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Artistic Expression as a Source of Resilience for Transgender and Gender Diverse Young People

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Abstract

There is a paucity of research exploring sources of resilience among transgender and gender diverse (TGD) young people with multiple marginalized identities. Information and communication technologies (ICT) offer unique opportunities for authentic self-expression, which is not always possible offline. The primary aims of this study were to understand unique sources of resilience among TGD youth in their online and offline lives. Using photo elicitation and grounded theory methods, we conducted online in-depth interviews with TGD young people (N = 29) between the ages of 14-25 across the United States identifying with at least one of the following social statuses: (a) person of color, (b) immigrant, or (c) living in a rural area. Four themes were identified from the data, with both online and offline artistic expression being viewed as a: 1) form of authentic self-expression; 2) coping mechanism; 3) way to connect to others; and 4) pathway toward agency. Findings advance understanding about the use of artistic expression as an underexamined source of resilience among TGD youth with multiple marginalized identities. Within clinical settings, options for TGD youth to participate in various forms of expressive art may improve engagement and enhance youths' abilities to authentically express their thoughts, feelings, and experiences to promote healing and growth.

Key Words: *Transgender youth, intersectionality, art, resiliency, coping, online*

Introduction

Over the last decade, there has been growing attention given to the needs of transgender and gender diverse (TGD) young people in popular culture and academic research. The term transgender (trans) refers to individuals whose gender identity (or how they perceive themselves) or gender expression (or how they present themselves) is different from their assigned gender at birth. In this study, the term TGD will be used inclusively to refer to young people with binary and non-binary gender identities (Grossman et al., 2016; Tebbe & Moradi, 2016). Despite the proliferation of such research, however, the experiences of certain subgroups of TGD youth have been notably underrepresented. There is a paucity of trans-specific research conducted with youth who are members of racial/ethnic minority groups, (im)migrants and first generation Americans, or those living in rural areas (Cerezo et al., 2014: Paceley et al., 2017; Singh, 2013). As gender identity is frequently not the only social identity shaping the experiences of TGD youth, it is important that research aims to explore how such identities intersect among diverse subgroups of TGD youth. Thus, research with TGD youth should utilize an intersectional lens (Crenshaw, 1991), underscoring the perspective that youth may have multiple intersecting forms of oppression (e.g., racial/ethnic, gender, sexual) that manifests on the micro and macro levels (Bowleg et al., 2003; Johns et al., 2019). In that regard, the purpose of this qualitative study, which uses photo elicitation, is to explore how TGD youth experience their intersecting identities in their online and offline worlds. The goal is to highlight their experiences of risk as well as potential sources of resilience. Notably, qualitative research methods have the ability to illuminate a multiplicity of co-existing identities, which aligns with using an intersectional approach to conducting research (Parent et al., 2013).

Mental Health and Minority-Based Stressors

TGD youth are frequently exposed to both overt and covert forms of identity-based marginalization, discrimination, and violence across multiple domains of functioning (Goldblum et al., 2012; James et al., 2016; Pullen Sansfaçon et al., 2018; Witcomb et al., 2019). These identity-based stressors are considered a form minority stress (Meyer, 2003), and scholars have discussed the serious implications of this type of stress on the mental health of TGD people (Hendricks & Testa, 2012; Lefevor et al., 2019). In fact, evidence has demonstrated that minority stress does indeed account for some of the disproportionate health and mental health outcomes experienced by TGD populations (Chodzen et al., 2019; Tan et al., 2019; Testa et al., 2017).

TGD individuals are typically exposed to unique sources of stress associated with aspects of their body and/or gender presentation as well as others' perceptions of their gender that do not align with their authentic gender. Such strain or distress is generally referred to as gender dysphoria (Ashley, 2019). Gender dysphoria accounts for greater higher rates of depression, anxiety, disordered eating, body image concerns, and suicidality within TGD communities (Dhejne, 2016). In contrast, when TGD youth and young adults access and engage in gender-affirming interventions (e.g., social, medical, and/or legal), they often experience improved mental health and well-being (Simons et al., 2013). Unfortunately, TGD youth continue to experience many barriers to accessing care (e.g., non-affirming parents, lack of affordable care, absence of affirming and competent mental health, medical, and legal providers) (Tyler et al., 2020; Vance et al., 2015).

When using an intersectional lens, it is important examine how the cisgenderism that TGD youth experience (Shelton, 2015; Wagaman et al., 2019) interacts with other social-structural forces such as racism, white supremacy, and classism. It is well-documented that TGD young people in particular experience the disproportionate effects of intersectional stigma and

discrimination on both the individual and institutional levels (Shelton, 2015; Shelton et al., 2018). These intersecting experiences of cisgenderism, racism, and classism have been suggested to represent the direct and indirect consequences of larger sociopolitical forces and state-sanctioned surveillance and violence that TGD people experience (Travers et al., 2020). These intersecting structures of oppression restrict TGD youths' agency and exacerbate vulnerability, contributing to identity erasure, trauma, poverty, and homelessness (Shelton, 2015; Travers, et al., 2020).

Given TGD youths' experiences of gender dysphoria, barriers to accessing affirming care, and their ubiquitous exposure to minority stress associated with sociocultural and political contexts rooted in cisgenderism and white supremacy, the disproportionate burden of mental health challenges is no surprise. Less expected are the unique and innovative ways in which TGD youth demonstrate courage, strength, resilience, and agency in the when facing intersectional forms of stigma and discrimination.

Pathways Toward Resilience and Agency

It has been widely established that there are various internal and external factors that help promote resilience among TGD youth (Asakura, 2017; Singh et al., 2014; Stieglitz, 2010). These include an individual's self-esteem and sense of self-worth (internal), social supports (e.g., peers, family, community; external), and social connections (e.g., social media; external), which can often mitigate health and mental health challenges. Such resilience is frequently enhanced by the ability of TGD youth to define themselves and their gender with support from gender-affirming resources and positive relationships with family and friends (Singh et al., 2014).

Agency has been found to be a significant mechanism by which TGD young people navigate social systems and structures, exercise coping, and demonstrate and build resilience.

For example, a secondary data analysis of research on TGD young people experiencing homelessness showed that these young people demonstrated resilience in the face of structural/institutional oppressions by enacting personal agency (self-identification and decision-making) and exhibiting a future orientation (positive reframing and imagining what 'home' is).

Importantly, Hillier et al. (2019) examined the concept of situated agency for TGD high school students as a mechanism for understanding how of risk (adversity) and resilience (agency) simultaneously shape their experiences. *Situated agency* refers to the ways that people's choices are constrained or mediated by the specific environmental, social, and emotional context such as the possibility of and ability to act and/or adapt (Hillier et al., 2019). The researchers highlighted TGD students' awareness of the need to make choices (enact agency) as they navigated the constraints (i.e., lack of power, safety concerns) imposed by the school context. It is has become increasingly recognized as important to allow TGD youth to identify and describe through their own words and/or images what factors in their lives function protectively (Greenfield et al., 2021).

Role of Information and Communication Technologies

It is becoming widely recognized that TGD youth access the internet and a broad range of information and communication technologies (ICTs) to harness identity affirming support and build resilience (Austin et al, 2020; Fial, 2020; McInroy & Craig, 2015; Raun, 2015). As ICTs offer unique opportunities for authentic self-expression not possible offline (McInroy & Craig, 2015), various forms of social media have been used over the past decade by TGD individuals to navigate and develop identities, access TGD specific resources, and engage with other members of the TGD community (Cipolletta et al., 2017; Hill, 2005; Raun, 2012; 2015). Emerging literature suggests that engaging with others online via internet or smartphone apps may be

particularly useful for the promotion of positive mental health and well-being (Austin et al., 2020; Fish et al., 2020). Moreover, ICTs offer access to online communities of shared identities (e.g., blacktransmen.org, transgenderpulse.com) and interests (e.g., Fandom, gaming discord servers) that can facilitate safety and support (McInroy, 2019). Although there is mounting evidence of the benefits of online engagement for TGD youth broadly, a number of topics remain underexplored. For instance, despite the proliferation of TGD artists and performers (Stuckey & Nobel, 2010) there is a dearth of research exploring the potential role of artistic expression among TGD youth in their online and offline lives.

Using Arts-Based Methods to Elicit Creative Expression

Creating art in various forms – painting, photography, poetry, music – has been shown to have a positive impact upon individual well-being (Nichols, 2013; Rhodes & Schecter, 2014; Rooke, 2010). Generally labeled as creative expression, these activities have been shown to improve health outcomes for LGBTQ+ people during the coming out process by fostering connection to others, engaging in self-reflection for identity development, and exploring experiences of trauma, sexuality, gender identity, coming out, and other factors impacting health and mental health (Pelton-Sweet & Sherry, 2008). Rhodes and Schechter (2014) examine the possibility of art in assisting young people with developing protective factors associated with emotional regulation, social skills, coping, ethnic pride, self-esteem, and problem-solving. The authors describe outcomes of reduced stress levels, improved academic performance, and motivation to avoid substance use and gang involvement. For young people, the process of creating art can further aid in creating spaces that foster self-understanding and self-actualization, recognition by others, and comfort (Rooke, 2010). Nichols (2013) illustrates how creating music can promote authentic self-expression, connection to others, coping, and even an

escape from stressors for TGD youth related to experiences of rejection and discrimination at school.

Relatedly, art has been used to engage LGBTQ+ communities and young people in activism by empowering them to create counter-narratives of resistance and survival (Fobear, 2017; Stornaiuolo & Thomas, 2018). Despite minority stressors and health disparities, such activism has been shown to have a beneficial impact upon the wellbeing of LGBTQ+ young people (Frost et al., 2019). The disciplines of social work and art therapy have jointly been advocating for both the infusion of social justice in practice and the power of artistic expression in facilitating such activities (McPherson & Mazza, 2014). Art has been used to engage social work students in self-reflection related to human rights in order to advance their understanding and ability to practice with marginalized communities (McPherson & Mazza, 2014). Through the lens of art therapy, acknowledging the impact of the sociopolitical context may assist social work students in recognizing "the strength and resiliency that clients have fostered to survive and thrive" (Karcher, 2017, p. 126).

The Use of Photo Elicitation

One arts-based method in particular has become more widely used in research with diverse populations to elicit their artistic expression (Frith & Harcourt, 2007; Harper, 2002). Referred to as photo elicitation, this method involves the use of photos/images within the context of qualitative interviews to elicit more in-depth narratives (Frith & Harcourt, 2007). Photo elicitation has been said to engage different aspects of memory and consciousness that cannot be accessed by using narrative interviews alone (Harper, 2002). The use of participant-generated photos and images in an interview allows participants to drive the discussion (Harper, 2002). Such processes may be particularly relevant for TGD youth with multiple intersecting

marginalized identities, as they are often rendered voiceless in contexts dominated by White supremacist, cisnormative, and adultist values.

Photo elicitation interviewing has been described as "empowering and emancipating for participants by making their experiences visible" (Oliffe & Bottorff, 2008, p. 850). Photo elicitation methods offer TGD youth the opportunity to maintain and build agency by telling their own stories as they are given autonomy to take and/or gather the photos relevant to their experiences, which are used to guide the interview process. Using online photo elicitation interviews for engaging in research with TGD youth is further supported by research which highlights the importance of social media (e.g., Tik Tok, Instagram, YouTube, Reddit, Tumblr) for TGD youth looking to better understand themselves and their lived experiences, as well as to find supportive and affirming spaces (Austin et al., 2020; Cipolletta et al., 2017).

Materials and Method

The present study aims to address existing gaps in the literature by using photo elicitation methodologies to gather qualitative data related to exploring the processes utilized by TGD youth and connections with their intersecting identities associated within the context of their online and offline worlds. Data for the current study was associated with a larger project, snapshoT which had the primary aim of using photo elicitation methods to explore the online and offline experiences of underrepresented subgroups of TGD youth with multiple intersecting marginalized identities. The specific goals of snapshoT were: 1) to enhance the understanding of TGD youth (e.g., transgender and non-binary) identities within the context of their online and offline lives; 2) to explore experiences of TGD youth with distinct intersecting racial/ethnic, cultural, and regional identities across the United States; and 3) to examine sources and processes of resilience among TGD youth with multiple marginalized identities. The current

research study focuses specifically on the narrative accounts and images related to the role of art and artistic expression in the online and offline lives of TGD young people.

Eligibility and Recruitment

Recruitment of participants for this study consisted of outreach via social media and digital marketing (e.g., Facebook, Instagram). A flyer with a clickable link to the online screening survey in Qualtrics was posted on social media sites and distributed via email to multiple national listservs of agencies serving TGD youth. A series of paid advertisements were purchased on Instagram targeting TGD youth from diverse racial/ethnic backgrounds, cultures, and rural areas. Inclusion criteria for participation in this study included: ages 14-25, identification as TGD, and identifying with at least one of the following: (a) a person of color, or (b) an immigrant, or (c) live in a rural community. Participants completed an online survey via Qualtrics. The first page of the survey consisted of informed consent advising participants of the purpose of this study, noting the risks and benefits of participation, and how the research team would maintain confidentiality of data. To create a more youth-affirming informed consent process and to establish multiple layers of consent, an animated video version was created using Vyond and displayed on YouTube (see, for example, McInroy, 2017). The link for the video was embedded into the informed consent on Qualtrics so that participants could readily access multiple forms of the consent, including a PDF version which was also embedded into Qualtrics for participants to download. Participants were not given incentives for completing the survey; however, they did receive a $25 USD Amazon e-gift card for participating in the photo elicitation interview. Initial IRB approval for this study was granted by the second author's institution and extended via separate university affiliate agreements for other research team members.

Data Collection

Data collection consisted of a multi-phased process. First, participants completed an

online screening survey seeking sociodemographic information via Qualtrics during the period

October 2019 through February 2020. Based on meeting eligibility criteria, participants were

invited to engage in the photo elicitation process. For the second stage of data collection starting

in March 2020 and ending in September 2020, participants were asked to upload 5-10 photos via

SurveyMonkey that described any or all of the following: (a) Who are you and how do you see

yourself in your online and offline life?; (b) How do others see you in your online and offline

life?; (c) What makes it hard for you to be who you are? What challenges do you face when

trying to be yourself? and; (d) What helps you be who you are? What gives you strength in the

face of challenges? Once participants uploaded the photographs, they completed a 60-90-minute

online photo elicitation interview via Zoom to discuss the photographs. The interviews were

semi-structured and adhered to photo elicitation methodology designed to empower the

participant images and related narratives to drive the interview process (Bates et al., 2017).

Researchers paused data collection and interviewing processes in June 2020 following the

murder of George Floyd in Minnesota on May 25, 2020 and the ensuing community-led online

and offline activism in which many TGD youth were heavily engaged. Members of the research

team who were in close connection with the TGD youth community received feedback that it

would be appropriate and timely to resume recruitment and interviewing efforts beginning

August 2020.

Data Analysis

Constructivist grounded theory (Charmaz, 2014) was used to guide all aspects of data

collection and analysis. NVIVO 12 software was used to transcribe audio files, as well as to

facilitate all aspects of initial coding of images and narratives. Authors three and four, under the supervision of authors one and two, individually coded initial interviews and images to create an initial codebook. All subsequent interviews and images were coded individually and processed as a team during our monthly analysis meetings. The team relied on consensus-building opportunities that fostered free thinking, broadened perspectives, and reduced groupthink rather than assessing interrater reliability (Hill et al., 1997). The research team compared and contrasted existing codes, negotiated any inconsistencies in coding, identified emerging concepts rooted in the data, and developed and refined a conceptual model illustrating relationships among concepts.

Initial coding of transcribed interviews consisted of line-by-line coding (Charmaz, 2014). Focused coding was aimed at exploring the extent to which codes generated during the first phase of coding remained relevant or needed to be modified (or dropped) to better reflect emergent findings. The next phase, theoretical coding, integrated relevant findings from the literature and the research team's prior knowledge and experience related to the population and emergent topic. Analytic processes revolved around engaging in a deeper examination of the potential relationships between focused codes in an effort to elucidate processes and/or interactions between the emergent themes (Charmaz, 2014).

The team utilized a framework outlined by Oliffe and colleagues (2008) to guide the analysis of participant images. This analytic framework suggests the use of four phases - preview, review, compare and contrast, and theorization for analyzing visual data within the context of photo elicitation research. Phase 1 (preview) recommends that researchers attend to each image in a way that privileges participants' perspectives by tuning in as much as possible to a participant's intended representation. Phase 2 (review) includes having researchers view each

image alongside the corresponding narrative in an effort to gain further insight into a participant's interpretation of an image. Phase 3 (cross-photo comparison) is devoted to viewing all relevant images collectively in order to sort images into categories based on the team's collaborative interpretations. The final phase of image analysis Phase 4 (theorizing) is aimed at examining the images and emergent codes and concepts within the context of relevant theoretical frames (e.g., queer/trans identity development, resilience). In the current study, this phase of image analysis was conducted alongside the theoretical coding and analysis of the narrative data.

The researchers employed a number of strategies to enhance data trustworthiness. Strategies included the use of memos to record our ideas, reflections, and biases throughout the coding process. Additionally, coders participated in peer debriefing meetings to review and refine codes, and our different areas of expertise (i.e., disclosure, qualitative research, and dating and sexual violence) allowed for investigator triangulation (Carter et al., 2014). We also searched for evidence that disconfirmed the emerging themes, and kept track of all research processes and decisions (Padgett, 2008).

Positionality and Reflexivity of the Research Team

All members of the research team identify either as allies to or members of the LGBTQ+ community. The authors conducting this study are all social workers with various degrees (doctoral and masters); they engage in transgender affirmative clinical practice, research, and education, research focused on health and mental health factors impacting the broader LGBTQ+ community, and preparing social work students for practicing affirmatively.

Despite the authors' positive intentions and collective commitment to ensuring that findings accurately captured participants' experiences, we had to recognize the potential impact of the research team's privileged identities, as well as the status of authors as outsiders (e.g., as

cisgender, predominantly White or Biracial White passing/presenting adults) as it pertained to the population being studied. We acknowledged the differences between the research team and the participants because this might have shaped the ways data was collected and analyzed. In other words, the researchers have and hold White and cisgender privilege, which ultimately contributed to the lens through which data was collected and analyzed.

Thus, steps were taken to monitor the researchers' biases and assumptions to ensure that these did not constrain the data collection and analysis. The team adopted Starks and Trinidad's (2007) goal of being transparent and vigilant about their pre-existing beliefs, values, and perspectives by engaging in a self-reflective process aimed at setting existing beliefs aside. This helped the researchers distinguish between their pre-existing views and ideas and those that emanated directly from participants' narratives and visual data. Doing so ultimately led to the co-construction of meaning between the team and the participants' narratives and visual data (Charmaz, 2014). The use of both of narrative and visual data allowed for a more comprehensive analytic process by relying on two sources of participant generated data to center the experiences of the TGD youth participants.

Results

Participants

A total of 664 participants responded to an online survey collecting demographic data (Table 1) and inquiring about interest in participating in an online photo-elicitation interview (PEI). In acknowledgement of the diversity of gender, sexual, racial/ethnic, and cultural identities potentially embraced by participants, certain items allowed for multiple, non-mutually exclusive responses. A total of 29 participants met inclusion criteria for the study and completed an online PEI. The age range of participants was 14-25, with a mean age of 17.86 (SD=3.00). Participants

were diverse in terms of their gender identity and race/ethnicity. Participants identified their gender identity as: non-binary ($n = 12$), trans man ($n = 15$), and trans woman ($n = 2$) and their race/ethnicity as: American Indian ($n = 1$), Asian or Asian-American ($n = 4$), Black ($n = 7$), Hispanic ($n = 7$), and White ($n = 10$). Participants reported living in 20 states across the U.S. with a total of 11 participants noting that they resided in rural areas (Table 1).

Themes

During all interviews, participants were asked to share ways they identify and describe themselves as well as any communities or groups they belong to and/or are influenced by. Multiple participants in this study listed being an artist as one of their main identities as indicated in the following quote: *"I'm a musician. I sing not professionally, obviously. I mean, I'm a hobby musician, but I sing and I play the guitar and I play the violin and I play the piano depending on where I am and when I am. But mostly I sing. And so that's sort of that musicianship"* (Trans man, Latinx, 17-years-old).

Preferred art mediums varied across participants to include theater, photography, music, cinematography, and tattoo design, but the centrality of the art within participant lives could be seen across the data. One participant (biracial, trans man, 18-years-old) describes the place of art in their life as follows: *"I've been drawing for a really, really for as long as I can remember. My dad is a really big artist as well. He ah, he owned a tattoo shop for a few years. Uh, He's a tattoo artist. So, I've always been surrounded by art. Um, and it's just something I've just always done and I just I couldn't imagine not doing it".*

In addition to "artist" being a primary identity, four main themes emerged from the data including art as a: 1) form of authentic self-expression, 2) coping mechanism, 3) way to connect to others, and 4) pathway toward agency. These themes are discussed in further detail below.

Art as a form of authentic self-expression

Participants often described challenges associated with authentic self-expression in their offline lives. In particular, participants indicated that due to reasons such as having a conservative family, non-accepting school, and/or belonging to certain non-affirming faith-based organizations, they were unable to openly and freely express themselves in a manner that affirmed their gender identities. For example, for many participants dressing and/or styling themselves in a way that was in line with their gender identity was not a viable option. As a result, many participants turned to art as a form of self-expression. Image 1 was shared by a participant (non-binary, Latinx, age 15) who used art to express how they saw themself from within and how they wished the outside world, both offline and online, could view them.

Image 1.

Other participants shared images of themselves in cosplay costumes or theatre make-up and described how being involved with cosplay and theater allowed them the opportunity and freedom to be someone else and openly express themselves without any judgement. Interestingly, as our sample consisted of TGD youth who hold multiple marginalized identities, many participants noted that art was used not only to express a TGD identity, but also as a way

to showcase other aspects of their identity that were often ignored, stigmatized, or oppressed. This was evidenced by an 18-year-old, biracial, trans man who noted:

> *My favorite thing to do about drawing is I can create representation that doesn't necessarily exist. It is almost very, very rare that I see mixed race people on the media. It is very rare that I see trans people and, you know, et cetera, et cetera in the media that aren't this or that, non-binary people especially, or gender nonconforming. It's also, I just want to create characters that aren't copy and paste. I would like to create likeable characters that are also LGBTQ.*

Art as a mechanism for coping and resilience

When asked about ways in which they overcome challenging times in their lives, participants often recalled challenges such as being deadnamed, bullied, or mistreated by family members and friends and reported using art as a way to "bounce back" from these difficult and often traumatizing experiences. For instance, an 18-year-old, biracial, trans man shared the image below (Image 2), along with stating:

> *I'm starting to branch out and just draw more like softer things because I really, I've always been intrigued by drawing like gore and blood because it's it's gross. It's and it's awful because some of the things I went through are awful. But I like I put trigger warnings. I put like general warnings. It is a is a wonderful skill I have acquired, but I've also learned it's quite therapeutic.*

Image 2.
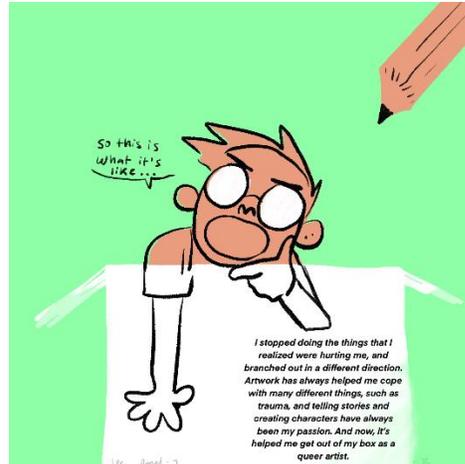
Furthermore, some participants used the power of imagery, storytelling, and words to tell their story - which they identified as a coping mechanism. For example, a non-binary, Asian American, 21-year-old participant shared that they had created a short movie based on their own experience which was screened locally and nationally. This participant described how seeing their life on screen and sharing with others has helped them work through some the challenges presented in the movie.

The following quote from a participant (non-binary, 16-years-old, White) illustrates the ways in which arts support well-being—through the processes of creating, sharing, and receiving positive feedback about the art:

> *I like to use arts and music and sports and stuff like that. You know, things that I can do to occupy my time. I like to use that and make pretty pictures or do paintings or write songs, stuff like that, because it helps a lot in making my day a lot less boring. And sometimes, you know, you write a song that someone relates to a lot and then it makes their day a little better and then they share it with someone and that makes their day a little better and then it makes your day better because people listen to your music. So it's just stuff like that, that you can bounce back from.*

Similarly, the importance of creating art was also evident in a conversation with another participant (Asian-American, non-binary, 23-years-old) who shared a picture of a quilt they had made from old shirts. In describing the significance of this image, the participant noted, *"I made this quilt from old shirts. It helps me to fixate on something. Everyone in my family collects blankets and I needed another reproject to pour anxious energy into it and this is what it is."*

Another participant, a non-binary, White, 18-year-old youth described the importance of poetry and written words as a way to express their pain related to the discrepancies between how they feel and view themselves and how the outside world perceives them. Image 3 (below) was shared as an example of their struggle and their use of poetry to cope.

Image 3.
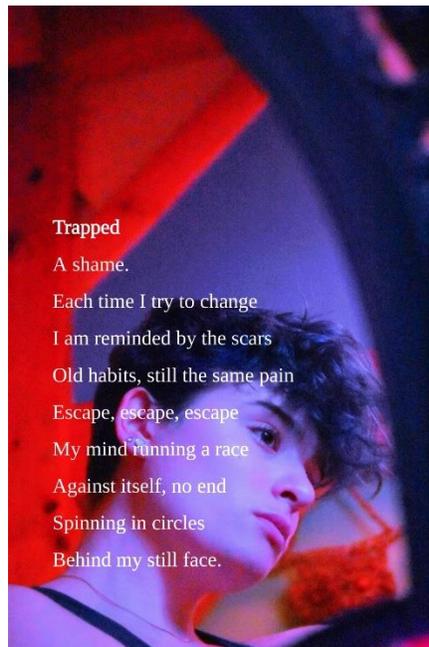
In describing the power of poetry, this participant stated:

> *Poetry. It helps me put my feelings out on paper and work through those hard*
>
> *feelings. And you're so, with poetry, I can be authentically me, like that is*
>
> *something that it can be as personal or as or as like broad as I want it. It can be*

whatever I want it to be and I can keep it to myself or I can share it with other

people. And, I don't know, I can just like express myself and it's so liberating just

to be able to write and to have fun like trying to rhyme a few things and to just

like, just the freedom of a pen and the paper. You don't need anything else.

This participant further expresses insight into the way in which they have used poetry to ask for help in some of their darkest moments:

So, I've had a lot a lot of insecurities about my body and what I look like and like

different parts of my body not being who I think I am. And so I have self-harmed

to cope with that sometimes and to kind of like bring me back from like that numb

feeling and the problem is afterwards, I the scars remain for months and I find

myself like shamefully hiding them and it's something that like it's something very

personal that other people don't see it. So, the way I've put it in another poem

actually, it it's my way of asking myself for help a lot of the time.

Similarly, another participant (Trans man, Latinx, 17-years-old) shared that music created by queer artists and music that is relatable are sources of comfort for him. As he shared:

I think music is a really great source of comfort for me...because I listen to a lot of

the queer artists like, you know, trans artists, too. And I listen to songs, you know,

that they just a lot of my songs make me feel better because I listen to music that

kind of pertains to who I am and what I'm going to do. There's music for literally

everything. So, it's nice to find little like artists that are like me, big songs about

things that happen to me, you know. So that that's that's a source of strength for

me to, you know, that in on a bad deal. Just listen to my favorite music. And now,

you know, it makes you feel understood and you're like, you're not alone.

Art as a way to connect with others

Participant narratives illuminated the various ways in which art helped them create connection in their offline and online lives. Several participants shared how art strengthened their bonds to family members and community as evidenced by this reflection (Trans man, 14-years-old, White):

Those are the mountains we live by. They they're really important in our valley

because they're just so big. Like you'll see in all the art shops down here, you're

guaranteed to see at least 12 paintings of these mountains. It's almost a tradition

from my grandma. Every one of her kids painted a picture of these mountains and

she has them all hanging up. I haven't submitted one to her yet. This was going to

be one, but um, I wanted to send a more realistic view on the one I'd send

to her. This was pretty quick. You can still see like the white over here and the

marks here. But I was still really, really happy with that. I liked the ombre sky and

I don't normally use paints cuz I like to be very in control of what I'm doing and

with paints you kind of have to give that up a bit. So this was nice to do.

While some participants had a solid and supportive community of friends and family members in their offline lives, many (especially participants residing in rural areas) were able to find a supportive community online. For some participants one way to find other queer artists online and connect with them was through presenting and sharing their art online, such as reported by one participant (Trans man, Asian-American, age 18): *I think as a, as a queer artist, it's like being in my online life has helped a lot because*

in my town there aren't many people who understand. But meeting fellow queer artists

online and trans masculine people, you know, people like that, it's sweet. It's very

uplifting. Also seeing I've seen many support tags for like, a trans masculine artist or, you

know, Filipino artist, such and such. And it's very nice to see that we're very willing to lift

each other up.

Participants also shared that they had specific social media pages (e.g., Instagram) that

they used to promote their artwork and where they were able to get queer/trans followers and

other queer/trans artists with whom they made meaningful, identity affirming connections.

Others described the ways in which they aimed to create connections for queer artists online by

being a role model and/or source of support. The following image (Image 4) and quote was

shared by a trans masculine, biracial, 18-year-old who highlights his efforts to use his art and

personal experiences to be a supportive role model to other youth online.

Image 4.
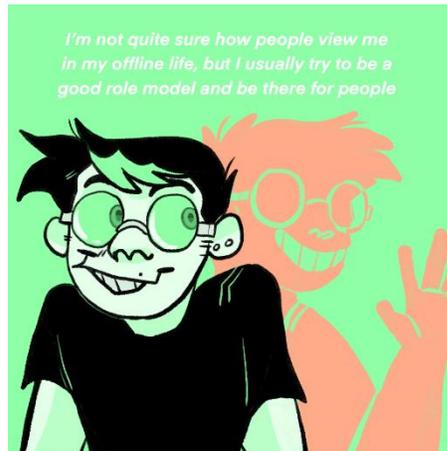
You know, sometimes life can be unfair. Life can be awful. Life can be horrible

and have unimaginable things happen to you. But that doesn't mean that you

should have to go through these horrors alone. But, also, there are coping

mechanisms, but not all of them are healthy. Yeah, but I mean, I want to point out

I'm not a therapist. I'm not I'm not trying to be a therapist for people. I'm just

trying to be a support for people who need it if they want to see it, are

comfortable as they can. I've, I've really learned to take what's happened to me

and kind of be like, hey, I went through that too.

Art as a pathway toward agency

Data revealed that youths' involvement with art created pathways toward agency. One participant, a non-binary, White, 18-year-old youth described how engaging in photography contributed to a sense of agency:

Like going outside in nature and just taking a picture of things I find beautiful.

That's always been really common for me doing some night photography or some

like just doing some just doing something that's like a challenge in photography, I

haven't really been able to find school as easy as a lot of people because I have a

slow processing speeds, so it's considered a learning disability. And it takes me at

least twice as long as everyone else to do anything. So, I guess with photography,

it's the one thing where that's not the case. And I can take pictures and like mess

around with a camera in a way that not many other people I know can do that. So

that's always, just it's also something I can do alone and just to be off like in

nature, taking pictures is always really nice.

Challenged by struggles in school, this youth's perception of success and agency as a photographer seemed to aid their self-esteem.

 Also, youth used their art to develop a sense of agency in order to overcome challenges in life. For instance, youth narratives often revealed that financial barriers

were preventing them from being able to express themselves more authentically. Examples of this included lack of access to funds required to purchase things such as a chest binder, clothes reflective of gender identity, hormone treatments, and top and bottom surgeries. Some participants described using their art as a way to attain financial independence and support their identities (e.g., tattoo artist, selling images). For example, a participant (Biracial, 23-years-old, non-binary) who identified as a tattoo artist shared:

> I started making them [tattoo designs] like a couple of years ago, and then it became more formalized and like. Of course, safer and cleaner and like part of. Part of a spiritual practice, but also like a business, like a way to sustain my livelihood and like pay for top surgery.

The following participant, a trans masculine, Asian American 18-year-old youth, discussed the way he embraces his intersecting identities (as a non-passing, no-hormone, trans masculine artist) in an effort to serve as a strong, fearless example to other youth facing barriers to living authentically. He aims to model a sense of agency over his own identity in order to support other youth going through some of the same challenges he has endured.

> I am not afraid anymore of being trans. I'm not afraid of just saying, you know. Cause for the longest time the representation I saw was trans guys who were on T. transitioning, you know like hormone therapy, top surgery, surgery just in general. And, I am, I can't afford surgery. I can't afford hormones. I am not from a very welcoming family. My family is kind of liberal-ish, but still like very not accepting sometimes. So, I realize you know, like there are kids just, who are like me back then, just wanting to pretend they are cis because they don't want to deal

with this. They don't want to, they don't want to feel ostracized for just existing in

general. So, I want to just be a role model, essentially. I want to be there. I want

to be one of those out loud artists like, hey, I don't care if I can't go on hormone

therapy right now. I don't care if I'm not passing.

This was especially important for these participants as they identified wanting to have full agency over their bodies, as well as all of their identities, and the ways in which they choose to express who they are to the world.

Discussion

Findings from this study advance understanding about the use of art and artistic expression as an underexamined source of resilience and mechanism for agency among TGD youth with multiple marginalized identities. Being an artist emerged as a salient identity for TGD youth, one often associated with strength, pride, confidence, and better appreciation for the identities that left them sometimes navigating shame and stigma due to hostile social environments. Indeed, such data suggest that participants viewed their artistic identity as one that set them apart from others in a valuable and meaningful way. Findings connected to the first theme (art as a form of authentic self-expression) illustrate the ways in which a wide range of art forms offered youth powerful opportunities to safely engage in authentic self-expression of their TGD and other marginalized identities. Authentic expression of all identities represents a critical source of well-being for TGD youth. Importantly, visual and narrative data revealed that art serves as more than a way for TGD youth to express themselves, rather it shapes how youth cope with challenges, engage in meaningful connections, as well as develop and assert personal agency. As such, youths' artistic identities and active engagement with the arts served to cultivate key sources of coping and resilience.

Importantly, data suggest that while participants engaged in artistic expression in their online and offline lives, ICTs appeared to serve as the vehicles through which youth were able to reach others with their art. Participants discussed the ways in which they shared their art online with the express aim of giving support, receiving support, or taking control over their own lives. Moreover, participants described the important role of certain online tags (e.g., trans artist, Filipino artist) and social media apps (e.g., Instagram) for building meaningful connection to others with shared identities and interests. The opportunity for far-reaching targeted social connections offered by ICTs seemed to be particularly meaningful for diverse TGD youth looking to connect with others who understand and relate to all aspects of their identity, not just one.

This need to connect is occurring against a backdrop of cultural and political oppression targeting TGD youth in the United States. For instance, more than 250 anti-LGBTQ+ bills have been introduced in state legislatures, including bills banning TGD students from participating in sports, prohibiting TGD students from using the restroom or locker room aligning with their authentic gender, and criminalizing gender-affirming interventions for youth (HRC, 2021). One of the consequences of this type of oppression is diminished opportunities for TGD young people, including their inability to enact agency (Spade, 2015; Travers et al., 2020). What is particularly notable is the finding highlighting the ways artistic expression served as a vehicle for personal agency among TGD youth in our study (e.g., self-expression, financial freedom, defining one's own queer and trans-ness). These findings align with recent literature, indicating that TGD individuals' resistance of cisnormativity, expression of authentic self, and engagement in self-advocacy represent important examples of resilience that may go unrecognized in

traditional discussions of resilience that may be rooted in cis- and hetero-normativity (Alessi et al., 2020).

Participants' narratives of resilience and agency evoke the phenomenon of queer world-making (Warner, 2002). Within queer theory lies queer world-making (Warner, 2002), which involves imagining a world where heterosexuality and cisgenderness are not the absolute norm. It is a way of thinking and being as a form resistance because "living into that envisioned world" involves, among other things, asserting one's identity, using certain language, or expressing oneself authentically (Wagaman et al., 2018, p. 2). Participant narratives and images revealed ways in which youth were indeed using art to do such things. Queer world-making is actively resists and deconstructs what is 'normal' to find peace, joy, pleasure, and love through the everyday expression of authentic self in ways that push beyond white, hetero, and cisnormative expectations.

Study findings draw attention to the potentially curative role of art, in its own right and as a result of the ways TGD youth utilize art to mobilize additional coping resources. Findings about the importance of art and artistic expression to study participants are especially noteworthy because they emerged organically from multiple TGD youth in response to general questions about resilience (e.g., "What helps you be who you are? What gives you strength in the face of challenges?"). Knowledge about the important role of art and creative expression, particularly online, in the lives of TGD youth supports and extends the growing body of literature on this topic (Nichols, 2013; Rooke, 2010).

Consistent with research on LGBTQ+ populations more broadly, our findings underscore the purpose and usefulness of creative expression for TGD youth navigating a range of issues including authentic self-expression and coping with painful emotions including those associated

with shame, rejection, and dysphoria. It is possible that various forms of art are particularly useful approaches for TGD youth as it may be challenging to express certain thoughts, emotions, and feelings unique to the diverse experiences of TGD people (Austin et al., 2021). For instance, a qualitative study of experiences found that TGD individuals often rely on metaphors to convey their experiences with gender dysphoria (Austin et al., 2021). Better understanding the health promoting impact of art and creative expression in the lives of TGD youth has implications for clinical practice and programming with TGD populations. It may be important to integrate art-based strategies into assessment and ongoing interventions. In addition to more traditional talk therapy approaches, offering options for youth to engage in expressive arts seems likely to improve engagement in the therapeutic process, as well as enhance TGD youths' abilities to authentically express thoughts, feelings, and experiences in a manner that will foster healing and growth.

There are several limitations to the current study. Despite the varied outreach efforts (e.g., social media platforms) the sample included only a few trans feminine participants. In addition, due to the methodological approach utilized in this study, the present sample only includes youth who had access to the internet and identified as users of social media. Therefore, our findings may not represent the experiences of all TGD youth, especially those that may lack access to the internet, may not be frequent users of social media platforms for self-expression or connectivity with others like themselves. The pause in data collection efforts during the summer months of 2020 may have resulted in a lack of study visibility and/or participant response. Regardless of such limitations, the study offers several directions for future research that includes continued examination of the impact of art expression, art therapy, and utilization of social media and art to express oneself as a member of the TGD community. Further, findings

suggest that using arts-based methods can be one way to better understand the risks that TGD youth face, as well as the factors that promote their resilience. Although TGD with multiple intersecting identities clearly manifest resilience and agency, it is essential that the adults in their lives work to better support and protect them, as well as facilitate opportunities for artistic engagement and expression.

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