
Misconceptions of Transwomen's Beauty	**Typical**
Violence	Variant
In-Group Transphobia	Variant
Poor Treatment	Variant
10 **Protective Factors Contributing to Perceptions of Transwomen's Beauty**	
Lack of Protective Factors	Variant
Friends	**Typical**
Reduce Negative Perceptions	**Typical**
Promote Positive Perceptions	Variant
Family	Variant
Reduce Negative Perceptions	Variant
Promote Positive Perceptions	Variant
Transgender Community	**Typical**
Online Support	Variant
Other	Variant

> Well, I think people have different ideas about what beauty
> means to them and however they want to express that is
> their right. So, if they think they're beautiful then that's
> their opinion. What I think is beautiful is mine. But I
> wouldn't think badly about a person or judge them based
> on whether I perceive them as beautiful. Beauty is
> subjective. But I will say confidence goes a long way. If
> you're confident that radiates a lot of beauty.

Further analysis of responses revealed that 50 percent of participants indicated the use of physical appraisals when assessing transwomen's beauty while approximately 58 percent of participants indicated the use of nonphysical appraisals when assessing transwomen's beauty; however, only 25 percent of participants reported having similar standards of beauty for transgender and cisgender women.

Effects of Societal Beauty Standards on Participants' Personal Perceptions/Expressions of Beauty. Participants were asked about the effects (or lack thereof) of societal beauty standards on their personal expressions and/or perceptions of beauty. Questions within this domain were intended to assess whether societal beauty standards influenced participants' perceptions of beauty and whether these standards were influential in how participants expressed their gender identity. Additional questions were included to evaluate whether participants felt pressure to conform to societal beauty standards. All but one of the participants indicated that societal beauty standards had influenced their expressions of beauty. Further evaluation of the data revealed that half the participants felt pressure or the need to adhere to societal beauty standards as a means to pass. Explanations regarding why passing was important for participants included safety purposes, efforts not to be misgendered, and ways in which they wanted to express their gender identity. One participant indicated,

> I try to meet the societal standards as much as I can. I won't
> leave the house anymore without putting on a face. I tend to
> even go a little more than a cisgender woman would with
> more noticeable makeup or perfume or bright colors
> because I know that if society just senses or they see you
> out the corner of their eye, and they see a pink outfit and
> long hair, generally they're really not going to look around.
> Their brains are just going to tell them subconsciously
> there's a woman standing there. So, I'm always basically
> trying to sell myself.

Another indicated, "I do. I think my safety in part depends on my ability to be in stealth mode when I want to be or when I need to be. So yeah, I do think the closer I can get, the more safe I'll be. And certainly, the more opportunities I hope in to be, you know."

Additionally, one-third of participants indicated that societal beauty standards influenced their expressions of femininity, in that they felt pressure to adhere to conventional expressions of femininity and/or they believed that they needed to express themselves in a more feminine manner:

> Of course they have. I'm just like any other—well I
> wouldn't say any other women—most women, I assume.
> I've watched the beauty commercials and I've watched
> the YouTube tutorials, and I've been down to Sephora
> and had my makeup done professionally. I have some of
> their makeup and some of those things. So, you've
> always got, you know, what society expects from a
> woman because we're just trying to blend in. We're
> trying to look more feminine. We're trying to look less
> masculine, more feminine.

Although not identified as common themes, typical responses within this domain revealed that 50 percent of participants believed that societal beauty standards have influenced their personal perceptions of beauty. Additionally, 50 percent of participants also felt pressure to conform to societal beauty standards.

Discriminatory or Prejudicial Factors Contributing to Perceptions of Transwomen's Beauty. Participants were asked about the effects, if any, of transphobia on the perceptions of transwomen's beauty. All but one of the participants indicated that they viewed out-group transphobia as a factor contributing to discriminatory and prejudicial perceptions of transwomen's beauty. Further evaluation of the data revealed that half the participants attributed out-group misconceptions of transwomen's beauty as an influential factor in the evaluation of beauty for transwomen. As indicated by one participant:

> Well I think people have misconceptions about transwomen
> and in turn have misconceptions about their beauty. People
> think it's taboo to perceive a transwoman as beautiful.
> People think for example, if you're a cisgender straight guy
> who perceives a transwoman is beautiful, then they're gay.
> And that's definitely not the case and highly problematic.

Additionally, approximately 42 percent of participants indicated out-group violence as a factor that reinforces negative perceptions of transwomen's beauty. Participants further elaborated on efforts by transwomen to circumvent potentially violent encounters or events by altering or enhancing the manner in which they express their gender identity, with particular emphasis on their expressions of femininity.

Although not identified as common themes, typical response patterns related to the study's research questions were identified within the following domains: personal

perceptions of beauty, societal perceptions of trans vs. cis beauty, attitudes about passing, and protective factors contributing to perceptions of transwomen's beauty.

Personal Perceptions of Beauty. Participants were asked how they generally defined beauty. Data from these responses revealed that approximately 58 percent of participants viewed beauty in terms of physical characteristics, 50 percent of participants viewed beauty in terms of nonphysical characteristics, and approximately 42 percent of participants expressed broad definitions of beauty:

> I also still harbor a lot of the more popular stereotypical images in my mind that are unattainable for me. Victoria Secret models and that kind of thing. Ideally my best beauty standard would be along those lines.

> Strength and authenticity I think. I think that's the best way to put it. Just like not conforming, you know what I mean. Being yourself. I think that's beautiful. I don't think beauty is limited to different body types or different people necessarily. I think it's beautiful when people are comfortable as themselves and strong.

> Beauty is in the eyes of the beholder. Representation, presentation, god there's so many ways to define beauty. Some people can look at a dead tree and be like oh that's horrible and some people can see beauty in it. So, I think it's in the eyes of the beholder.

Overall, participant responses expressed variability in their understanding and perception of beauty. Several participants did not subscribe solely to one of the three presented categories (physical characteristics, nonphysical characters, and broad definitions) but defined beauty utilizing a combination of these categorical elements.

Societal Perceptions of Trans vs. Cis Beauty. Participants were asked about their perceptions of societal evaluations of beauty, particularly differences or lack thereof, between the evaluations of transgender and cisgender women. Data from these responses revealed that approximately 75 percent of participants believed that society holds different standards of beauty for transgender and cisgender women and subsequently utilized different standards of evaluation. Further evaluation of the data revealed that approximately 58 percent of participants attributed these differences in evaluations to misconceptions about transgender beauty:

> Typically, when a transwoman is perceived as beautiful and their beauty comes with some microaggression or backhanded compliment. Like 'oh I would've never know you weren't a real woman' or 'you look just like a real woman.' It's like yeah because I am a real woman, I'm not pretending, this is me. It's like the equivalent of saying you look good for a fat girl or for a black girl. Like what! If you're seen as a cisgender woman, you're just seen as beautiful without any strings attached.

> But I think society when they hear the word trans, I think they automatically think oh short dress, high heels, you're a tranny on the street corner.

Participants expressed discontent regarding societal evaluations of transwomen's beauty. Participants highlighted the influence of gender-related stigma and cisnormativity on the evaluations of transwomen's beauty. Many participants viewed societal perceptions of transwomen's beauty as prejudicial and pejorative.

Attitudes about Passing. Participants were also asked about their general feelings about the term "passing." Data from these responses revealed that approximately 66 percent of participants recognized the utility of the term (i.e., for safety purposes, opportunity, to avoid being misgendered), 58 percent of participants had negative evaluations of the term, and approximately 33 percent of participants viewed passing as a goal for transwomen (both personally and generally).

> It's complicated because on the one hand it can mean safety for a lot of people. For some, passing is necessary so they aren't perceived as trans and subjected to violence and discrimination. On the other hand, it's problematic because it implies that there's a right way to be trans or to express one's gender, and the implication is that you need to be perceived as cisgender. So yeah I don't like the word but it's complicated.

> I know it's a controversial term nowadays particularly in the realm of activism. It's a personal goal for me. It's like I said before, you would like to be just assimilated into society so nobody takes a second look to see what I am. They take a second look to appreciate what I look like.

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Many participants expressed difficulties with defining and providing a definitive viewpoint on the term, viewing it as problematic, necessary, and/or as a personal objective. There does not appear to be consensus on the nature of the term within our participant pool, and per participant responses, there appears to be variability in sentiments regarding the term within the transgender community. Further research into these dynamics will be necessary to better understand the concept.

Protective Factors Contributing to Perceptions of Transwomen's Beauty. Lastly, participants were asked several questions to assess whether protective factors exist within the transgender community that serve to diminish or eliminate perceived adverse pressures of cisnormative beauty standards. Data from these responses revealed that approximately 66 percent of participants identified friends as protective factors, with 66 percent of these participants highlighting ways in which friends have helped to reduce negative perceptions of transwomen's beauty, and 50 percent of these participants also highlighting ways in which friends have helped to promote positive perceptions of transwomen's beauty.

Additionally, 50 percent of participants identified factors within the transgender community as influential in their perceptions of transwomen's beauty, approximately 42 percent of participants identified family members as protective factors, and approximately 33 percent of participants identified online support (i.e., blogs, Facebook groups, forums, and chat rooms) as protective factors. Approximately 42 percent of participants were unable to identify protective factors within their personal lives and/or specifically indicated a lack of protective factors within the transgender community (i.e., isolation from others, disengagement from the transgender community, lack of social supports).

DISCUSSION

The purpose of this study was to establish foundational knowledge and insight on the effects of societal beauty standards on transgender women's perceptions and expressions of beauty. Researchers sought to understand the ways in which participants defined beauty and the extent to which societal beauty standards influenced participants' understanding of beauty. Additionally, questions were posed to assess whether societal beauty standards influenced how participants evaluated their own beauty as well as the beauty of other cisgender and transgender women. Lastly, the researchers sought to identify whether there were resources or protective factors that helped to minimize or negate negative perceptions of transwomen's beauty.

Overall, the participants' responses suggested a variation in perceptions of beauty consisting of both physical and nonphysical characteristics, as well as broad definitions of beauty. Societal beauty standards also appeared to be noninfluential in participants' personal perceptions of beauty yet very influential in participants' personal expressions of beauty. Many participants indicated felt pressures to adhere to societal beauty standards as a means to pass, to avoid being misgendered, and to ensure their safety. Data also suggested that the influence of societal standards on participants' perceptions of

beauty for other cisgender and transgender women as varied. All but one of the participants indicated that they viewed the beauty of all women (i.e., transgender and cisgender) as diverse or as encompassing a broad range of variability. Participants' evaluations of beauty included physical and nonphysical appraisals for both transgender and cisgender woman; however, only 25 percent of participants reported similar standards of beauty for transgender versus cisgender women. Finally, participant responses varied in the identification of protective factors. Several participants identified protective factors that helped to promote positive perceptions of transwomen's beauty as well as reduce negative perceptions of transwomen's beauty (i.e., friends, family, the transgender community, and online support). Several participants also indicated a lack of resources and/or support.

Data from the current study have highlighted ways in which cisnormative beauty standards affect how transgender women view themselves, their own beauty, and the beauty of other transgender and cisgender women. Positive and negative appraisals of beauty, whether direct or indirect, influence ways in which transgender women are judged and correspondingly treated. Participant responses shed light on the highly prevalent and fundamentally exclusionary, discriminatory, and/or assimilatory standards that society holds for transwomen's beauty. When speaking of societal beauty standards, participants shared general sentiments of discontent, dysphoria, felt pressure, restrictiveness, unattainability, and the unrealistic and problematic nature of such standards while also noting a need for modification and indications that some progress is being made. Various themes presented in the data serve as potential social stressors that may influence adverse health outcomes among the transgender community. Additional evaluation of themes will provide enhanced understanding of application, context, and consistency of such themes among transgender women.

Utilizing the primary findings of the study, future research should further evaluate the validity of these themes within a larger pool of participants. Future research should consider nationally conducted surveys that measure the constructs obtained in the research data in order to further establish its validity, context, and applicability within the transgender community. These efforts should include additional qualitative measures to gain more foundational knowledge and understanding as well as quantitative measures to assess to uncover prevalent frequencies and trends within the United States.

Limitations and Future Research

One key limitation of this study is the absence of ethnic/racial diversity in the participant pool. Accordingly, results of the study cannot be generalized to transgender women of color. Historically, normative beauty standards have often represented European or Caucasian American traits as ideal (Poran 2002). Accordingly, transgender women of color are being evaluated not only by cisnormative standards of beauty but also by racially biased standards of beauty. Given the intersectionality and compounded minority stress experienced by transgender women of color (James et al. 2016; Nadal 2013), it is important for future research to assess the effects of cisnormative beauty standards as

they pertain to transgender women of color. Furthermore, future research should identify and evaluate protective factors for transgender women of color.

Although not directly measured and assessed, participant responses appeared to reflect generational differences regarding perceptions and expressions of beauty. Differences in how gender expression in particular appeared to be conceptualized differently among older participants versus younger participants (i.e., viewed as more dichotomous vs. fluid). Future research should evaluate whether generational differences exist and should identify these differences. Research should also evaluate the effects, if any, of recent changes in the social-political climate within the United States (i.e., increase in transgender visibility, protections, and prohibitions) and the potential effects those changes may have on transwomen's expressions and perceptions of beauty.

Informal evaluations of participant data also appeared to reflect differences in responses by participants from the Midwest versus the Northeast. Specifically, participants from the Northeast appeared to more readily identify connections with the transgender community and/or resources that served as protective factors against negative perceptions of transwomen's beauty. Meyer (2003) suggests that individuals who belong to minority groups generally develop coping strategies and resilience as protective factors against prejudice and discrimination. Examples of strategies include interacting with and/or developing relationships with those who share similar experiences. Accordingly, these individuals begin to compare themselves to their minority culture rather than against dominant group culture (Hendricks and Testa 2012; Meyer 2003). Such interactions and comparisons may serve as corrective experiences in that they provide opportunities of validation and positive self-evaluation that effectively counteract felt stigma (Hendricks and Testa 2012). Given the small participant pool, it is difficult to determine the validity of these observations. Future research should evaluate the potential effects of geographical influences on transwomen's connections with the transgender community, and the extent to which regional social-political climates affect perceived and tangible connections.

CONCLUSION

The purpose of this research study was to explore the effects of societal beauty standards on transgender women's perceptions and expressions of beauty. Researchers conducted semistructured interviews with 12 self-identified Caucasian transgender women to assess the effects of societal beauty standards on transwomen's perceptions and expressions of beauty. Participants' responses were analyzed via the CQR method (Hill 2012), which utilizes within- and between-case analysis of reoccurring themes across all interview transcripts. Analysis of the data revealed the following primary themes: Participants viewed the beauty of transgender and cisgender women as diverse or as encompassing a broad range of variability; societal beauty standards were influential in regards to participants' expressions of beauty; and participants viewed out-group transphobia as a factor contributing to discriminatory and prejudicial perceptions of transwomen's beauty.

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