

ORIGINAL ARTICLE

The Rise of Transgender and Gender Diverse Representation in the Media: Impacts on the Population

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In recent years, the transgender and gender diverse (TGD) population has gained a stronger voice in the media. Although these voices are being heard, there are limits on the types of TGD representation displayed in media. The current study interviewed 27 TGD individuals. These interviews exposed how participants view the rise of TGD media representation. The main themes that emerged were TGD awareness and TGD identity discovery and role modeling. Clearly, there is a disconnect between transnormativity in the media and transnormativity in reality.

Keywords: TGD, Media Representation, Grounded Theory, Transnormativity, Identity, Role Modeling

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The number of people who identify as transgender and gender diverse (TGD) has increased in recent years (Gates, 2011). TGD visibility through media (Cavalante, 2017) and in the economic market share has also increased (David, 2017). The increase in the TGD population, estimated to include up to 1% of the U.S. population, is likely due to an increase in the raw population of individuals who identify openly as TGD, the expanding definition of TGD, and the actual means by which TGD populations are counted. Coinciding with this rise, there has been an increase of TGD representation in media, through celebrities like Caitlyn Jenner, supporting characters in films and television, and shows and movies where TGD characters and

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their journeys are the central theme. While this increased representation is positive on its surface, it is by no means without flaws and TGD persons are still wildly underrepresented in the media (Capuzza & Spencer, 2016).

Although many TGD people are resilient in the face of marginalization, mediated portrayals are often stigmatizing (Glover, 2016), are played by cisgender actors (Armstrong, 2016), and/or pigeonhole the TGD community into transnormative boxes (Mocarski, Butler, Emmons, & Smallwood, 2013). The limits on the types of TGD representations displayed in media perpetuate understandings of what it means to identify as TGD in the world and, at least so far, occlude many obstacles faced by the population. One such obstacle is the devastating health and economic disparities, which include 40% of TGD individuals attempting suicide in their lives, 1 in 4 experiencing homelessness, and 1 in 3 experiencing assault during primary school, as well as elevated rates of depression, anxiety, alcohol and drug abuse, and post-traumatic stress disorder (Bockting, Miner, Swinburne Romine, Hamilton, & Coleman, 2013; Haas et al., 2010; James et al., 2016). The disparities faced by TGD populations are astonishing and are often exacerbated by barriers to health care that include the fear of stigmatization, refusal of care, and discrimination in care settings. These disparities and obstacles are compounded and/or rooted in public misunderstandings of what it means to be TGD, coupled with a hegemonic worldview that is both heteronormative and gender normative, casting gender as an either/or proposition tied to the biological sex assigned at birth. It is imperative to better understand media portrayals and how they impact TGD persons, as these portrayals can continue to prompt misunderstandings.

Theoretical underpinnings: Socioecological model of health and transnormativity

We take a constructivist position when thinking through the ways that media contributes to the creation and recreation of understanding and reality. As Gamson and Modigliani (1989, p. 2) contended, “media discourse is part of the process by which individuals construct meaning.” However, a constructivist viewpoint has the potential to make assumptions about the creation of reality that are often reductive, especially in the context of gender. Part of this pitfall comes from the potential assumption that there is “a split between the body and mind, and between an individual’s biological make-up and cultural processes” (van den Berg, 2011, p. 398). When analyzing mediated constructions of gender, it is important to allow for infinite orderings of gender. We do not view media representations to be static or to represent the views of any one group. Furthermore, a single piece of media may take on many forms of meaning for different audiences or for a single viewer across time. Shani Orgad’s understanding of global imagination is a compelling starting point for our theoretical position:

Global imagination refers to a collective way of seeing, understanding and feeling, at a global level . . . this is not to say that global imagination is a monolithic,

homogeneous or fixed symbolic faculty. Nor does it abolish or swallow other imaginations, personal or collective. (Orgad, 2014, p. 4)

Media is one discourse that reflects and creates reality, working within a complex tapestry of discourses to create and recreate cultural understandings. The larger purpose of our community-based research is to pave a pathway to better conditions for TGD persons, with a specific aim of reducing health disparities. Therefore, our analysis of the impacts of media on the TGD population is situated within a health paradigm.

Socioecological model of health

The biomedical model has “dominated health care for the past century” (Wade & Halligan, 2004, p. 1398). The foundational constructs lead to an understanding of health that forecloses discussion on social determinants or any intersections between factors on which health depends. In other words, the biomedical model is a “reductionist model . . . hence, each disease or illness can be explained in terms of faulty physiological or biochemical processes” (Brennan, Eagle, & Rice, 2010, p.11). This type of reductionism places the onus for being healthy on each individual, divorced from social determinants. When we extend beyond illness to other aspects of life that impact our health, this model should disappear. However, TGD subjectivities have been treated through a biomedical lens, as being TGD can be diagnosable through the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM) via a gender dysphoria diagnosis. It is important to move beyond such reductionist understandings of health and personhood to better understand the impacts of media and other social determinants on wellbeing.

Bronfenbrenner’s (1977) Socioecological Model of Health (SEM) posits that the health of any one individual is impacted by a variety of factors at varying levels of the individual’s control. The Center for Disease Control and Prevention’s (2015) adaptation of the model is illustrated as a rainbow, with the individual as the innermost band, encompassed by widening bands of influence: interpersonal, organizational, community, and policy. We argue that the rainbow should be expanded with an additional band for societal belief systems. For TGD individuals, hegemonic norms of gender and sex in this outer band influence each smaller band, with the community level acting as a regulatory force in the Foucauldian sense of power (Foucault, 1977). In other words, cultural norms on gender, sex, and sexuality provide the foundation for the lived experiences of TGD persons.

Transnormativity and hegemony

Hegemony is the willing submission to governing rules of behaviors within a dominant group, whereby resistance to dominant norms is punished through group reprimands. Contextualizing hegemony as a force that influences every part of the above-described SEM rainbow is important, because these dominant norms impact TGD persons not only at the individual level, but also at family, community, and

societal levels. Willing submission is not necessarily conscious submission, as the insidious nature of hegemonic ordering pervades meaning systems. Therefore, it is often inescapable. This inescapability can manifest in both positive and negative reinforcements for dominant norms. Reprimands of non-hegemonic behavior need not be overt, but often can be, as demonstrated by the elevated rates of violence against, homelessness of, and homicide against TGD persons (Stafford, 2015; Stotzer, 2009). Furthermore, hegemony is most effective when those subject to its norms are unaware of or powerless against its effects, thereby enacting dominant norms and reprimands on themselves through internalization. In TGD communities, the power of hegemonic gender ordering can be seen through high suicide rates in the population.

As hegemonic systems act as powerful drivers of disenfranchisement, understanding and addressing the subtleties of hegemony allow one to challenge their effects at a root-cause level. Butler (1990) first articulated the need to decouple sex, gender, and sexuality in her seminal work, *Gender Trouble*. In her exploration of the hegemonic ordering of gender, she demonstrated that one of the most powerful vectors of power to keep these norms dominant was the institutional collapsing of the false binaries of gender, sex, and sexuality. If one was to be born male at birth, one would “naturally” have a masculine gender identity and a sexual desire to couple with a female who was born at birth with a feminine gender identity. This logic, and these sets of hegemonic ordering principles, are perpetuated in everyday behaviors (e.g., boys wear blue), physical structures (e.g., sex-specific bathrooms), and institutional practices (e.g., intake forms that only ask for binary genders).

Scholars have built on Butler’s theories to examine the influence of media on the hegemonic order of gender and the impacts of intersectional, hegemonic vectors. Halberstam demonstrated the ways that queerness is appropriated by media and scholars through a lens of Whiteness and maleness:

While mainstream media acknowledge the existence of queer masculinities, they do so only to reassert the hegemony of White male masculinities. And while masculinity studies as a field has largely been formed in response to a perceived neglect of the topic in feminism, the work produced there largely and almost exclusively addresses men and maleness. (Halberstam, 2002, p. 345)

Halberstam demonstrated the complex terrain that non-normative identities—specifically, TGD identities—face in both media and the academy. Hegemonic orderings ensure that non-normative portrayals are anchored in a dominant vector of power (in this example, Whiteness). Depressingly, they also demonstrate that movements to bring new identities to the fore in response to the absence of inclusion in the academy are met with normalizing responses, once again reifying hegemonic vectors. This treatment of TGD identities is, unfortunately, unsurprising. However, it also represents a myopic worldview that closes off the vast potential for transgression and disruption that TGD identities embody, since they cut across intersectional boundaries and expose the false nature of hegemonic gender vectors. As Stryker so

poignantly stated:

It is increasingly obvious that transgender phenomena are not limited to individuals who have “transgendered” personal identities. Rather, they are signposts that point to many different kinds of bodies and subjects, and they can help us see how gender can function as part of a more extensive apparatus of social domination and control. (Stryker, 2007, p. 61)

In short, TGD identities expose the fact that gender is not a natural state. Instead, gender is socially constructed and fluid, making the increased inclusion and acceptance of TGD persons in media and other spaces vital to the deconstruction of this powerful, hegemonic vector. This potential is also why it is so important that representation is broad and intersectional, so that the potential good that TGD representation realizes is not undercut by reliance on other hegemonic vectors of power to deny other non-dominant representations.

One way in which dominant norms circulate is through media, as individuals learn hegemonically appropriate/inappropriate behaviors through the syntheses of fictional and factual representations of our world. Much scholarship has deconstructed the ways in which media perpetuates dominant norms of race (Holtzman & Sharpe, 2014), ethnicity (Holtzman & Sharpe, 2014), class (Rennels, 2015), sex (Barker, Gill, & Harvey, 2018), sexuality (Shugart, 2003), and gender (Mocarski et al., 2013). Even as resistance to dominant norms becomes part of the mediated discourse, reprimands from hegemonic pressure, usually in the forms of traditional cultural forces, fight to normalize these acts of resistance. Transnormativity is one such example of a resistive act (displaying TGD persons in media) being normalized (limiting the type of TGD representation). Transnormativity, for the purposes of this manuscript, is a binary-TGD person (someone who wishes to adhere to the normative gender binary, but feels that the gender they were assigned at birth associated with their birth sex is the opposite of who they are) who is White, upper-middle class, and post-operative heterosexual. Furthermore, said person is not shown as a sexual being and is shown enacting hegemonic gender behaviors, such as wearing traditional, gender-“appropriate” dress (Mocarski et al., 2013).

Method

Research team

Trans Collaborations (TC) is a community-academic partnership that aims to reduce TGD health disparities. TC was started in late 2014 by two academic partners and one community partner (Trans Collaboration co-founders: Debra Hope, Richard Mocarski, and Nathan Woodruff). This partnership led to the creation of a community board of five TGD community members. The community board meets at least quarterly to set the research agenda, is led by the lead community investigator, and directs the academic partners.

Participants

Recruitment was based on the location of TC, in the Great Central Plains. This location represents a departure from past studies with TGD participants and the first study, to the authors' knowledge, within this geographic footprint that systematically address health disparities in TGD populations. Community partners led the recruitment efforts, acting as liaisons for local support groups and identifying TGD-affirming medical providers. Additionally, listservs and social media outlets were utilized for recruitment. Qualifications to participate in this study included being over the age of 19 (the age of majority in Nebraska) and self-identifying as TGD. This included individuals who had received or were planning to have gender-affirming surgery, had taken or planned to take hormone therapy, and who did not plan to have surgery or take hormone therapy.

There were 27 TGD participants that self-identified with the following genders: female to male, male to female, trans man, trans woman, male, female, gender queer, gender non-binary, and fluctuating. Ages of participants ranged from 20 to 64. There were 13 participants who lived in rural areas and 14 who lived in urban areas. There were 22 participants who identified as European American, 1 who identified as African American, 1 who identified as Native American, and 2 who identified as multiracial, as well as 1 participant who declined to report their race. As the first major recruitment effort of TC, the demographics of the sample reflect the demographics of the region. We recognize the need to make efforts to oversample participants from non-European backgrounds and are currently having success with these efforts in our current studies. With two-fifths of the board identifying as African American, including the board leader, we have made significant inroads into communities of color, including the creation of a partnership with Queer People of Color in Omaha. It should be noted that the analysis in this paper derives from a mostly White, regionally based sample, which makes the data specific to the community and their viewpoint. We contend that this makes the data valuable, since this particular region for TGD populations is understudied, and also presents opportunities for further research to expand the ethnic and racial demographics of the sample.

It should be noted that this paper deviates from traditional demographic reporting within the analysis section. Specifically, quotes and paraphrases from the participants are not coupled with demographic details. While reporting these details may provide more nuance to the analysis and allow for a richer interpretation by the authors, we made this choice as part of our service to our community. In the conception of our research, our community expressed concern that privacy and anonymity from qualitative data would be impossible due to how few persons in the region identify as TGD. The primary state in which the study was conducted, Nebraska, does not currently have any protections against employment discrimination based on gender or sex. Furthermore, Nebraska is a relatively small state in terms of population (~1.92 million people) and, therefore, has a small population of TGD persons. Half of our interviewees hailed from rural locales where populations were under 50,000 (per the U.S. Census definitions), with most hailing from areas much smaller. With these

factors in mind, the concern of our community for anonymity was necessary, all the way down to decoupling qualitative data from typically shared demographic markers. It should be noted that traditional forms of anonymizing data in qualitative studies are generally adequate to protect the populations. And while it is certainly possible that these procedures and norms would be adequate here, give the potential for financial, and other, harms to the population and the partnership our team has built with the community, the additional nuance the data would gain from situating quotes with demographics, in our opinion, does not outweigh the benefits of protection for our participants.

Procedure

Internal Review Board approval was obtained through the University of Nebraska-Lincoln with a jurisdiction elsewhere approval from the University of Nebraska at Kearney prior to any study implementation. Participants provided informed consent and signed the form prior to the beginning of the interview. Interviews were conducted at a mutually agreed, private location. All interviews were conducted by trained study personnel, lasted between 1–2 hours, and were audio-recorded with participant consent. This project is part of a larger effort of TC that includes developing and providing training on TGD-affirming health-care practices to providers and developing and providing advocacy training to TGD community members. The data collected from these participants are reported here and in other publications (Holt et al., under review; Hope et al., under review; Meyer et al., under review) that look to inform evidence-based guidance for behavioral health providers, as well as to develop advocacy training targets for the TGD community.

Design

Two senior research team members analyzed the interview data using a grounded-theory methodology (Strauss & Corbin, 1997), and their results had significant overlaps. Neither of these researchers conducted interviews or transcribed data; those tasks were handled by other team personnel. A constant comparison technique was employed, and thematic saturation was reached after 16 interviews were fully coded; however, all 27 interviews were fully coded to add richness to the findings. All transcripts were also reviewed and discussed with the research team by the senior community partner prior to the analysis. After initial codes were established, an executive summary was presented to the community board for comment. Community board members had access to all transcripts and worked with the researchers to flesh out the codes and situate them within the realities of the region. This process was repeated after axial coding. From the axial data, an additional critical rhetorical (McKerrow, 1989) analysis of the references made by interviewees to mediated discourses was performed by one of the senior investigators. This analysis is supplemental to the qualitative findings and reported in the Results section in an interspersed way with these analyses. An initial draft of this manuscript was disseminated to the local

board for comment at a quarterly meeting, with their comments incorporated into a subsequent draft.

Results and discussion

Two main axial codes concerning media representation emerged from the data: TGD awareness and TGD identity discovery and role modeling. Within the data, mediated discourses referenced included Caitlyn Jenner, Chaz Bono, Laverne Cox, Renee Richards, Ryan Salanz, and Nikkie Johnson as TGD celebrities; *Ma en vie rose*, *Boys Don't Cry*, *Rocky Horror Picture Show*, *the Danish Girl*, *Silence of the Lambs*, *Diagnosing Difference*, and *The Assignment* as films; and *Steven Universe*, *Shameless*, *South Park*, *Orange is the New Black*, *RuPaul's Drag Race*, and *Sailor Moon* as television shows, with *Transparent* also referenced in community board meetings. Additionally, TGD bathroom laws news coverage, Imogen Bennie (author), cisgender actors playing TGD persons, and docunews specials on TGD issues were other mediated products and constructs mentioned.

Awareness

Duality and transnormativity

Many participants indicated that mediated representations of their community have mixed effects. Media representations are both positive, due to increased public understanding, and problematic, due to the often stereotypical and narrow representations available. An example of these opposing ideas is shown here:

So yes, it's great that transitioning is coming to light. . . . The problem is all the flip side of it. Like now we got all these bathroom laws . . . people are stalking people in the bathroom and the thing is trans people were going into the bathroom that they were supposed to be going in and you didn't know until we made it a big deal and now it's a problem. So the media is just I think a nightmare for everything. (Participant 21)

This participant summarized the duality of exposure succinctly. They bring to the fore the idea that awareness and exposure of the TGD community can make the lived experience better, but that is not always the case. These portrayals, while they may make life easier in some ways, also bring an ugly side of society to the surface, which can manifest in calls for discriminatory laws. We contend that these discriminatory laws demonstrate hegemony's place in the SEM model of health. Specifically, discriminatory laws are the hegemonic system of gender's overt retaliation, which permeate the SEM rainbow by influencing the individual at multiple levels. Clearly these laws are part of the policy level, but they also negatively impact TGD persons' ability to find support at the organizational, community, and interpersonal levels by reifying discriminatory behavior as valid. Particularly, the current hegemonic ordering of gender does not allow space for TGD persons, which means, to the system, that their appearance must be corrected. Discriminatory laws are overt and

operate on hate, ignorance, and fearmongering in a public that understands gender hegemonically only, while also operating on intimidation, shame, and fear in the TGD population. These overt disciplinary actions also embolden the under-the-surface retaliation, giving license to hegemonically inclined parents to stamp out gender-deviant behaviors in their children, to hegemonically inclined publics to misgender and enact other microaggressions, and so forth.

Although the media can be an important part of a TGD persons' understanding of their own journey, it is important to note that this journey is different for every person. One participant stated, "transition is different for every trans person and it looks different for every trans person" (Participant 4). Thus, the representations of transitions in media are significantly important, because they offer a cultural foothold for individuals whose gender journeys are different. For instance, a non-binary person whose gender journey is reflected in hegemonic cultural representations is likely to use media as a reference point for what transition looks like for everyone. Specifically, this echoes findings from other participants that focused on how every TGD person has a different gender journey and, perhaps, a different end destination. As Participant 21 put it, the media shines:

A greater spotlight on the people who are prideful which is absolutely fine. . . . So people are getting this idea that that is what a trans person looks like. When in all reality you have trans people that you would never know.

This participant highlights how the media shows those TGD folx who act as community leaders and advocates through pride events. They explain that these portrayals are not necessarily translatable to those TGD folx who are at different stages in their journeys. This idea, coupled with other participants' highlighting that most mediated, non-news, TGD persons seek full gender affirmation, demonstrate the way that mediated representations narrow the available, acceptable options in a hegemonic world. Specifically, some TGD individuals' gender journeys include a full, gender-affirmation medical procedure involving hormones, multiple surgeries, and other medical procedures, while others take no medical actions, and still others do not identify as any normative gender. As such, folx present differently to the public, and these differences may be temporal to the individuals as well. For instance, a TGD person who is seeking a journey that includes hormones and both top and bottom surgeries will present differently at various time points along their journey, due to the way these procedures progress. With the current media landscape, for individuals in transition or those who do not seek a full medical transition, there is an expectation of shame. This participant and others interviewed made it clear that what is being broadcast in the media are only very particular presentations, often missing transition stages.

Another layer that participants added is that a lot of representation is wrapped up in celebrity. Examples of this phenomenon include those who were famous prior to disclosing their TGD status (e.g., Chaz Bono and Caitlyn Jenner), those who became famous through their TGD documentation (e.g., Jazz Jennings), and those

who became famous for their talent, with their TGD status disclosed prior to their rise (e.g., Laverne Cox). The timing of the interviews (2016–2017) ensured that Caitlyn Jenner was a large topic of conversation, as her disclosure and subsequent television show appearances were close in date to the interviews (announcement in April 2015). One can look to the transition of Caitlyn Jenner and her media tour for clues to how the hegemonic system accepts TGD identities, as her transition was largely ignored in favor of the end of her binary gender journey. Her well-publicized transition offers an example of what a transition may look like, but runs the risk of normalizing elements of a gender journey that are not representative of either the experiences of other TGD individuals or the conceptualization of the process of transitioning. As one participant pointed out:

I can't do what Caitlyn did, I can't go and get all these surgeries and go away and transition and come out, like that's not anywhere possible for me, and so I think it's bringing awareness but it's also giving people more room to make assumptions and again kind of apply one thing to an entire group of people which we know can be dangerous. (Participant 13)

Identifying as TGD does not necessitate having transition surgeries, or publicly acknowledging what procedures, if any, have been done. Not only did the participant recognize this disparity, they articulated the danger that this singular portrayal of a very personal journey has as on the representation of a larger group. In particular, Caitlyn's reveal, after several surgeries, reproduced the normative construction of a strict binary of gender, rather than a more fluid conceptualization that viewing a transition process would take. The binary logic of gender is not challenged with a full transition sans any documentation of the transition journey for public consumption. This is part of transnormativity, as it is a safe way to be TGD for the hegemonic ordering of gender, as the before-and-after presentation that leaves out the necessary steps in transition presents the audience with a familiar, normative construction of two distinct genders, separated by anatomical sex.

Even though these types of representations may narrow the publicly accepted forms of TGD identification, thereby stigmatizing those who either do not meet these fully binary and fully transitioned standards, participants noted that these types of representations still allow TGD persons, their allies, and other audience members to have role models that act as *de facto* guides. Participant 18 stated succinctly, "obviously representation for binary trans people isn't the best but at least they have some. When somebody says the word trans usually they know what you are talking about." This participant demonstrated the exclusion of gender-nonconforming and gender-fluid ways of identifying in the media. This is another wrinkle to the fully transitioned representations in media, as non-binary and other non-conforming representations are still completely absent from media portrayals. This positioning can push away some TGD folx and create a safe harbor for transphobia in the general public when confronted with real-life TGD people that do not match mediated portrayals.

This type of devotion to the binary that the hegemonic ordering of gender seems to be recreating in media representations of TGD persons is vital to current transnormativity. In other words, binary-transgender presentation is the only currently acceptable deviation from hegemonic gender, as constructed from current media representations. Binary devotions allow for another element of representation and awareness that was noted by participants: the casting of cisgender individuals as TGD.

There are a lot of movies coming out where they will have like cisgender people play trans people . . . most of them aren't generally bringing anything positive to the table like as far as representation or even just light on the issues . . . And it's just, that doesn't help. I see backlash from that . . . you've got cisgender men playing a woman which just reinforces all the stereotypes and okays them with people in their head so there is good. (Participant 22)

An awareness of the trade-off that comes with cisgender portrayals is crucial at this juncture, as it highlights the construction of hegemonic transnormativity as it goes mainstream. TGD audiences and their allies gain the exposure to TGD issues for a larger public through mainstream media, but at the cost of the lingering stigmatization from hegemonic heteronormativity. In this case, a cisgender portrayal of a TGD individual reflects the stereotypical, harmful, and heteronormative notion that being transgender is just a man pretending to be a woman, or vice versa. Moreover, this trade-off places additional pressure—social, cultural, and even political—on TGD individuals to enact specific norms to operate without a societal backlash.

In addition to sticking to binary logic, media portrayals are unrealistic in other ways, creating a transnormativity that is White and upper class. Participants noted that media sources reinforced certain stereotypes about the TGD community that are not true for most TGD persons. Caitlyn Jenner's socioeconomic status (and, therefore, social privilege) was noted by multiple participants as unrealistic and an insulating factor for her in her journey. Media transitions often result in heterosexual outcomes, often center on persons of privilege (e.g., celebrity, wealth), and rarely include details about the lived experiences (e.g., surgeries, shots, discrimination). Most importantly, participants expressed that transnormative media portrayals created pressures in the daily lives of TGD persons, creating expectations surrounding the normative aspects of these portrayals. Caitlyn's wealth made her transition seem easy, which heaps expectations of TGD persons to individually deal with their gender journeys without support, and especially without financial support. Transnormativity then reinforces the idea that gender-affirming surgeries are elective and that their costs, as well as access to care, are the responsibility of the TGD individual.

Additionally, participants cited the systematic exclusion of persons of color from TGD portrayals as problematic. Participant 13 even included Laverne Cox, a TGD

person of color, in their statement about the whitewashed media landscape:

[TGD people of color] don't look at Caitlyn and see them, they don't even look at Laverne so much, yes she is a person of color but her process has been really shiny and that doesn't kind of coincide with what they are, how they are going through.

Taken together, participants made it clear that while media representations are on the rise, these representations are problematic. Participants viewed representations as sticking to a transnormativity that excludes many TGD persons and reinforces the heteronormative, patriarchal, and gender-normative world. While TGD representation may seem revolutionary, in its current form it may continue to perpetuate gender- and sex-normative understandings and stereotypes.

Discipline through comedy and political retaliation

In order for TGD representation to be heralded as progress while being a hegemonic vector of normative power structures, there must be disciplinary tactics communicated with and/or through these representations. As demonstrated above, more public awareness seems to have been coupled with increased political scrutiny. Particularly with TGD representation on the rise, there has been a rise in awareness by politicians and activists, as evident by the rise in TGD issues being fought in state and national political theaters. This is especially evident with the bathroom laws noted by participants. These laws can be viewed as a disciplinary device of the hegemonic ordering of gender and sex, in a Foucauldian sense. These laws are overt in their discrimination and utilize the creation of myths to cast TGD persons as deviant and predators in order to rally public support and, in turn, discipline TGD persons for not following traditional gender and sex roles. This overt discrimination is not the only type of disciplinary vector from the data, as participants noted the insidious ways in which media portrayals often utilize TGD persons as the butt of jokes:

Then Caitlyn coming out also led to a lot of jokes at her expense and so seeing that very public backlash against her coming out could also lead to people feeling really terrible about themselves . . . what are the people around me going to say about me. (Participant 2)

Jokes taken at the expense of TGD celebrities in the presence of TGD persons send the message that being TGD is non-normative and, therefore, unacceptable. While this type of disciplinary vector operates both publicly through the backlash and privately through jokes, other vectors are embedded within TGD representations. Participants noted other examples of mediated representations where TGD persons were ridiculed. This type of representation reinforces that TGD persons are not functioning within the hegemonic system and works to undermine the way they live their lives.

Identity discovery and role modeling

Self

A common theme found throughout the interviews was the role of the media in the development of the participants' understandings of their TGD subjectivity. By watching a television show or searching on the Internet, TGD persons have a variety of ways to find out more information on what it means to be TGD. Participants explained that this type of role modeling was especially important at the outset of their identity awareness and/or when they were children. As one participant put it: "9 or 10 is when I started realizing that I wasn't the same as everybody else . . . I remember seeing something on TV about they called it like a sex change operation" (Participant 22). For this participant, a television show was their first exposure to the idea of gender-affirming surgery and what possibilities that could open up. Participants regularly mentioned that, as a child, seeing a celebrity come out in the media was their first exposure to a TGD person. The media is a way for people to become more aware of their identity. In recent media, Caitlyn Jenner has been a spokesperson for the TGD community.

I was watching the Caitlyn Jenner interview, the 20/20 interview that was before she announced being Caitlyn and there were just too many parallels to how she explained how she lived her life. (Participant 4)

For this person, Caitlyn Jenner allowed them to realize or start their journey to find their identity. While Caitlyn's representation has been problematic, as documented above, she still provided this participant with a person to identify with and begin the process. Other participants noted similar scenarios with other portrayals, such as Renee Richards in the 1970s: "it provided definition to an identity that I didn't perceive" (Participant 5). Many participants echoed the idea that exposure to mediated representations of TGD persons led to better self-understanding. Interestingly, the mediated portrayals mentioned in this light were all non-fiction in nature. Those discourses that participants latched onto to help them when they began their identity awakening were all real people (e.g., celebrities) or real situations (e.g., talk shows or documentaries). The genres of reality TV, talk shows, and documentaries share conventions that may be easier to identify with than their fictional counterparts. In particular, these genres are generally focused and provide catharsis through tight conclusions. For documentaries and talk shows, these conclusions often happen over the course of a show, while reality TV shows may take a whole season. And while these genres are interested in creating drama and intrigue, they generally have central through-lines of transformation for TGD subjectivities. Conversely, fictionalized accounts of TGD persons often deal with many other through-lines and TGD identities and transformations may only be subplots, or may be completely ignored. Even in cases where a transformation is central (e.g., *Transparent*), this theme often takes a back seat to louder dramas and strife.

Family

In addition to aiding self-identification, media representations can impact how family and friends understand their loved ones who identify as TGD. Family members and significant others can seek out sources to help them through their loved one's transition. One couple found relief through a website and book published by Helen Boyd. Helen Boyd was initially married to a cross-dressing man; however, her husband decided to transition to a woman. The interviewee said that when they came out to their partner, "she initially was like, 'I don't think that I can do this.'" However, after this couple discovered the website myhusbandbetty.com, their relationship improved significantly. The interviewee shared this story by saying:

She was like "wow, I really feel like she speaks directly to me, this is my partner," and in that she found comfort in knowing that, "wow, if she can do that and stay with her partner through the transition. ..." "You know, I am not in love with your parts as much as who you are as a person." (Participant 4)

After looking at this resource, the couple found comfort in their decision to stay together. Although the media has many negative connotations associated with it, this is one example of how media can be used to further educate and help demolish stereotypes.

On the other hand, the media can have a negative impact on family members' perceptions of TGD persons. One participant recalled an event with grandparents where being TGD was not accepted.

I probably was about 7. . . . This woman had had gender conformation surgery and I can still remember very vividly that news piece and it was kind of like affirming that that was something that could happen and I remember asking my grandmother right after it and she kind of denounced it very casually though . . . but she said that people shouldn't be doing that. (Participant 12)

Because of interactions like this, TGD persons may have a harder time accepting their identity and coming out to their family members. News and media often take a negative or sensationalist stance when it comes to stories about TGD persons. Unfortunately, this can lead TGD persons to hide their identities from their loved ones. This example speaks to the role of hegemony in health through the SEM model. Specifically, this particular mediated example goes against the hegemonic vector of normative gender, but normative gender is so pervasive that the hegemonic norm is affirmed at the familial level, reducing whatever personal benefit the account would have brought the participant in isolation. In other words, this demonstrates both the way personal health is interconnected, as described by the SEM model, and how hegemony is a force that influences all of those levels.

These negative aspects fold into the hegemonic discipline noted above. Family and friends can reify hegemonic orderings, emboldened (or frightened) by increased media exposure. Participant 15 indicated the difficulties surrounding the media and perceptions of their family members:

I guess the whole bathroom thing in the media, that was, kind of made it difficult for me to come out to my extended family because like I knew a couple of them in particular that thought that trans people should go to the wrong bathroom and that they are going to molest their kids, you know just the typical fear.

In short, this participant and others noted how the public backlash against TGD persons, which was probably due to increased exposure and awareness, influenced their family and friends. This influence, or even the threat of the influence, may hold folk back from disclosure, delay transitions, or cause permanent rifts in families. The media does an insufficient job of providing accurate and nonbiased information to the general public.

Conclusion

Understanding the fluid nature of transnormativity from the perspectives of TGD audiences is crucial to managing the critical space between the positives from representation in popular culture and the negative effects of normative constructions of the TGD experience on the people living it. Currently, the media shows a narrow view of the acceptable representations for TGD persons: a reality recognized by our interviewees.

This narrow view has a binary logic as its backbone, which includes the erasure of transmen and misogyny toward transwomen. Identifying as TGD does not need to include surgery or hormone therapy, and by making these the acceptable forms of representation, media intensifies the scrutiny on TGD individuals who do not follow binary forms of gender. The media has encouraged TGD jokes by illustrating the TGD population as non-normative. Transwomen, specifically, face issues of misogyny, as demonstrated in these jokes. This has created a divide for TGD persons, both with their self-identities and with their relationships with their families. However, the media also allows exposure to TGD persons, which is beneficial to those who are discovering their own identities. In order to change the uniform nature of representations in the media, more research needs to be conducted using a Cultural, Critical Rhetorical (CCR) lens with Community-Based Participatory Research (CBPR). This will allow practitioners to recognize the effects of transnormativity in TGD lives. This is necessary because researchers may not fully understand or may exaggerate the norms and realities of TGD persons. Overall, research in this area is crucial and necessary in order to protect the lives and identities of TGD persons.

Participants recognized that representation in media, particularly in fictional portrayals, has two sides: the character and the performer. Both elements of representation play a crucial role in normalizing TGD individuals for audiences. As media shifts to portraying TGD folk as a wide range of characters, special attention needs to be paid to the actors and actresses in these roles. When cisgender actors and actresses play TGD characters, they represent the negative stereotype that TGD people have

dealt with for generations: that TGD people are just pretending to be another gender. Even when their portrayals construct otherwise positive representations of a TGD individual, they are enacting the justification of stigmatization.

This article demonstrates the importance of investigating a community's critique of popular culture as a way of understanding how communication creates a culture and community and, more importantly, how that community articulates its place within the normative barriers ceded with representation. Rhetorical scholars recognize that their interpretations of texts are individual and not generalizable, and using CBPR practices within CCR work presents an avenue where scholars can investigate the overlapping reads from a scholar and from individuals living out these experiences, creating a scholastic space that adds significant vibrancy to rhetorical work. Specifically, understanding moves between the researchers and the participants in ways that inform not only the specific research project, but the relationships between constituents. This gives researchers more nuanced articulations of the effects of normativity from those who experience them, rather than requiring researchers to speculate as to what it may feel like to an imagined audience. The articulations allow for an examination of the cultural negotiations that happen between representation, stereotyping, and stigmatization through the lens of lived experiences. Additionally, utilizing participants' references as additional sites of analyses allows qualitative analyses to be grounded in the greater cultural milieu. While qualitative research often provides this cultural context, having the participants guide the choices of contextual sites adds a layer of authenticity to the analyses.

Moreover, CBPR work creates an avenue from which to critique the shifting nature of normativity, as well as the harm it creates within an at-risk population. Transnormativity is a fluid construction, so as to absorb outcroppings of non-normative constructions if and when they are beneficial to maintain hegemony. The concept of transnormativity itself exemplifies exactly how this happens, since TGD identities were strictly non-normative until very recently, but now that there are benefits to representing the most whitewashed form of TGD identities, acceptable elements of the identity have been annexed. The participants in this study articulated the harms that normative constructions cause, but understanding how those harms shift as transnormativity shifts requires a relationship with community members. Good CBPR work, combined with CCR analyses of qualitative data, has the ability to track and critique transnormativity as it changes. Community researchers on the project are able to articulate important, in-group understandings of the data that help to shape the analyses in more authentic ways. Thus, the research participants' words are given more weight through a true partnership with the community and, therefore, become the ideal for critiquing normative and hegemonic constructs of particular communities, which then positions the researchers to add a CCR layer to the cultural context referred to in the qualitative data. In short, CCR analyses can add nuance and authenticity to qualitative data analyses when they are guided by community partnerships that are structured for lasting and impactful community participation and feedback.

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