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# "I Wanna Know Where the Rule Book Is": YouTube as a Site of Counternarratives to Transnormativity

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“I WANNA KNOW WHERE THE RULE BOOK IS”: YOUTUBE AS A SITE OF  
COUNTERNARRATIVES TO TRANSNORMATIVITY

by

JORDAN FORREST MILLER

Under the Direction of Megan Sinnott, PhD

ABSTRACT

In June 2015, Caitlyn Jenner created waves of excitement with her coming out announcement on the cover of *Vanity Fair*: “Call me Caitlyn.” From the perspective of critical trans politics, however, the heightened visibility of trans people in mainstream media does not call for unequivocal celebration. Though trans women of color, such as Laverne Cox and Janet Mock, are more visible in mainstream media than ever before, mainstream media still largely depicts trans people through white constructs of what it means to be trans, namely medicalized binary transitions. Many trans people who deviate from mainstream media’s depiction of trans people are creating their own media on YouTube to voice their lived experiences. I argue that while YouTube is a particularly accessible platform for trans people to challenge transnormativity, the reach of trans YouTubers’ messages are highly limited by the medium’s design and genre conventions.

INDEX WORDS: Internet, Medicalization, Non-binary, Social media, Transgender

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A Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of

Master of Arts

in the College of Arts and Sciences

Georgia State University

2016

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2016

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by

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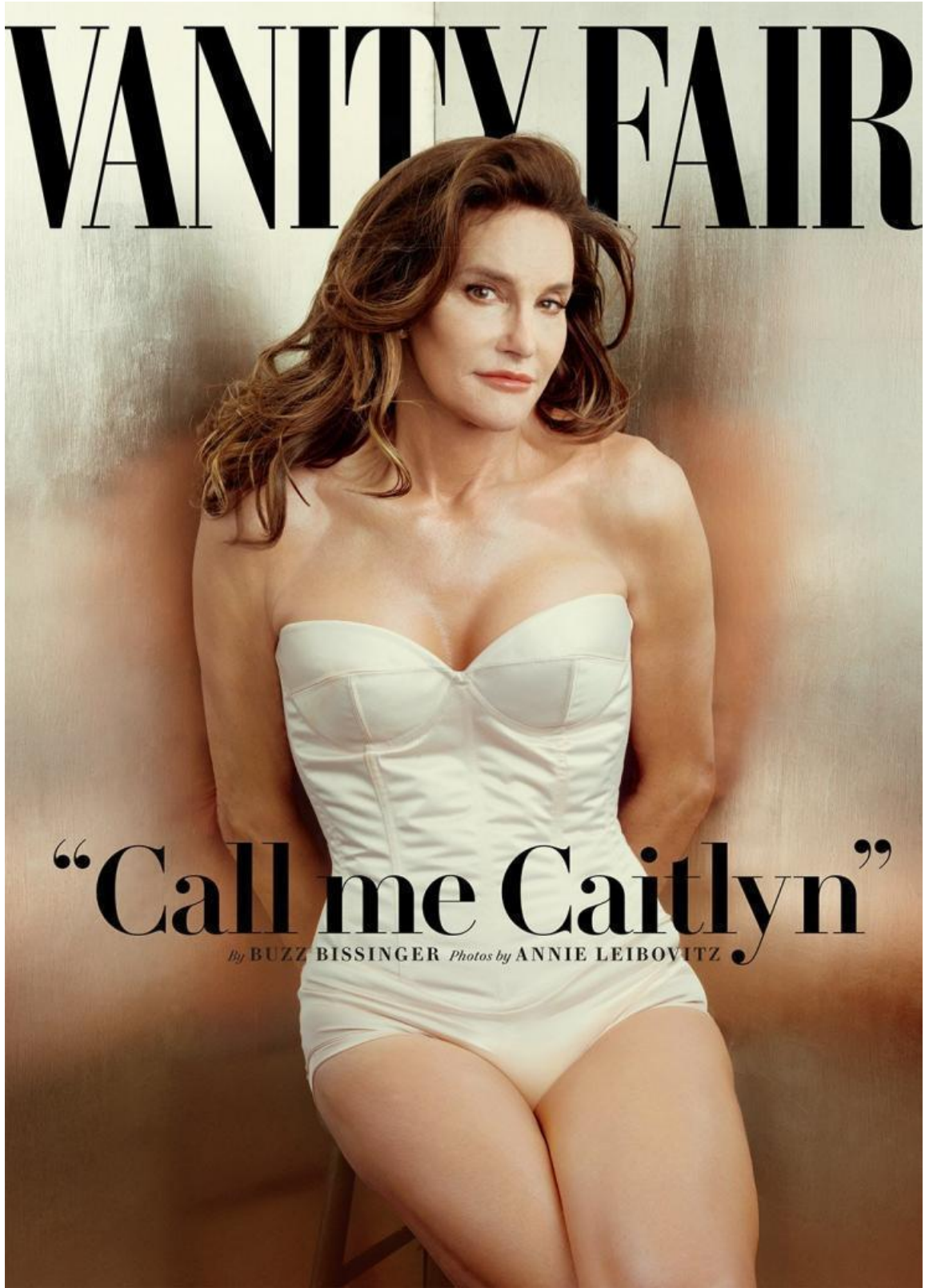
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## LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

|         |  |
|---------|--|
| cis     | cisgender  |
| DSM     | <i>Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders</i>                       |
| F to M  | female-to-male   |
| FTM     | female-to-male   |
| GCS     | gender confirmation surgeries  |
| HRT     | hormone replacement therapy  |
| LGB     | lesbian, gay, and bisexual   |
| LGBT    | lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender  |
| LGBTQ   | lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer                                     |
| LGBTQ+  | lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, and other gender and sexual minorities |
| MTF     | male-to-female   |
| POC     | people of color  |
| SEO     | Search Engine Optimization   |
| SNS     | social networking sites  |
| trans   | transgender  |
| UK      | United Kingdom   |
| US      | United States  |
| vlog    | video blog   |
| vlogger | video blogger  |



**Figure 1: Caitlyn Jenner on cover of Vanity Fair** Source: *Vanity Fair*, June 9, 2015, front cover.

# 1 CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

## 1.1 “The Transgender Tipping Point”

In June 2015, Caitlyn Jenner created waves of excitement with her coming out announcement on the cover of *Vanity Fair* (Figure 1): “Call me Caitlyn.” From the perspective of critical trans politics, however, the heightened visibility of trans people in mainstream media does not call for unequivocal celebration. Mainstream trans visibility reinforces what could be called *transnormativity*. Though trans women of color, such as Laverne Cox and Janet Mock, are more visible in mainstream media than ever before, mainstream media still largely depicts trans people through white constructs of what it means to be trans, namely medicalized binary transitions.<sup>1</sup> Many trans people who deviate from mainstream media’s depiction of trans people are creating their own media on YouTube to voice their lived experiences.

YouTube’s capability for self-proclaimed expert, first-person, direct-address narratives allows for audiences to view trans people expressing their own lived experiences and perspectives, largely unfiltered by publishers, production agencies, and other gatekeepers. Trans video blogs (vlogs) are predominantly recorded in private settings using a familiar “talking torso” format, creating an intimate relationship between the creator and audience.<sup>2</sup> Trans YouTube users connect instantly through video posts, comments, likes, video replies, and subscriptions to user channels and get involved with YouTube for a variety of reasons: to

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1. Bernadette Barker-Piummer, “Fixing Gwen: News and the Mediation of (Trans)gender Challenges,” *Feminist Media Studies* 13, no. 4 (September 2013): 710–724, accessed August 14, 2016, <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/14680777.2012.679289>; Gordene Olga MacKenzie, *Transgender Nation* (Bowling Green, OH: Bowling Green State University Press, 1994), 103–39.
  2. Avery Dame, “‘I’m Your Hero? Like Me?’: The Category of ‘Expert’ in the Trans Male Vlog” (Master’s thesis, University of Kansas, 2012), 40–63; Tobias Raun, “Out Online: Trans Self-Representation and Community Building on YouTube” (PhD diss., Roskilde University, 2012), 171.

document the changing body, to offer advice/support, to be involved in queer/trans politics, as a social activity, as a therapeutic tool, for recognition as trans, for knowledge sharing, for trans community, and for the economic and career opportunities created by YouTube's platform.<sup>3</sup> Trans YouTubers' experiences are recorded with one's phone or webcam throughout one's day-to-day life and made readily available to viewers who previously may have been lacking in access to positive trans representation. These videos have the potential to both provide support for people questioning their gender identities as well as educate non-trans people on trans realities beyond the physical; however, because white, binary, and medically transitioning trans YouTubers remain the most popular within trans YouTube, it can be difficult for other narratives to be heard.<sup>4</sup>

Through qualitative interviews with six non-white and/or non-binary trans YouTubers, this thesis explores the value, and difficulty, of using the medium of YouTube to challenge transnormativity. I argue that while YouTube is a particularly accessible platform for trans people to challenge transnormativity, the reach of trans YouTubers' messages are highly limited by the medium's design and genre conventions. Some of the limiting factors include the privileged status of transnormative content, resistance to evolving language, divisions between trans communities, and how the visual medium of YouTube facilitates the scrutiny of trans bodies.

I will first elaborate on some key terms and concepts used throughout this thesis and then demonstrate how this project fits within emerging trans YouTube scholarship.

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3. Raun, "Out Online," 135–216.

4. Raun, "Out Online," 301.

## 1.2 *Transnormativity*

While the term *trans* is a fairly recent concept that, on the surface, tells us little about an individual person's understanding of their identity, life, or gender, *trans* as an umbrella term can be politically useful in our fight to end "all discrimination based on sex/gender variance."<sup>5</sup> The language trans people use to describe ourselves is widely contested within trans communities. There are virtually limitless ways of experiencing gender and being trans, although not all of these ways are validated by our culture at large.

If we break down the word transnormativity we have *trans-*, which leading scholar in transgender studies Susan Stryker refers to as "people who move away from the gender they were assigned as birth, people who cross over (*trans-*) the boundaries constructed by their culture to define and contain that gender"<sup>6</sup>; *normative*, which is defined as "based on what is considered to be the usual or correct way of doing something"<sup>7</sup>; and the suffix *-ity*, meaning "quality, state, or degree."<sup>8</sup> Using these definitions, I consider transnormativity to be the quality, state, or degree of being considered the usual or correct way of moving away from, or crossing the boundaries of, the culturally defined gender one was assigned at birth.

The term *transnormativity* derives from concepts frequently discussed within queer and feminist theory. Stemming from Adrienne Rich's concept of *compulsory heterosexuality* in

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5. Julia Serano, *Whipping Girl: A Transsexual Woman on Sexism and the Scapegoating of Femininity* (Emeryville, CA: Seal Press, 2007), 26.
  6. Susan Stryker, *Transgender History* (Berkeley, CA: Seal Press, 2008), 1.
  7. "Normative," *Merriam-Webster Online*, accessed March 4, 2016, <http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/normative>.
  8. "-ity," *Merriam-Webster Online*, accessed March 4, 2016, <http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/-ity>.

1980<sup>9</sup> and Gayle Rubin's distinction between sex and gender in 1984,<sup>10</sup> Michael Warner popularized the term *heteronormativity* in 1991 to describe the process by which heterosexuality is normalized.<sup>11</sup> Lisa Duggan then popularized *homonormativity*: "a politics that does not contest dominant heteronormative assumptions and institutions, but upholds and sustains them, while promising the possibility of a demobilized gay culture anchored in domesticity and consumption."<sup>12</sup> As a political strategy for acceptance within dominant discourse, homonormativity enforces normative notions of coupledness, race, class, gender, and ability for the homosexual or queer subject.

Aspects of transnormativity having to do with both the trans individual and trans politics have been studied. Evan Vipond explained that "to be transnormative" is to be trans and be placed into "hierarchical categories based on social definitions of 'normal,'" namely "white, middle class, mentally and physically able, heterosexual, and... normative notions of gender (masculine man and feminine woman)."<sup>13</sup> Currah and Moore used the term *trans-normative* to describe "a transgender rights framework demanding inclusion and recognition within the

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9. See Adrienne Rich, "Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence," *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 5, no. 4, Women: Sex and Sexuality (Summer 1980): 631–60.
  10. See Gayle Rubin, "Thinking Sex: Notes for a Radical Theory of the Politics of Sexuality," in *Culture, Society, and Sexuality*, 2nd ed., ed. Richard Parker and Peter Aggleton (New York: Routledge, 2007), 150–87.
  11. See Michael Warner, "Introduction: Fear of a Queer Planet," *Social Text*, no. 29 (1991): 3–17, accessed March 7, 2016, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/466295>.
  12. Lisa Duggan, "The New Homonormativity: The Sexual Politics of Neoliberalism," in *Materializing Democracy: Toward a Revitalized Cultural Politics*, ed. Russ Castronovo and Dana D. Nelson (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2002), 179.
  13. Evan Vipond, "Resisting Transnormativity: Challenging the Medicalization and Regulation of Trans Bodies," *Theory in Action, Vol. 8 No. 2* (Transformative Studies Institute, 2015), 23.



institutions, norms, and arrangements structured around gender.”<sup>14</sup> Similarly, Vipond defined transnormativity as “the normalization of trans bodies and identities through the adoption of cisgender institutions by trans persons.”<sup>15</sup> I believe transnormativity to be a systemic process by which a hegemonic trans narrative is created and then used to inform trans people of the correct ways we should look, think, and behave. To better understand how the visual medium of YouTube functions, I have focused on aspects of transnormativity having to do with trans embodiment in relation to the norm, as well as transnormativity as a politics of inclusion. Regardless of which aspects of transnormativity one analyzes, it is clear that trans individuals who fit the most within accepted transnormative narratives have privileged status within US culture.

We as individuals hold varying degrees of power with which we can create, reinforce, *and* disrupt transnormativity through our language and actions. Transnormativity is the result of the stigmatization of those who deviate from societal norms. The negative consequences of deviating from transnormativity can include social estrangement, religious condemnation, an increased risk of violent hate crimes and street harassment, police violence, loss of familial and community support, and institutionalized discrimination in health care facilities, prisons, housing, and the workplace.<sup>16</sup> Another negative result of transnormativity is the perception that

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14. Paisley Currah and Lisa Jean Moore, “‘We Won’t Know Who You Are’: Contesting Sex Designations in New York City Birth Certificates,” in *The Transgender Studies Reader 2*, ed. Susan Stryker and Aren Z. Aizura (New York: Routledge, 2013), 609.

15. Vipond, “Resisting Transnormativity,” 24.

16. Judith Butler, *Undoing Gender* (New York: Routledge, 2004), 3; Stryker, *Transgender History*, 6; Dean Spade, *Normal Life: Administrative Violence, Critical Trans Politics and the Limits of the Law* (Brooklyn, NY: South End Press, 2011), 11–13; Dan Irving, “Normalized Transgressions: Legitimizing the Transsexual Body as Productive,” in *The Transgender Studies Reader 2*, ed. Susan Stryker and Aren Z. Aizura (New York: Routledge, 2013), 24–25; Serano, *Whipping Girl*, 178.

there are acceptable and non-acceptable ways of being trans, thus privileging any one kind of trans person over other ways of being trans. The oppressive systems, including racism and misogyny, underlying transnormativity need to be dismantled. YouTube is one such medium where trans people are challenging their audiences' preconceived notion that the presumed *usual way* of being trans equates to there being a *correct way* of being trans.

### ***1.2.1 Transnormativity and The Political Economy of Trans YouTube***

After the Google enterprise purchased YouTube for \$1.65 billion dollars in November 2006, the site quickly became popular in the US, Britain, and before long, on a global scale. Primarily branded as “Your Digital Video Repository,” YouTube distinctively, as compared to earlier but similar sites that were unsuccessful, allowed for viewing, sharing, *and* finding video. Now advertised as a site to “Broadcast Yourself,” YouTube offers social networking features that encourage auditory, textual, and visual viewer participation.<sup>17</sup> In part because of the intimate capability of YouTube, trans YouTube vlogs are particularly relevant cultural artifacts for studying how new media “have been sites for the construction and deconstruction of gendered and racialized narratives.”<sup>18</sup>

Based on the relationships between personal motivations and the practicality of being active and visible on YouTube expressed by the participants in this study, it is clear that trans YouTubers are entangled with various aspects of and relationships to economics, power, and

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17. Jean Burgess and Joshua Green, *YouTube: Online Video and Participatory Culture*, (Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 2009), 1–10; Paul Soukup, “Looking at, with, and through YouTube,” *Communication Research Trends* 33, no. 3 (September 2014): 3.

18. Peter Cava with David Jacobsen, “‘Our Lives Are Normal Now’: Contemporary Trans Documentary Film and the Feminist Classroom,” *Films for the Feminist Classroom* 5, no. 1 (Spring 2014), accessed December 6, 2015, [http://ffc.twu.edu/issue\\_5-1/rev\\_Cava-with-Jacobson\\_5-1.html](http://ffc.twu.edu/issue_5-1/rev_Cava-with-Jacobson_5-1.html).

oppression.<sup>19</sup> Trans YouTube interestingly comprises a “social hybrid economy” of content produced by major media corporations and user-generated content.<sup>20</sup> As opposed to studying mainstream media (where consumers have little say regarding the production), it seems that the trans YouTuber has power over their own cultural productions, as producers do, in theory, retain ownership over their content.<sup>21</sup> However, user-generated content still must function within the larger media system of YouTube, whose ultimate aim is to monetize content.<sup>22</sup>

While YouTube is advertised as a democratic platform to “Broadcast Yourself,” the rhetoric of *platform* is directed toward advertisers, major media producers, and policymakers as a strategy to generate profit.<sup>23</sup> Videos that generate the most profit are the most visible. For example, when searching *transgender* on YouTube, one must sift through pages of videos from BuzzFeed, ABC News, Entertainment Tonight, National Geographic, Cosmopolitan, and other major media publications before one reaches the majority of user-generated trans content, most of which does not generate revenue for YouTube. Narratives that enforce the idea that all trans people feel like they were “born in the wrong body” are popular in mainstream discourse regarding trans people and rarely interrogate or provoke further conversation about one’s

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19. Nicholas Garnham, “Political Economy and Cultural Studies: Reconciliation or Divorce?” *Critical Studies in Mass Communication* 12, no. 1 (March 1995): 62–71; Kellner, “Cultural Studies,” 9–20.

20. Wasko and Erickson, “The Political Economy of YouTube,” 378.

21. See YouTube’s “Terms of Service,” <https://www.youtube.com/t/terms>.

22. Eggo Müller, “*Where Quality Matters: Discourses on the Art of Making a YouTube Video*,” in *The YouTube Reader*, ed. Pelle Snickars and Patrick Volderau (Stockholm: National Library of Sweden, 2009), 136; Kellner, “Cultural Studies,” 7; Wasko and Erickson, “The Political Economy of YouTube,” 377.

23. Tarleton Gillespie, “The Politics of ‘Platforms,’” *New Media & Society*, 12, no. 3 (May 2010): 352–55, accessed January 9, 2016, <http://dx.doi.org/10.1177/1461444809342738>.

preconceived notions of gender, sex, and sexuality or one's relationship to power, privilege, and oppression.

One key way YouTube's design limits the reach of one's messages is through its Search Engine Optimization (SEO). Because of the design and functionality of YouTube's search parameters, users gravitate toward transnormative content. YouTube's SEO is based on a complicated algorithm of audience retention, views, likes and dislikes, subscriptions after watching, comments, shares, favorites, and description, tags, and title.<sup>24</sup> While some strategies like consistently tagging terms, such as "non-binary" or "black ftm," can help users seeking specific resources, the likelihood of greater visibility is connected to one's monetary compensation for videos, available free time to create videos, and access to technology that enhances the sound and picture quality of one's videos.

Though it fairly uncommon, many trans people have successfully supplemented or supplied their income through YouTube partnerships and affiliation donation sites. YouTube is often used in conjunction with sites like Patreon, where patrons can pledge donations in exchange for exclusive content and other creative projects or Society 6, where YouTubers commission their artwork. Due to the fact that she does not "put enough energy into that direction," Patreon donations to one of the participants in this study, Shaetania, have been few; however, they have afforded her a new webcam for making YouTube videos. One trans YouTuber, Kat Blaque, receives \$857 a month from Patreon donations in addition to the funding she receives directly from her YouTube partnership, which allows her to continue to create illustrations and collaboration videos. Additionally, many trans YouTubers have successfully

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24. Brian Dean, "YouTube SEO – Step-By-Step Video SEO Guide," YouTube, June 9, 2014, accessed March 3, 2016, [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=\\_nEO\\_O2B8Zw](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_nEO_O2B8Zw).

used YouTube in conjunction with YouCare, GoFundMe, Kickstarter, or Indigogo to crowdfund for their medical transition.<sup>25</sup>

While many trans people have utilized YouTube to benefit themselves financially in some way, maintaining a YouTube channel is, for most, unpaid work. Thus, popularity is in many ways connected to one's class privilege. Consequently, many trans YouTubers must find a fine balance between their desire to be active on YouTube while still preserving their life offline. Depending on the content of one's video, vlogs may require more or less time and energy for preparation and editing. Many of the participants in this study noted that although novice skills are needed to maintain a largely unedited vlog where one essentially records zirsself discussing a certain issue or sharing aspects of hir life for hir audience, audience retention seems to increase for more heavily edited videos recorded with more expensive equipment and viewership seems to increase when one is able to upload more videos. These practical matters work against many YouTubers who deviate from transnormative narratives.

### ***1.2.2 "The Danger of a Single Story"***

While trans YouTube videos created by white binary trans people on the topic of medical transition have been a great resource for many medically transitioning trans people, the lived experiences of trans people show that this single trans narrative is an unfair generalization that creates unrealistic and often damaging expectations. Laura Horak, professor of Film Studies at Carleton University, described the temporality of many trans YouTube vlogs as operating in "hormone time," where time begins the day one's medical transition begins and is "measured

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25. See Megan Farnel, "Kickstarting Trans\*: The Crowdfunding of Gender/Sexual Reassignment Surgeries," *New Media and Society* 17, no. 2 (February 2015): 215–30, accessed December 4, 2015, <http://dx.doi.org/10.1177/1461444814558906>.

against that date, even years afterward.”<sup>26</sup> Trans people often employ a common script—it begins with an expression of knowing they were trans from an early age, of being unhappy about being trans, of feeling they were “born in the wrong body,” of suppressing their beliefs about zirselves, and then it evolves to an eventual coming out and deciding to medically transition to the “other gender.” This medical intervention is more often than not expressed as a life-or-death step to achieving happiness. For example, one female-to-male (FTM) trans YouTuber expressed being disappointed because he felt the medical community had “sold to him” the idea that once he starting taking testosterone, he would immediately “find congruence” and his body would “do this song and dance.”<sup>27</sup> Other trans YouTubers have expressed that they do not feel their transition is happening fast enough or well enough compared to other trans vloggers’ transitions. These sorts of pressures and harmful comparisons to other trans people both create and reinforce a transnormative narrative that says to be “properly trans,” one must medically transition.

In her TEDTalk titled, “The danger of a single story,” novelist Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie spoke about the unintended consequences of reading only British and American children’s books as a young child in Nigeria. Before she realized that literature could, in fact, contain characters that reflected her skin tone, her hair texture, and her life experiences, she believed that “books by their very nature had to have foreigners in them and had to be about things with which [she] could not personally identify.” Adichie named several other single story narratives given to groups of people: the poverty-stricken family of her family’s domestic helper, the African in need of a kind, white foreign savior, the abject immigrant, the abusive nature of Nigerian men. As Adichie explained, “[t]he single story creates stereotypes, and the problem

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26. Horak, “Trans on YouTube,” 579.

27. BluntedFSharps, “FtM Transgender: Why I Quit Testosterone,” YouTube, May 27, 2014, accessed June 19, 2016, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HP3sBFDp9js>.

with stereotypes is not that they are untrue, but that they are incomplete. They make one story become the only story.”<sup>28</sup> Many trans people, such as my interviewee Darnelle, do relate to the common “transsexual narrative” or “born in the wrong body” expression on some level; however, these ways of understanding trans identities should not be seen as the one, true, or correct way of being trans, as there is no one, true, or correct way of being trans.

Contrasting mainstream media’s limited coverage of trans lives, trans people’s stories are readily available on YouTube to anyone with internet access. YouTube is a user-friendly medium where trans people who deviate from transnormativity can both fill the void of trans-produced media and find personal enjoyment and empowerment in doing so. By sharing intimate details of their personal experiences and struggles, both directly and indirectly related to their trans identity, trans people who choose to be visible on such an accessible medium are “paying it forward” to the other trans and queer people who can benefit from seeing possibility models who they can relate to and can aid in their self-understanding.

The platform of YouTube restricts deviations from transnormativity, as transnormativity on YouTube is rewarded with popularity and more outward signs of support. Non-white and non-binary YouTubers often challenge popular trans discourse with their attempts to broaden the ways we understand issues affecting trans lives. While many non-binary trans YouTubers use their channel to broaden the language we use around gender, trans YouTubers of color are educating audiences on trans issues by expressing their lived experiences within a culture of white supremacy. In an age of increasing use of social media as a news source, these

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28. Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, “The Danger of a Single Story,” TedGlobal 2009, July 2009, accessed May 5, 2016, [https://www.ted.com/talks/chimamanda\\_adichie\\_the\\_danger\\_of\\_a\\_single\\_story?language=en#t-164485](https://www.ted.com/talks/chimamanda_adichie_the_danger_of_a_single_story?language=en#t-164485).

conversations are especially valuable.<sup>29</sup> That being said, the visibility that comes with having a YouTube channel devoted to sharing one's personal experiences being trans can be a quite vulnerable position to put oneself in. For instance, attempts to discuss alternate ways of understanding the concept of *trans* have been met with hostility. These sorts of reactions can be especially disheartening when coming from other people who identify with a gender or sexual minority. Several of the participants in this study highlighted the difficulty of mentally sustaining a YouTube channel in which one challenges transnormativity and is met with personal attacks or complete dismissal of one's intended message.

Many trans YouTubers who are not white, do not identify within a male/female binary, or are not currently undergoing medically transition cannot readily see their experiences being represented in mainstream media, so some begin their YouTube channels as a way to find connection in community. Based on my interviews, it seems many trans YouTubers outside of the categories of white, binary, and medically transitioning actually facilitate in the creation of the very communities they sought to be a part of. There seems to be little communication between different kinds of trans people, likely because trans people are seeking support from other trans people who reflect themselves. In other words, trans YouTube audiences are largely segmented into different niches, much like the offline "trans community" comprises an

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29. Jeffrey Gottfried and Elisa Shearer, "News Across Social Media Platforms 2016," Pew Research Center: Journalism & Media, May 26, 2016, accessed August 16, 2016, <http://www.journalism.org/2016/05/26/news-use-across-social-media-platforms-2016/>; Nic Newman with Richard Fletcher, David A. L. Levy and Rasmus Kleis Nielsen, *Reuters Institute Digital News Report 2016* (University of Oxford: Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism, 2016), accessed August 16, 2016, <http://reutersinstitute.politics.ox.ac.uk/sites/default/files/Digital-News-Report-2016.pdf>.



immeasurable number of smaller trans communities.<sup>30</sup> The segmentation of trans YouTube audiences is reinforced by YouTube's suggested videos, leading one to continue to find videos within one's own niche unless one is specifically seeking to find alternate narratives. This segmentation can be useful for locating relevant resources; however, because these non-white, non-binary, and non-medically transitioning trans narratives often become lost within trans YouTube as a whole, it is less useful for YouTubers aiming to challenge transnormativity for a broad audience.

Trans YouTube vlogs, specifically, emphasize the physical body of the YouTuber. Consequently, many viewers overly fixate on physical appearance and are unwilling or unable to engage in deeper discussions around transness. This is not always a malicious act; many viewers have genuine interest or concern about the physical aspects of being trans or transitioning. Others, however, take advantage of the visual image YouTube provides and choose to scrutinize the YouTuber.

Though it is not yet commonplace, there is an increasing trend of collaborations within trans YouTube across race, gender identity, sexuality, disability status, and geographical locations. For instance, Milo, a participant in this study, has collaborated or live-streamed with vloggers who identify as transfeminine, non-binary, gay, visually impaired, and indigenous. Likewise, another participant, Darnelle, has collaborated with a white, cis gay man. Collaborations such as these foster coalition building between trans communities and other

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30. Alexandra Juhasz, "Learning the Five Lessons of YouTube: After Trying to Teach There, I Don't Believe the Hype," *Cinema Journal* 48, no. 2 (Winter 2009): 146–47, accessed February 4, 2016, <http://dx.doi.org/10.1353/cj.0.0098>; Elihu Katz, "And Deliver Us from Segmentation," in "The Media and Politics," special issue, *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 546 (July 1996): 22–33.

marginalized groups of people. As trans representation on YouTube provides a rich source of insight into the study of trans cultural production, new media, and the future of trans advocacy, this thesis can be of especial use to trans activists, trans YouTubers, sociologists, and scholars of gender and media studies.

To better situate my argument about transnormativity, I have reviewed the relevant literature in the fields of transgender studies, YouTube studies, and at the intersection of these two fields.

### ***1.3 Literature Review***

#### ***1.3.1 Trans Studies: Who is Transnormativity Good for?***

To best understand how transnormativity in the United States has been created, it is useful to first have a better understanding of the general conversations around transnormativity within the rapidly growing field of transgender studies. Theorists such as Sandy Stone, Dean Spade, Dan Irving, Susan Stryker, and Evan Visonoff have argued against transnormativity in medical discourse. Many trans activists and scholars, such as Morgan Bassichis, Alexander Lee, Dean Spade, and Micah Bazant have proposed strategies to resist transnormativity and recognize the effects of white privilege within activist movements.

##### **1.3.1.1 The Medicalization of Trans Bodies**

Transnormativity within medical discourse gains power primarily from non-trans service providers who not only create obstacles to achieving desired bodily modification but do not yet, as Spade articulately stated, have “a commitment to gender self-determination and respect for all expressions of gender.”<sup>31</sup> Many trans people, often for fear of being denied access, choose to adopt the pre-scripted “transsexual narrative” in order to be granted approval for “treatment.”<sup>32</sup>

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31. Spade, “Mutilating Gender,” 325.

32. Spade, “Mutilating Gender,” 319.

Trans people, if they desire to change their secondary sex characteristics and/or identification records to match their desired gender identity and presentation, must navigate a highly restrictive medical and legal system in order to achieve their aims. In the United States, the decision to transition hormonally or surgically is controlled through the gatekeeping of therapists, psychiatrists, doctors, and surgeons.<sup>33</sup> The gatekeeping of county lawyers, local government offices, and the state similarly constrains name and gender marker changes on driver's licenses, passports, birth certificates, and other forms of personal identification. Many insurance companies deem surgeries for trans people "cosmetic" or "elective," even if one sufficiently demonstrates the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders*' (DSM-V) criteria for gender dysphoria.<sup>34</sup> The medical and psychological establishment presents a double-bind for trans people desiring access to medical technologies. Through the repetitive acts of both trans people reciting an often untruthful or oversimplified narrative of their experience to medical professionals and medical professionals pathologizing transsexuality as an illness in need of a cure, normative gender and gender expression is further defined based on perception and thus able to be regulated.

Through its limited medicalized binary portrayal of trans people, mainstream media disseminates messages that reflect the medical gatekeeping model within which trans people must function as fact. Transnormativity in mainstream media perpetuates the pathologization and medicalization of trans bodies, the notion that to be transgender is to be "sick" and thus in need

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33. Spade, "Mutilating Gender," 319.

34. American Psychiatric Association, *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders*, 5th ed. (Washington, DC: American Psychiatric Publishing, 2013); Stryker, *Transgender History*, 6–7, 112; Dean Spade, "Resisting Medicine, Re/modeling Gender," *Berkeley Women's Law Journal* 18, no. 1 (September 2013): 16–26, accessed October 5, 2015, <http://scholarship.law.berkeley.edu/bglj/vol18/iss1/2/>.

of treatment. As Vipond has explained, “this model relies on medical practitioners being deemed ‘experts’ in the field of transsexuality, while trans persons zirselves are seen as uninformed patients.”<sup>35</sup> As trans people are already in a vulnerable position within institutions which strictly enforce binary ways of thinking about gender, this transnormative script especially affects the most marginalized trans people who are always already othered and seen as deviant: people of color, androgynous people, those with illnesses or disabilities, indigenous people, sex workers, poor and impoverished people, immigrants, those incarcerated or in mental institutions, homeless people, and youth.<sup>36</sup>

In “The *Empire* Strikes Back: A Posttranssexual Manifesto,” Sandy Stone critiqued early male-to-female (MTF) transsexual autobiographies for invoking problematic elements of medical discourse about transsexuality in order for their histories to be read as plausible, for their bodies to be read as culturally intelligible, or for acceptance as “natural” members of the gender they identify with. Dean Spade, similarly, has considered how the medical approach to gender variance and the creation of transsexuality work to maintain normative notions of gender and gender expression. The existence of a monolithic transsexual narrative, in part due to trans people strategically describing transness as being “born in the wrong body,” has prevented a deeper analysis of the often contradictory “ambiguities and polyvocalities” of trans lived experiences, ultimately limiting the ways gender variant people can express their desires and identities.<sup>37</sup>

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35. Vipond, “Resisting Transnormativity,” 33.

36. Spade, *Normal Life*, 13; Irving, “Normalized Transgressions,” 24.

37. Sandy Stone, “The *Empire* Strikes Back: A Posttranssexual Manifesto,” in *The Transgender Studies Reader*, ed. Susan Stryker and Stephen Whittle (New York: Routledge, 2006), 231–32; Irving, “Normalized Transgressions,” 18; Dean Spade, “Mutilating Gender,” in *The Transgender Studies Reader* (New York: Routledge, 2006), 315–32.

Ensuing from the work of Stone and Spade, Canadian political scientist Dan Irving analyzed how the construction of transsexual subjectivities by early medical experts, early trans theory, as well as contemporary trans activism has not only reinforced dominant and exploitative class relations but has constructed the “transgender working body” as an assimilationist tool for gaining civil rights. Irving stated, “to move toward achieving social recognition, the transsexual body must constitute a productive working body, that is, it must be capable of participating in capitalist production processes.”<sup>38</sup> The transsexuals’ worth, consequently, is determined by their capacity to be a “transgender working body,” which is largely decided by one’s class privilege, or lack thereof.<sup>39</sup> In Season 1 Episode 3 of *I Am Cait*, Caitlyn Jenner illustrated Irving’s concept of the “transgender working body” well. She stated, “Blossom [a Black trans woman featured on her show] just wants to make this world a better place, and with help from friends, you can kind of conquer the world. You can go out in to the world and be accepted and be understood and be a productive citizen.”<sup>40</sup> Through her repeated insistence that what hinders trans people from acceptance into society is seeing trans people as “normal human beings,” Jenner represents one example of how the rhetorical use of wanting to be seen as “normal citizens” is heavily informed by one’s privilege within society. This sort of tactic (largely used by privileged trans people), Irving argued, has only further excluded those on the margins.

While insufficient consideration has been given to the gatekeeping role of non-trans book publishers and audiences in the processes behind which trans stories are able to be published as autobiographies and which remain unspoken,<sup>41</sup> I am particularly interested in further challenging

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38. Irving, “Normalized Transgressions,” 17.

39. Irving, “Normalized Transgressions,” 19.

40. *I Am Cait*, season 1, episode 3, “The Road Trip Part Two,” aired August 9, 2015, on E! Entertainment Television.

41. Serano, *Whipping Girl*, 151.

the role that gender and sexual minorities play in the creation and continuation of harmful transnormative narratives.

### **1.3.1.2 The Dangers of Overgeneralization and LGBT Rights Discourse**

By focusing their activism solely on a single issue (the oppression of homosexuals by heterosexuals), the mainstream LGBT rights movement has largely oversimplified the underlying causes of discrimination and prejudice affecting people of color and trans people. This single-issue focus has ultimately created a more disparate hierarchy between gender and sexual minorities with wealthy, able-bodied, neurotypical, white, cis, gay men maintaining the most privileged position.<sup>42</sup>

Under the guise of buzzwords like “equality,” “multiculturalism,” and “diversity,” mainstream LGBT activism has adhered to progress narratives whose goals have primarily been to achieve hate crime legislation, marriage equality, representation, and visibility. Legislation reform, such as the Matthew Shepard and James Byrd Jr. Hate Crimes Prevention Act of 2009, the repeal of Don’t Ask Don’t Tell in 2011, the federal legalization of same-sex marriage in 2015, the 2016 repeal of the transgender military service ban, and the existing local and state non-discrimination laws for sexual orientation and/or gender identity are a result of LGBT activism. That being said, changes to the legislative system meant to benefit LGBTQ+ people as a whole are highly limiting and do little to transform oppressive systems for queer and trans communities, communities of color, and poor communities.<sup>43</sup> Campaigns such as “It Gets

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42. Serano, *Whipping Girl*, 108.

43. Morgan Bassichis, Alexander Lee, and Dean Spade, “Building an Abolitionist Trans and Queer Movement with Everything We’ve Got,” in *The Transgender Studies Readers 2*, ed. Susan Stryker and Aren Z. Aizura (New York: Routledge, 2013), 653–67.

Better” and the Human Rights Campaign, while perhaps well-intentioned, are often misdirected and lacking in a critical examination of whiteness, cisgenderism, and class.<sup>44</sup>

In addition to mainstream LGBT movements who marginalize trans people are queer and trans communities that, instead of destabilizing the notion that there is a correct or true way to be queer or trans, direct their energy toward shunning other queer and trans people’s gender identities, gender expressions, or sexualities as inauthentic, inappropriate, fake, reinforcing binaries, or not being queer, radical, or subversive enough.<sup>45</sup> Julia Serano has named one aspect of trans exclusion by other trans people *subversivism*, “the practice of extolling certain gender and sexual expressions and identities simply because they are unconventional or nonconforming.”<sup>46</sup> This tactic is largely counterproductive. Instead of non-binary gender identities and expressions revealing the polyvocalities of human experience and opening up ways of existing safely, many non-binary trans people essentially cast aside trans men and women who *do* identify within a male/female gender binary.

Running parallel to this rhetoric, some transsexual people, who have come to be known as *truscum* or *transmedicalists* in online communities, have been criticized for claiming that one must experience dysphoria and want to transition medically in order to be trans. Some trans people who do not have immediate plans to medically transition, such as Milo, are pejoratively named *transtrenders* or *social justice warriors* (SJWs) and are said to only be claiming to be

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44. Richard Kim, “Against ‘Bullying’ or On Loving Queer Kids,” *The Nation*, October 6, 2010, accessed December 15, 2015, <http://www.thenation.com/article/against-bullying-or-loving-queer-kids/>; Jasbir Puar, “In the wake of It Gets Better,” *The Guardian*, November 16, 2010, accessed December 15, 2015, <http://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/cifamerica/2010/nov/16/wake-it-gets-better-campaign>.

45. Serano, *Whipping Girl*, 109–10, 149, 345–62.

46. Serano, *Whipping Girl*, 346.

trans in order to gain popularity and “social justice points.” Instead of disrupting transnormativity by engaging in conversations around linguistic understandings of concepts like *trans*, *non-binary*, or *dysphoria*, many YouTube comment sections are spaces of insults and threats stemming from differing personal beliefs. We have never been a monolith, and thus trans people, especially, should not continue to create artificial divisions within our own communities based on such factors as one’s experiences with dysphoria or one’s desire, choice, or ability to transition socially, medically, or otherwise.

Many trans and queer activists, such as Bassichis, Lee, and Spade, propose that instead of creating false dichotomies between people facing similar kinds of discrimination, we embrace a radical trans and abolitionist social justice movement. This movement is one in which our overarching goals include putting an end to the logic of “deserving” victims in the prison industrial complex, supporting movements that “weaken oppressive institutions,” working to combat transphobic, sexist, and racist exploitation in our workplaces, and ending “all forms of militarization, criminalization, and warfare” as part of our larger struggle for “racial, economic, gender, and social justice.”<sup>47</sup> Trans activists, like Micah Bazant, use their art to express “biodiversity in terms of ability and gender as part of what we need to survive” and recognize that “there’s also a seed of white supremacy and colonization even in the word trans.” The progress narrative that has been created about trans people by mainstream media works to erase the long history of gender variance in various cultures.<sup>48</sup> YouTube is increasingly bringing

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47. Bassichis, Lee, and Spade, “Building an Abolitionist Trans and Queer Movement,” 653–67.

48. Micah Bazant, “Claiming the Non-Normative in Your Gender & Body,” interview by Elizabeth Cooper, The Queer Body Love Series, June 18, 2016, accessed June 20, 2016, [http://thequeerbodyloveseries.com/micah-bazant-2/?mc\\_cid=324db4331c&mc\\_eid=aeb9784710](http://thequeerbodyloveseries.com/micah-bazant-2/?mc_cid=324db4331c&mc_eid=aeb9784710).



visibility to radical trans political strategies, such as those described by Bassichis, Lee, and Spade.<sup>49</sup>

To better contextualize where my project fits within trans YouTube scholarship, it is important to understand the preceding scholarship in YouTube studies.

### ***1.3.2 YouTube Studies: Making Sense of an Unstable Archive***

Since the site is a fairly recent invention and is constantly evolving as users add new videos and delete others, and since it has no real means of categorization, YouTube is an unstable archive endlessly full of new videos to discover.<sup>50</sup> Because of its broad functionality, YouTube differs from the way users connect through other mediums, though often users' YouTube channels are embedded and supplemental to profiles on their various other social networking sites (SNS).<sup>51</sup> For instance, some trans YouTubers will share their YouTube videos on their Tumblr and Facebook accounts. Except for the occasional music copyright issue, none of my interviewees have experienced any significant technical difficulties, attesting to the technical functionality of the site. However, there is a debate about whether YouTube truly does promote democracy and free expression. Scholars such as Burgess, Green, and Jenkins have argued for YouTube's democratic potential, though others such as Wasko, Erickson, Gillespie, and Juhasz have challenged the assumption that YouTube provides the opportunity for all voices to be heard equally.

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49. See Barnard Center for Research on Women, "Dean Spade: Impossibility Now," YouTube, August 12, 2013, accessed August 16, 2016, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OU8D343qpdE>.

50. Thank you to Dr. Julie Kubala for the phrase "Unstable Archive."

51. Richard Grusin, "YouTube at the End of New Media," in *The YouTube Reader*, ed. Pelle Snickars and Patrick Vonderau (Stockholm: National Library of Sweden, 2009), 60.

As widely cited sociologists who have argued for YouTube's value as a site of cultural production, Burgess and Green were among the first scholars to extensively map dominant patterns of YouTube usage. Using coded information deriving from over 4,000 videos within four of YouTube's categories of popularity, Burgess and Green concluded that YouTube is a site of *participatory culture*, encouraging engagement from all types of users.<sup>52</sup> This research specifically countered popular critiques of YouTube as merely a site for copyright infringement, corporate media, cyberbullying, and validation of "banal forms of cultural production."<sup>53</sup>

Drawing on the work of Henry Jenkins, Burgess and Green defined participation that functions from the top down, as corporate-driven, and from the bottom up, as consumer-driven.<sup>54</sup> User-generated trans videos addressing political issues are one example of a "bottom-up" trans activist strategy. The definitive traits of participatory culture include "relatively low barriers to artistic expression and civic engagement," "strong support for creating and sharing one's creations," "some type of informal mentorship whereby what is known by the most experienced is passed along to novices," "members believe that their contributions matter," and "members feel some degree of social connection with one another."<sup>55</sup> User-generated trans YouTube content, in many instances, exhibits characteristics of participatory culture; however, due to the fact that transnormative narratives are more easily locatable on YouTube, principles of participatory culture are likely more applicable to YouTubers whose content does not deviate from transnormativity.

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52. Burgess and Green, *YouTube*, 57.

53. Daniel Chamberlain, review of *YouTube: Online Video and Participatory Culture*, *Popular Communication* 8 (2010): 96, accessed May 12, 2016, <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/15405700903502312>.

54. Burgess and Green, *YouTube*, 6.

55. Henry Jenkins, *Convergence Culture: Where Old and New Media Collide* (New York and London: New York University Press, 2006), 7.

The political and profit driven aims of YouTube as a corporation should not be ignored in conversations about the democratic potential of YouTube as a *platform* for participatory culture. Wasko and Erickson have argued that YouTube has commodified labor and exhibits a strong preference for videos that will “make a profit for media companies and for Google, but certainly not for the individual user.”<sup>56</sup> Tarleton Gillespie, a Principal Researcher at Microsoft Research, has analyzed how YouTube strategically employs the term *platform* toward advertisers, major media producers, policymakers, and users. To the latter, YouTube is marketed as a platform for free expression, yet to advertisers and major media producers, *platform* is employed to generate profit.<sup>57</sup> The fact that the YouTube/Google enterprise uses *platform* in these various ways captures the contradiction of how despite a monetary bottom-line, they are trying to make it seem egalitarian and democratic to users.<sup>58</sup>

It is necessary to tease apart the many nuances of participatory culture in relation to YouTube as a site of trans people offering counternarratives to transnormativity. While the participatory culture of YouTube, in theory, aims to build connections and promote, support, and value all expression and engagement, YouTube is not a utopian space. Another nuance of YouTube’s participatory culture can be found in Alexandra Juhasz’s attempt to use YouTube as the medium for her course “Learning from YouTube.” She quickly became frustrated and found, due in part to its corporate intentions, that “YouTube is *not* democratic... the more controversial your ideas or methods, the quicker your demise [emphasis added].”<sup>59</sup> While marginalized

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56. Janet Wasko and Mary Erickson, “The Political Economy of YouTube,” in *The YouTube Reader*, ed. Pelle Snickars and Patrick Vonderau (Stockholm: National Library of Sweden, 2009), 383.

57. Gillespie, “The politics of ‘platforms,’” 352–55.

58. Gillespie, “The politics of ‘platforms,’” 352.

59. Juhasz, “Learning the Five Lessons of YouTube,” 146–47.

political expression could be (and has been) seen on YouTube, these videos are widely ignored or lost to low viewership in what Juhasz has referred to as “NicheTube,”<sup>60</sup> meaning that unless someone is specifically seeking out videos that counter transnormativity, they are unlikely to find any.<sup>61</sup> Next, I have reviewed the literature at the intersection of transgender and YouTube studies.

### ***1.3.3 At the Intersection of Trans and YouTube***

At the intersection of transgender studies and YouTube studies lies a new and interdisciplinary area of study: trans YouTube studies. This area of study encompasses many theories deriving from gender studies, media studies, and cultural studies. Tobias Raun, Avery Dame, Laura Horak, and Matthew O’Neill have analyzed several aspects of trans YouTube: its potential for knowledge sharing and community building for transsexual people, the “expert” role hailed by trans male vloggers, how trans people take advantage of YouTube’s affinity for “personal” and “spectacular” vlogs through “generating impressions of authenticity and intimacy” through their displays of the body, and how trans youth are using YouTube as a platform for self-expression and identity formation, respectively.

Tobias Raun, a professor of Communication Studies in Denmark, has most extensively researched trans YouTube. Raun’s work in “Out Online” focused on eight Anglo-American transsexual vloggers, four of whom are trans men and four of whom are trans women. Raun used the follow criteria to select his focused case-studies: 1) the vlog appeared when searching for *transgender*, 2) the vlogger had at least thirty vlogs uploaded to their personal channel, 3) the YouTuber regularly updated and had uploaded within the past two months, 4) the vlogger was at

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60. Juhasz, “Learning the Five Lessons of YouTube,” 146.

61. Horak, “Trans on YouTube,” 576.

least eighteen years old, 5) the vlogger openly self-identified as trans, 6) the vlogger was medically transitioning by hormones and/or surgeries, and 7) the vlog's inception began in conjunction with the vloggers transition by medical means. In addition to this original criteria, Raun added the following criterion: a selection of what Raun perceives as "typical" vloggers (who you would likely find first in a keyword search). Raun's study did, to his acknowledgement, contain an overrepresentation of white American binary-identified trans people. Mason, a lesser-known vlogger, was chosen to highlight "a more alternative gender expression," and Diamond, one of the trans women Raun interviewed, was the only person of color in Raun's sample. Because of Raun's focus on medically transitioning vloggers, he has encountered several critiques of his selection process. Several non-trans critics believe Raun's data selection reproduces (hetero)normativity and has a lack of "radical enough," "subversive enough," and "queer enough" representation.<sup>62</sup> While I do not agree with the language of "enough" employed by these critics desiring less normative trans representation, a more nuanced understanding of why white, binary, medically-transitioning trans people maintain the privileged status of "typical" trans vloggers is critical for deconstructing the various axes of privilege that underlie transnormativity.

Nevertheless, Raun's findings highlight several ways in which media and medical technologies mediate trans subjectivity. Raun posited YouTube as a transformative site where transsexual people, specifically through their creation of vlogs, are born or born again. The camera itself plays many key roles in trans vlogging, most importantly, Raun argued, as the role of a "vehicle of transubstantiation." For example, as Wheeler, an 18-year-old FTM trans person, became more comfortable filming himself in front of the camera he "learn[ed] and relearn[ed]

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62. Raun, "Out Online," 39–42.

culturally located bodily practices that define gender.”<sup>63</sup> The camera simultaneously documented and facilitated Wheeler’s transition into the man he defined himself as.<sup>64</sup>

In a similar way that the camera is a powerful mediating media technology for trans vloggers, so are advancing medical transitioning technologies. Testosterone is “*the* transformative technology” for trans men. The masculinizing effects of testosterone, therefore, are a primary topic of conversation in trans male vlogs.<sup>65</sup> While trans male vlogs are one site for exploring how trans men “*could* look,” they also have the potential to reinforce ideal transmasculinity and transmasculine transition.<sup>66</sup> Because estrogen does not function as quickly or evidently as testosterone, trans female vlogs, on the other hand, feature vastly different conversations around the topic of hormone replacement therapy (HRT).

While Raun has studied several popular vloggers within trans YouTube, Avery Dame, a doctoral candidate in Women’s Studies at the University of Maryland, has more specifically explored the authoritarian “expert” role hailed by trans male vloggers. As a result of his rhetorical analysis, Dame concluded that dialogue has begun to shift transness from being a considered a condition to being a category of self-identification. Where expertise about transgender was once held only by medical authorities, now trans youth are positioning zirselves as experts, via the creation of YouTube videos, inherently contesting the authority of medical

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63. Raun, “Screen-Births,” 119; Raun, “Out Online,” 219.

64. Tobias Raun, “Screen-Births: Exploring the Transformative Potential in Trans Video Blogs on YouTube,” *Graduate Journal of Social Science* 7, no. 2 (December 2010): 119, accessed November 11, 2015, <http://gjss.org/sites/default/files/issues/chapters/papers/Journal-07-02--07-Raun.pdf>.

65. Tobias Raun, “Archiving the Wonders of Testosterone via YouTube,” *Transgender Studies Quarterly* 2, no. 4 (2015): 201, 239–40.

66. Raun, “Archiving the Wonders,” 707; Raun, “Out Online,” 170.

professionals.<sup>67</sup> Trans vloggers, as opposed to medical authorities, give advice rather than diagnoses. Dame drew data from five “highly visible” and “information-rich” vlogs produced by trans males. Each of these vlogs had at least 1,000 views, the most popular of which had over 800,000 views. Each of the selected vloggers “self-identified as white, [was] under 30 years old, spoke American English, and had undergone some level of medical transition.” One of the five held Canadian citizenship; the other four were US citizens. In addition, each selected vlogger reported having stable family support.<sup>68</sup>

Horak’s research has revolved around how the nature of the medium of YouTube highlights the “personal” and the “spectacular.” In her work, she mentioned how the popularity of “hyperattractive, predominantly white vloggers institutes hormone time, beauty, gender cohesion, and whiteness as uncomfortable norms.”<sup>69</sup> While I agree with Horak that “criticizing hormone time for not being ‘queer enough’ misses the life-saving work that these vlogs do,” I believe that, if our goal is trans liberation, our time and attention would be well spent analyzing how videos created by trans people who do not inhabit these norms are also “saving trans lives.”<sup>70</sup>

Lastly, Matthew O’Neill, a graduate student at Queens University Belfast, has located five identifiable narratives within popular trans youth YouTube culture: transitional videos, do-it-yourself (DIY) gender, trans vlogging, trans anti-bullying videos, and celebrity trans vlogging.<sup>71</sup>

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67. Ze/zir/zirs and Ze/hir/hirs are gender-neutral pronouns. Dame, “I’m Your Hero? Like Me?,” 44.

68. Dame, “I’m Your Hero? Like Me?,” 42–47.

69. Horak, “Trans on YouTube,” 582.

70. Horak, “Trans on YouTube,” 581.

71. Matthew G. O’Neill, “Transgender Youth and YouTube Videos: Self-Representation and Five Identifiable Trans Youth Narratives,” in *Queer Youth and Media Cultures*, ed. Christopher Pullen (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), 39–43.

Using this categorization, O’Neill explored how “trans youth are potentially empowered through engaging with a platform such as YouTube, offering as it does the possibility of a global audience that previous individuals could only dream of.”<sup>72</sup> O’Neill noted that “in contextualizing trans youth representation on YouTube, there is the possibility of a fixed identity that can lead to an expectation for trans youth identity to perform in a dominant way,” though O’Neill makes it clear that these five narratives are not meant to be definitive.<sup>73</sup> YouTube is a major site for trans identity formation. While I have not chosen to focus on trans youth in this project, it is important to note some of the ways trans youth are potentially using YouTube to challenge transnormativity.

Now that I have provided a better understanding of the fields into which my study fits, I present the methodologies informing this project and the methods I have used to obtain my findings.

#### ***1.4 Methodologies and Methods***

The genre convention of trans vlogs is transition videos documenting the changing body during the early stages of HRT or after various gender confirmation surgeries (GCS).<sup>74</sup> Given that many trans people must learn to navigate their transition without the help of a culturally competent medical provider, these videos focused on the physical aspects of medical transition serve as valuable resources for many trans people. Topics often discussed by medically transitioning transmasculine people include having dysphoria, the physical effects of testosterone such as increased muscle mass and hair growth, the desire for or results of top surgery, passing

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72. O’Neill, “Transgender Youth,” 44.

73. O’Neill, “Transgender Youth,” 38.

74. Gender confirmation surgeries (GCS) have also been called gender reassignment surgeries (GR/S). Many trans people prefer the phrase GCS over GR/S.



tips, and the use of various binders, STPs, pumps, and packers. Common topics discussed by medically transitioning transfeminine people, on the other hand, include the bodily effects of estrogen, progestogens, and antiandrogens such as fat redistribution and skin changes, makeup tutorials, voice exercises, vaginal dilation, and tucking.<sup>75</sup> Although many trans people of color and non-binary trans people do use their channels to document the physical aspects of their medical transitions, these narratives are predominantly white and binary.<sup>76</sup> With this study, I aim to fill a gap in trans YouTube literature by instead focusing my case studies on channels outside of one or both of these categories of YouTube vlogs: vlogs created by white trans people and vlogs created by binary-identified trans people.

Based on the existing literature on trans YouTube, three main methodological factors influenced this decision. First, the key focal point for each mentioned trans YouTube researcher has been the most popular videos within the narrower topic they are exploring of trans YouTube. Having popularity be a standard criterion for scholarship largely limits research to white YouTube. Second, scholarship on trans YouTube has excessively focused on transsexual people who identify within a male/female binary gender system. Having this focus prevents one from hearing the experiences of people who may relate to or discuss the concept of gender differently. Lastly, the physical aspects of medical transition are well-documented. By focusing primarily on medically transitioning trans people in trans research, importance is inherently placed on medical transition. Raun, for example, attempted to broaden the scope of his research by including one

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75. Transmaculine: male/masculine but assigned female at birth. Passing, in this context, is commonly understood as a trans person's ability to be read as cisgender. An *STP* is a stand-to-pee device commonly used by transmasculine people. Many doubly function for *packing*, creating the look/feel of a bulge in one's crotch. Transfeminine: female/feminine but assigned male at birth.

76. Laura Horak, "Trans on YouTube: Intimacy, Visibility, Temporality," *Transgender Studies Quarterly* 1, no. 4 (2004), 576.

trans person of color and one person who does not identify exclusively with a binary gender.

Choosing my dataset based on factors outside of popularity, however, has allowed me to partake in a different conversation about how trans people are using YouTube. Thus, I narrowed my dataset using the following criteria:

- 1) the YouTuber self-identified as a trans person of color and/or a non-binary trans person;
- 2) the YouTuber's channel had not exclusively or primarily focused on the physical aspects of transition;
- 3) the YouTuber, at the time of interview, resided in the United States;
- 4) the YouTuber spoke English, and
- 5) the YouTuber, at the time of interview, was at least 18 years old.

Using this criteria, I recruited six trans YouTubers for this Georgia State University Institutional Review Board approved study. I contacted the interviewees through YouTube messaging service or through the YouTuber's personal contact information provided on their YouTube channel. I contacted a total of 31 trans YouTubers, 13 of whom initially responded. One person expressed that they did not have the capacity to assist with this project at this time but provided a list of others who may be interested, one person was turning 18 in January and thus did not meet the age requirement, and five people expressed interest but did not respond to my follow-up messages. I interviewed participants between May and June of 2016. Each interview lasted from 20 minutes to an hour, was conducted via Skype, video recorded using ECamm Call Recorder, and then personally transcribed. Participants chose whether or not their name, YouTube channel, images, and other personal identifiers were shared in this thesis.

I have provided some demographic information about my interviewees in Table 1 below. I choose this demographic information to express the diversity of ways in which my interviewees self-identify.

**Table 1: Participant Demographics**

| <b>Name</b> | <b>YouTube Channel</b> | <b>Age</b> | <b>Gender Identities</b>         | <b>Racial/Ethnic Identities</b> | <b>Sexual Identities</b> |
|-------------|------------------------|------------|----------------------------------|---------------------------------|--------------------------|
| Ariel       | Ariel Violet           | 21         | Genderqueer, Non-binary, Trans   | White                           | Pansexual                |
| Darnelle    | Darnelle Scott         | 21         | Trans woman, MTF                 | Mixed race, Black               | Heterosexual             |
| Melvin      | itsGOTtobegroovy       | 33         | Trans man, FTM, Transgender, Man | Black                           | Gay                      |
|             | Love Is Vulnerability  | 34         | Non-binary, Trans                | Mixed Chinese-American          | Queer                    |
| Milo        | Milo Stewart           | 18         | Non-binary, Trans                | White                           | Aromantic, Asexual       |
| Shaetanica  | Shaetanica Sanguine    | 33         | Non-binary, Demi-femme, Trans    | White                           | QAF (Queer As Fuck)      |

Foundational in the field of cultural studies, Stuart Hall described *encoding* as the process by which messages are created and *decoding*, alternatively, as the process by which messages are

received.<sup>77</sup> One rationale for this categorization, according to Hall, is that there might be different ideological messages embedded, or encoded, into texts than there are interpreted, or decoded, from them. This process depends on such factors as one's context, understanding of culture-specific codes, and socioeconomic status. For this reason, I have studied what my participants wished to accomplish with their videos, how they went about accomplishing these goals, and some of the ways in which their videos were perceived by their viewers.<sup>78</sup>

At the core of “Encoding/Decoding” is the idea that the meaning of a text is not localized within the text. A fundamental idea in cultural studies is that texts move around within contexts, and the meaning within the culture changes based on this context. Given the upcoming presidential election, occurrences of international Black Lives Matter protests, along with the heightened visibility of trans people in mainstream media, the political climate of the United States is incredibly tense. During this politically tense context, studying the phenomenon of YouTube vlogs, especially those created by trans people of color, is highly complex. While I have aimed to study how race functions in trans YouTube vlogs in relation to transnormativity, my findings are inconclusive. In this thesis, I do discuss race when relevant to the interview or content of the interviewee's YouTube video; however, to obtain a better sense of the role of race in transnormativity, one could conduct further analysis with a larger dataset of trans YouTubers of color.

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77. Stuart Hall, “Encoding, Decoding,” *The Cultural Studies Reader*, 2nd ed. (London and New York: Routledge, 1993), 507–17.

78. Douglas Kellner, “Cultural Studies, Multiculturalism, and Media Culture,” in *Gender, Race and Class in Media*, 4th ed., ed. Gail Dines and Jean M. Humez (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, 2015), 7–19; Christine Scodari, “‘No Politics Here’: Age and Gender in Soap Opera ‘Cyberfandom,’” *Women's Studies in Communication* 21, no. 2 (1998): 168–87.

Messages tend to be encoded in a particular way for particular reasons. In order to give the creators agency over what they would like others to know about their work, the interviews were semi-structured. A list of sample interview questions is provided in the Appendix. In addition to interviewing six trans YouTubers, I have provided descriptions of several videos created by my interviewees, keeping in mind the concepts laid forth by previous researchers of trans YouTube (such as “hormone time”) and how these concepts may or may not be relevant to the videos that challenge transnormativity. I studied “two types of discourse, visual and aural.”<sup>79</sup> Included aspects in my analyses are the transcript of the producer, the producer’s accompanying intonation, any indication of the producer’s interpellated spectator, how the producer positions zirsself vis-à-vis the camera, any gestures toward the camera, and other indications of the producer’s intended and unintended messages. In order to get a sense of the ways in which the audience decodes the producer’s messages, I have also analyzed the audience’s reception of these videos. Some of these videos have over 2,500 comments, while others have less than 10. I have not chosen to analyze every single comment; instead, I have chosen a select few to represent a range of audience responses. Because trans YouTube is a site of subcultural production that does not fit well within Stuart Hall’s original codes of *dominant-hegemonic*, *negotiated*, and *oppositional*,<sup>80</sup> I used Peter Cava’s adapted schema influenced by Celeste Michelle Condit, Justin Lewis, and Christine Scodari:

- By preferred readings, I refer to readings that (1) decode the producers’ preferred meaning, (2) value the preferred meaning, and (3) reproduce the encoded ideology.

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79. Hall, “Encoding, Decoding,” 511.

80. Hall, “Encoding, Decoding,” 515–17.

- By negotiated readings, I refer to readings that (1) decode alternative meanings or devalue the preferred meaning and (2) reproduce the encoded ideology.
- By resistive readings, I refer to readings that (1) decode alternative meanings or devalue the preferred meaning, (2) reject the encoded ideology, and (3) do not demonstrate an awareness of the preferred reading.
- By oppositional readings, I refer to readings that (1) decode alternative meanings or devalue the preferred meaning, (2) reject the encoded ideology, and (3) demonstrate an awareness of the preferred reading.<sup>81</sup>

I now present my findings within these two themes demonstrated by the participants of this study: strategies for challenging transnormativity and obstacles to challenging transnormativity.

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81. Peter Cava, "Science-Fiction Girlfriends: Transgender Politics and US Science Fiction Television, 1990–present," (PhD diss., Florida Atlantic University, 2015), 95–97.

## 2 CHAPTER 2: FINDINGS

### *2.1 Strategies for Challenging Transnormativity*

Two ways trans YouTubers have used their platform to challenge transnormativity is by 1) broadening the scope of one's channel to include topics outside of the physical aspects of medical transition and 2) educating others on often unfamiliar and evolving subcultural language used by trans communities.

#### *2.1.1 Broadening Scope*

Broadening the scope of one's channel to discuss issues intersecting with trans lives is one way trans YouTubers are challenging the transnormative narratives portrayed by mainstream media. The six participants in this study have used their channels to highlight day-to-day trans experiences on topics such as coming out to family or in the workplace, issues facing trans veterans, experiencing racism as a Black trans person, relationships to one's family or religious community after coming out as trans, barriers to healthcare access, self-medicating, bodily insecurities, FTM pregnancy, being stealth, dating or being in a relationship as a trans person, the upcoming presidential election, being a trans student or teacher, emotional changes on HRT, (a)sexuality, trans suicide, names and pronouns, relationships to feminism, body positivity, trigger warnings, writing strategies, gender expression, the June 2016 Orlando shooting, dealing with anger, atheism, and why the rhetoric of "All Lives Matter" is problematic.

After years of watching other trans people's videos, Love Is Vulnerability, 34, formally introduced themselves to the YouTube community as a non-binary transgender person in 2014 and now has a small following of 77<sup>82</sup> subscribers. In their channel description, they share the meaning behind their username.

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82. Updated July 23, 2016

I chose “Love is Vulnerability” because I’m nervous about being open about things I’ve typically kept private. But I want to give back. I want to show my love for queer and trans communities, which have been so generous with their stories and have therefore made it possible for me to imagine myself differently. Thanks to each of you who have contributed to the wealth of stories on YouTube, Tumblr, and elsewhere. Your willingness to share has meant more than you can know.<sup>83</sup>

I asked my interviewees what they found their role was, as YouTubers with various racial, gender, and sexual identities, in the larger context of trans visibility. Love Is Vulnerability offered the following:

Well, I guess that’s what YouTube is, and that’s what the internet is. It’s a series of small clumps of interconnected stories, and I think for a lot of trans people in general, YouTube is gonna be the taste of real life trans people that they might not have gotten or that they need to supplement. For me that was true. I taught this Trans Studies class this semester, and I taught this article... by Laura Horak... There’s a big response from the students in the classroom, like even the students who weren’t trans. It’s like anytime that they wanted to learn more from real people, they were... turning to YouTube and not necessarily watching all the videos that you and I might have watched, although there were some people that did that too. You can’t always rely on the one person that you know, and you can’t always rely on the biggest narratives in media. I think almost everybody knows Caitlyn Jenner is not *the* representative trans person. And so, where do they go to, where do you go to look for trans people? I think it’s whatever social media you use and then that social media is going to go to YouTube, because that’s where all the trans people are talking, for some reason. We all just got into that habit of trying to mark our changes or just share resources and learn from other people who are in similar situations. I think vlogging, or videos in general, are just a really good method for that... You can’t just flip the cable channel and come up with a bunch of trans produced media.

Melvin, 33, started vlogging during college in 2009, a year after he started coming out as trans and one month before he got his first bloodwork panel in order to start taking testosterone. While he is taking a break from his channel for the time being, he currently has 1,162<sup>84</sup> subscribers. He provides this description for his channel: “I’m Melvin - a black, Christian, gay, transgender man. In this vlog, I discuss race, gender, sexuality, spirituality, and other things as they relate to my

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83. Love is Vulnerability, “About Description,” YouTube, accessed June 9, 2016, <https://www.youtube.com/user/loveisvulnerability>.

84. Updated July 23, 2016



life's journey in the hopes of expanding minds and being a resource for others. Feel free to hit me up, whether just to chat or ask a question.”<sup>85</sup> Melvin's motivations for vlogging are tied to his strategies for social justice.

When I first started creating YouTube vlogs, my motivation was to just document the physical changes with my physical transition and to be part of a community of other trans men on YouTube, where before starting my vlog I would follow other guys and comment on their videos and look forward to, you know, it was just a community. It felt like a community to me, and so I wanted to be a part of that... I have since grown to see my platform, my channel, as something greater than just documenting physical changes in my physical transition... I talk about other things including things not directly related to my gender transition... I've come to see my videos as just a type of educational tool that people can watch and learn from...It also ties in with my personal social justice view of personal storytelling being a very very effective tool for social change.

One example of broadening the scope of one's YouTube channel beyond the physical aspects of medical transition can be found in Melvin's "5 Reasons Why Gay is NOT the New Black" response (Figure 2) to an emergent Huffington Post article titled, "It's Official: Gay is the New Black" published in December 2011 by what he presumed to be a Black straight woman.<sup>86</sup> Melvin framed this video response by giving some context of the passing of California's Prop 8 during President Obama's first electoral year. As Melvin explained, following the passing of Prop 8 many gay white people claimed that because most Black people voted for Prop 8, Black people were therefore "especially homophobic" and therefore "gay was the new black," meaning being gay was the "new civil rights issue of our time." This "Gay is the New Black" phenomenon received national media attention. Among the points Melvin made were why it is especially pointless for straight Black people and white gay people to attempt to rank their

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85. itsGOTtobegroovy, "About Description," YouTube, accessed June 9, 2016, <https://www.youtube.com/user/itsGOTtobegroovy/about>.

86. See Monique Ruffin, "It's Official: Gay is the New Black," *The Huffington Post*, December 28, 2011, accessed August 17, 2016, [http://www.huffingtonpost.com/monique-ruffin/gay-civil-rights\\_b\\_1168897.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/monique-ruffin/gay-civil-rights_b_1168897.html).

oppressions and why they should instead seek commonalities between gay struggles and the struggles of people of color by “build[ing] bridges” between gay rights work and anti-racist work. He instructed his white gay male audience to “stop trippin’,” as the “black struggle is not over.”

Citing such sources as the National Coalition of Anti-Violence and the Applied Research Center, Melvin effectively used his channel as a platform for educating his audience on how Black people and trans people are still marginalized, even within the “GLBT community” and how many other groups, for example women, Muslims, people with disabilities, and Latina/os, still face discrimination. He used the example of the climate of fear both undocumented and documented Latinas and Latinos living in Arizona and Alabama were currently facing as a result of “blatant racial profiling,” “vigilante immigration policing,” and federal government sanctioned detentions and deportations. Melvin further argued that “gay people have a long history of organizing and ruckus-raising and gay is not the new anything,” mentioning activists such as Emma Goldman, Henry Gerber, and Prescott Townsend.

This particular video has received 18,159 views, 362 likes, and 31 dislikes.<sup>87</sup> It was recorded in a typical vlogging style, featuring only Melvin speaking to his camcorder. In addition to added captions, he employed several editing techniques, including constructing an introduction clip with music, formatting overlay text throughout the video, and splicing in photos of people protesting with “Gay is the New Black” signs, a magazine cover of *The Advocate* claiming , and a clip from the Rocky Horror Picture Show’s “Time Warp” scene. When asked if he had received much negativity as a result of his videos, Melvin responded with laughter:

*Yes! I have had a lot of negative comments on two particular videos of mine. I keep them up there. Normally I value engaging people in dialogue around biases, but I just ignore*

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87. Updated August 16, 2016

them. I actually have deleted some comments that were done out of just mean-spiritedness. I've gotten racist comments, transphobic comments, homophobic comments, on those videos. I think the "5 Reasons Gay is NOT the New Black" video [Figure 2] was the first time that I ended up getting a lot of comments. I never got a lot of negative comments, really, and this time I was like, "People are mean!" I was kind of hurt by it. [laughs] But then I was like, this is like the sewer of the internet... Most people can be anonymous and say anything. YouTube is no different from real life. People have all sorts of biases.



**Figure 2: "5 Reasons Why Gay is NOT the New Black"** Source: itsGOTtobegroovy, "5 Reasons Why Gay is NOT the New Black," YouTube, January 10, 2012, accessed June 25, 2016, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Y7N9L7W8jfI>.

Shaetanica, also 33, published her first YouTube video in October of 2014 and now has 670<sup>88</sup> subscribers to her channel. She has a partnership with Huffington Post and Broadband TV's Outspeak™ Program, from whom she has access to a sound library and a video editing program. She described this partnership as "a fun way to do the YouTubes." Shaetanica provides this description for her channel: "I am a Trans\*AgroFemme metal guitarist chick who loves riding fixed-gear bikes and enjoying all that life has to offer. This channel is going to be a mixture of

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88. Updated July 23, 2016

things from my thoughts about current topics, to experiences from my life, relationships, events and so much more!”<sup>89</sup> In our interview, she elaborated that she has come to describe her gender expression as Trans\*AgroFemme and her gender identity as demi-femme, to express how she feels femme “most of the time, but there’s also times where [she] feels agender.” She laughed and added, “It’s interesting feeling my own subtle fluidity.” Shaetanica’s motivations inspiring her channel involve enjoying performance and helping others.

I’ve always enjoyed being a performer of sorts, like I play guitar in a band. I like educating and being in a place of relating information, and I found some power in sharing myself in this way, you know? [My motivations] have definitely refined and changed in a sense that I’ve added to them, like I enjoy exploring sharing out of my own experience... I don’t just talk about trans stuff. I also talk about veteran stuff. I was deployed to Iraq with the United States Marine Corp. That is something that is just such a huge part... So, it’s definitely still focused on relating information and helping others, helping to reduce shame in others.

Milo just turned 18 and currently has 10,779<sup>90</sup> subscribers to their channel, which provides this description: “I’m Milo (he or they pronouns). I’m a non-binary, trans, asexual, aromantic q\*eer who doesn’t care about your cisgender feelings.”<sup>91</sup> He started his YouTube channel when he was about 13 because of their vague interest in film and “because [he was] a teenager and it was the cool thing to do.” Milo shared the following when asked his role as a white non-binary trans

Youtuber:

Well, I don’t think that me adding my perspective on YouTube really adds a whole lot of stories that are not already being shared, because even though there aren’t many mainstream popular YouTubers who are non-binary or even like trans talking about their experiences, there’s still a lot of white non-binary people on YouTube and elsewhere on other social media platforms.

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89. Shaetanica Sanguine, “About Description,” YouTube, accessed June 14, 2016, [https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCT5TKQaqH7017aln\\_clB9IQ/about](https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCT5TKQaqH7017aln_clB9IQ/about).

90. Updated July 23, 2016

91. Milo Stewart, “About Description,” YouTube, accessed June 15, 2016, <https://www.youtube.com/user/RoryDeganRepresent/about>.

Shaetanica also discussed the privilege that accompanies having the platform of YouTube as a white non-binary trans person.

We, as white people, are constantly the ones who are lifted up to these positions... I try to bring and keep the perspective of people of color in conversation... because it's not just about me as a white, trans, queer, et cetera, whatever. It's about the active conversation between me including this other group... I try not to put myself on a pedestal without bringing others with me, if that makes sense... I don't want to have everything focused on myself, as a perspective from a white person, although that's really all I can talk about... Part of it is, I think, because a lot of the videos I have made to date haven't necessarily been external, you know? I've done a lot of videos from just personal things about emotions and struggling with different things and you know, whatever's going on in my life... I've received so much push back from different people. And I guess what I'm saying is people outside of the trans community. Like, I want to connect with people in the trans community, but I also want to reach out and cross these societal barriers there are between all these different fractioned groups, right?... I just feel like we're all yelling at each other without listening to the other person... I see POC issues the same way, because we don't have these conversations as white people, and if you do, then you're playing the race card and it's all this other bullshit.

Shaetanica further clarified her experience with people saying that she is “playing the race card.”

If I, as a white person, start engaging with other white people on the subject of systemic racism and oppression of people of color, that is what I am told; that I am somehow “playing the race card.” It is a response that I have gotten from white people who are either not ready or incapable of being able to look at how they themselves are perpetuating the oppression of people of color.<sup>92</sup>

As per vlogging style conventions, vloggers generally speak from their own experience unless they are specifically creating collaborative dialogue with another vlogger with different identities and perspectives. Through the comments on Shaetanica's videos, in addition to her reflections during our interview, it is clear that her audience primarily consists of other white (mostly transfeminine) people. Though Shaetanica recognizes her privilege as a white non-binary trans YouTuber and has created videos involving race, for instance she mentioned racist and transphobic jokes being posted on Facebook, she often finds it difficult to talk about race with

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92. Shaetanica Sanguine, e-mail message to author, June 14, 2016.

other white people. Because white people are generally lacking in meaningful language around race and white supremacy, it can be tricky for Shaetanica and other white trans vloggers to challenge the whiteness informing transnormativity.<sup>93</sup> Though white people interrogating whiteness is necessary work, it is also necessary for trans people of color to continue sharing their stories on YouTube.

For example, Melvin created another video (Figure 3) in which he shares situations in which he, as a Black trans man who was at that time dating a cis woman, is struggling with racism differently since beginning HRT and becoming more aware of the ways his body is being “racialized and gendered and how other people are picking up on that.” He explained it as “white men viewing [him] with contempt before.” He continued, “Living as a Black woman, I felt invisible much of the time, in terms of getting passed over, looked over, talked over, this that and the other.” He expressed feeling more invisible in some situations, such as when being ignored trying to get a drink at a gay bar during Pride weekend and hypervisible in other situations, such as when white people viscerally reacted toward him in rural towns with his partner. He was unable to distinguish whether people were discriminatory toward him due to him and his girlfriend being read as lesbians, them being an interracial couple, because he is a Black man, or something else.

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93. Robin DiAngelo, “White Fragility: Why It’s So Hard to Talk to White People About Racism,” *The Good Men Project*, April 9, 2015, accessed July 25, 2016, <https://goodmenproject.com/featured-content/white-fragility-why-its-so-hard-to-talk-to-white-people-about-racism-twlm/>.



**Figure 3: “Week 24 on T: Invisibility/Hypervisibility”** Source: itsGOTtobegroovy, “Week 24 on T: Invisibility/Hypervisibility,” YouTube, October 18, 2010, accessed June 18, 2016, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BftGR0Ezbco>.

Melvin found his role within trans visibility to include countering some of the messages portrayed by mainstream media.

I hope that it brings a wider lens to thinking about trans issues and trans people, beyond what we see in mass media with people like Caitlyn Jenner. Because of her background and experiences, she is not, well no one’s background and experiences are representative of trans communities. I think that people who can bring some counternarratives to the table, I think that will definitely broaden people’s knowledge about things that trans people can go through, can experience, and do experience.

Melvin wishes for the future of trans YouTube to include less of a focus on physical changes and more of a focus on educating people about trans issues. He elaborated,

I want there to be more discussions, more experiences represented. And just getting away from just discussing the superficial aspects of transition. I think that we’re in a great place right now with all of that, with the trans visibility... I love that social media has made a way for trans people to meet each other. Even if trans person is in a rural area, if they have access to internet, they can meet other trans people, see other trans people, and I think that that is a great direction. That just makes me so happy that we’re at this point. We’re in the 21st century, and this is a reality.

Darnelle, 21, started her first YouTube channel during middle school in 2007 before she identified as trans because back then she “didn’t know being trans was a thing.” She remembers living around other gay people but did not know of any trans people at the time. Her channel’s content began with “crude” comedy and has since largely been focused on beauty. She often vlogs about being in nursing school and the issues she faces as a trans woman of color, such as encountering racist men on dating apps and dealing with her family not respecting her trans identity. She currently has 2,734<sup>94</sup> subscribers to her main channel, lives in a rural area of Missouri, and is a partner with Style Haul, from whom she receives perks and opportunities similar to Shaetanica’s partnership, such as having access to a library of songs that she is able to use in her videos (which allows her to evade copyright issues) and reviewing merchandise for brands. In her channel description she states, “You are better than anyone who thinks they are better than you. #FLAWLESS” and provides a link to her personal FameBit account where people can view her social media statistics and potentially hire her for campaigns on YouTube, Twitter, and Facebook.<sup>95</sup> Darnelle described her motivations behind starting and maintaining her channels as remaining consistent but her content as evolving.

When I started it was more comedy. I did it mainly because I saw it as a way I could connect with people, because I didn’t really have anyone in my life to connect with with what I was going through. So it was more for the support than anything, and I still do it. It’s something I like to do... I get the occasional comment where somebody’s like, “Your video really helped me. It’s gotten me through hard times in my life.” ...I don’t really do comedy really anymore. It’s more like beauty and makeup and all that, so I think my content has changed, but the reasoning behind why I do it really hasn’t changed.

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94. Updated July 23, 2016

95. Darnelle Scott, “About Description,” YouTube, accessed June 9, 2016, <https://www.youtube.com/user/juicyjuice501/about>.



Darnelle explained that she “think[s] YouTube is open to anyone, but [she] think[s] the topic is kind of self-directing toward certain groups of people.” Like Melvin, Darnelle sees her role within trans visibility as countering mainstream media coverage about trans people.

I think because I’m going through a lot and everything that I go through I tend to put on YouTube, what that is doing is allowing people to see that this is a real issue. Like the bathroom thing is an issue, the hormones, if you saw a video I put up, I was denied hormones. I think when we do that, it just brings light on the subject, that this is a real thing... Until someone steps up and says something, no one is going to know, you know what I’m saying? ...With Caitlyn Jenner and things like that, I think the media only puts out there the good things. They never put out there about the fact that trans women are getting denied hormones. They’re getting denied basic medical services. They’re getting denied a safe, the bathroom thing is kind of out there so that’s kind of a good thing, but it never was a problem, until now... I mean, they show murders and stuff like that, but they never show, you know, being denied hormones and just, the day to day life behind a trans person... There’s not a TV show following someone like me around. I mean Caitlyn Jenner is fine but she comes from a different life, and most trans people don’t come from a background that she’s from. So, I think more and more trans women and men need to start sharing the different things that they’re going through.

Darnelle is one such trans person that the “born in the wrong body” expression resonates with on some level. She explained,

I will say that it’s part of it, but it’s definitely not all of it. I think people get caught up on the whole “in the wrong body” like you said, but for me it’s more about playing the role as woman in life... When you go out in public, you’re not naked, you’re not sharing, you know, your body. That’s a personal thing... I think that phrase should be expanded on, and I think it should be “born in the wrong role.” That’s what think they should change it to, because it’s not just your body that you have a problem with, it’s the whole role... If someone’s identity is important to them, it’s the difference between not being stable and being stable.

Darnelle’s channel essentially fills the role of “a TV show following someone like [her] around” but on a much smaller scale. In addition to posting topic videos, makeup tutorials, and product reviews, Darnelle has filmed vlogs from her phone throughout her day: as she’s getting ready in the morning, as she goes to the store or the gym, as she’s heading to take her nursing school finals, as she’s leaving the library, while she’s out for dinner at Olive Garden. During these vlogs, viewers learn intimate details about her life. In just one 4 minute, 28 second video (Figure

4) recorded on her phone on the way to a work meeting, viewers learn that she has some kind of feelings about how she “hasn’t even started to work yet,” that she “has to shave every dang day,” that she has a goal of receiving laser hair removal treatments, that she enjoys taking selfies after she finishes getting ready, and that she is not out as trans to everyone at school, some of which who are friends with her on Snapchat. Though she is publicly out as trans on YouTube, she was uncomfortable with how there were 30 views on her Snapchat video that she accidentally posted to her story (instead of in a personal message) revealing her facial hair.



**Figure 4: “MY SNAPCHAT MISTAKE!!!! THEY ALL KNOW IM TRANSGENDER NOW IF THEY DIDNT BEFORE”** Source: Darnelle Scott, “MY SNAPCHAT MISTAKE!!!! THEY ALL KNOW IM TRANSGENDER NOW IF THEY DIDNT BEFORE,” YouTube, June 6, 2016, accessed June 18, 2016, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CVfgOjS6vM>.

Responses to this video included all preferred readings. Alejandra Cardona complimented Darnelle and her sense of humor by writing, “Don’t worry girl, we all send snaps by mistake

lol.”<sup>96</sup> Darnelle reported receiving few hateful comments and did not express being concerned by them.

I let them comment and do whatever they want, cause a view’s a view and a comment’s a comment... I have to say that a lot of times people report my, like the trans videos, people report them, trying to get them taken down. And every time someone reports one of my videos, it sends me a notification, but they never take them down. I think that’s more of an annoyance than a difficulty.

When asked what moments stood out to her since creating her first YouTube channel, she shared that she really enjoyed creating a collaboration with Davey Wavey (Figure 5) as well as “getting 1,000 subscribers.” She continued, “I mean, that was crazy. Which happened a couple years ago but just knowing that a thousand have subscribed to you... I mean some people have millions of people watching them but a thousand is just like, you know, that’s like my whole town I live in... It’s still kind of strange that people wanna watch me.”

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96. Alejandra Cardona, YouTube comment, 1 week ago, accessed June 19, 2016, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CVfgOIjS6vM>.



**Figure 5: “What To Say To A Transgendered Person feat. Davey Wavey | Darnelle Scott”**  
Source: Darnelle Scott, “What To Say To A Transgendered Person feat. Davey Wavey | Darnelle Scott,” YouTube, uploaded January 31, 2016, accessed June 10, 2016, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XevprxVvsd8>.

In addition to videos about work interactions and other topics related to coming out as a non-binary trans person and being on testosterone, Love is Vulnerability has made several videos specifically addressing their experiences coming out to Fundamentalist Christian family members. They began one such video by sharing that they “come from a very conservative Evangelical Christian background,” that they “even went to bible college for a couple years after high school,” and that their “parents met on a mission trip.” Though Love is Vulnerability’s posture toward Christianity has shifted greatly, they are still attempting to maintain a relationship with their family members who hold conservative fundamentalist Christian beliefs that are at odds with their trans identity. This particular video is just over 14 minutes long and, as most of their other vlogs, reflects the familiar “talking torso” style. It is recorded in a home office setting. Viewers may notice their bookshelf, stacked totes, and bottle of lotion behind them to their left

or another desk covered with miscellaneous items such as nail polishes and an empty cereal bowl behind them to their right. As they swivel in their desk chair and move closer and further away from the screen, one may get a sense of the emotions they might be feeling through their facial expressions and gestures toward the camera. Audiences may feel as if they are having a serious conversation with a friend over Skype or another video chat service.

Throughout the video, they shared intimate details of their journey throughout their process of coming out, from hurtful emails from their mother, supportive phone conversations with their older sister, to useful conversations with their partner and therapist. While they hold space for atheists, they imparted this message to viewers who are potentially going through similar situations or struggling with their Christian beliefs:

If you came out as whatever you are and you worry that God doesn't like you anymore, I just want to tell you that that's not true. God really likes you and loves you and created you to be the person that you are and that you're becoming, and I hope that you take that to heart... Things are hard, and your relationship with God is sometimes as difficult as relationships with people. It takes time to heal. It takes time to understand each other. Well, I think God understands you, but it might take you a while to understand who God is or what version of God is real, whether it's the version that was thrown on you at church or that you thought you saw or it's a version of God that you're still in the middle of trying to understand... God made you who you are. Okay? *Who you are*. And your body is one part of that, and your history is one part of that. But who you are is the version of you that's motivating this change, through coming out or through identifying differently or through hormones or through surgery or through whatever process you're gonna go through or not go through. That's you, and God made you to be that person.<sup>97</sup>

Three individual users commented on this video, each having preferred readings. Ace Daws wrote, "omg im crying!!! my family is evangelical reformed presbyterian and im ftm. im still a christian. im so fuking scared of telling my dad and this was vey encouraging. i still dont know

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97. Love is Vulnerability, "Coming out to Fundamentalist Christian Family – 8 weeks on T," YouTube, February 16, 2015, accessed June 18, 2016, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2I1-N4TWKSU>.

when or how to tell him, but i have an idea now. i seriously give you mad props dude.”<sup>98</sup> Another user, E Grantham, stated,

Thank you so much for this! My family is Pentecostal, and they take Christianity very seriously. (Everything they do revolves around God.) Unfortunately, though, like your family, their beliefs are very non-affirming, a circumstance that has really made me reevaluate my faith. Although I still believe (obviously differently than they do), there’s definitely a huge emotional divide between them and I, but as of late, I’ve been coming to terms with the fact that I don’t need their "approval"/emotional guidance... I’m completely out (also as non-binary trans) and am doing okay without their support. P.S. I’ve been really enjoying following your journey! (both on here and on tumblr) P.P.S. I would definitely be interested in hearing of how you walked away from their brand of Christianity!<sup>99</sup>

After sharing their experience, another commenter wrote, “i haven’t really commented or anything, but i’ve been following your videos and i appreciate you putting your experience out there. it’s nice to hear about others’ situations because it makes me feel... a little less alone in mine, i guess. so thank you. :).”<sup>100</sup> In response to these comments, Love Is Vulnerability offered reassuring words of support and expressed a thankfulness for the connection that making YouTube vlogs has enabled them to create. Tumblr links were provided in the description, for those interested in reading the full correspondences with their family members. In addition to these three commenters, this video has received 163 views, two likes, and zero dislikes and is among the top five most viewed videos on their channel.<sup>101</sup> One could postulate that viewers could have felt a connection with Love is Vulnerability’s story but chose not to engage directly.

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98. Ace Daws, YouTube comment, June 12, 2016, access June 18, 2016, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2I1-N4TWKSU>.

99. E Grantham, YouTube comment, 1 year ago, accessed June 18, 2016, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2I1-N4TWKSU>.

100. QueerAsCat, YouTube comment, 1 year ago, accessed June 19, 2016, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2I1-N4TWKSU>.

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Many found it rewarding to use the medium of YouTube to relay information and found that by sharing various aspects of their life and identities in a visible way, they were both providing support for other trans people and encouraging understanding from non-trans people. In addition to building connections, these individuals have experienced personal enjoyment in having access to a platform to express themselves creatively.

### ***2.1.2 Broadening Use of Language***

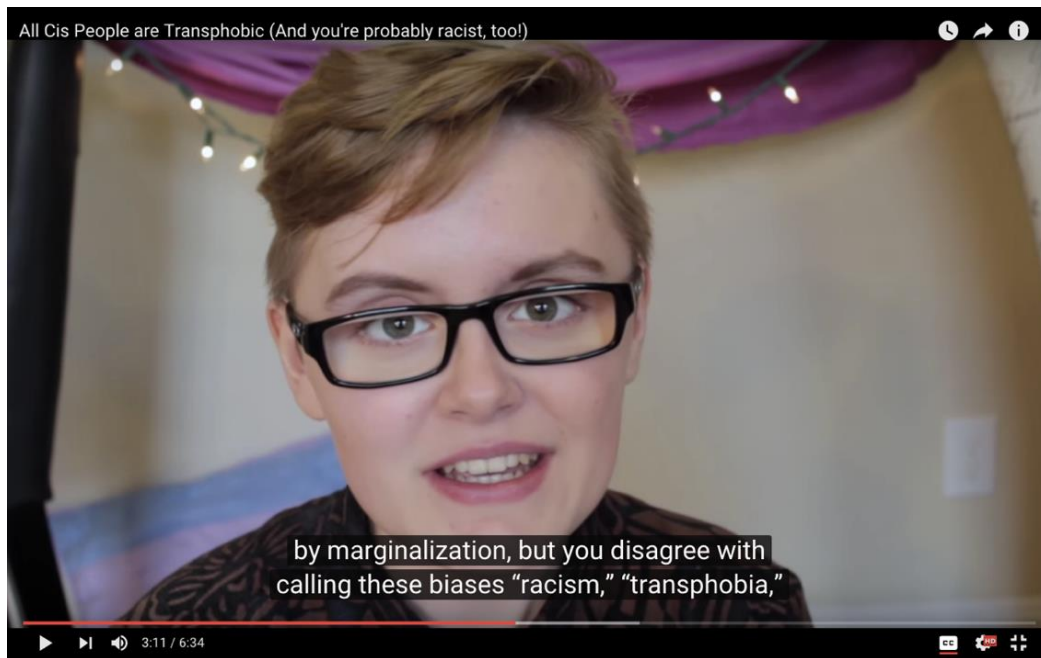
Although Darnelle has had mostly positive interactions as a YouTuber, oppositional readings are common throughout trans YouTube. Amongst the many resistive and oppositional readings of trans YouTube videos is a theme of disagreement over the definition of words, such as *trans*, *gender*, *sex*, and *racism*. Milo, in particular, has received a large amount of resistance to their videos. He reflected,

Certainly there are ways that I could have worded my controversial videos to not, you know, maybe get... that defensive [of a] reaction, but I think that people are going to be defensive in general when being called out on being transphobic and that I really can't do anything about that. It's not worth my energy to try to take my activism very, very slow, give out very bite size bits of activism and education in my videos so that people don't get defensive about it.

In one of Milo's highly-controversial videos (Figure 6) titled, "All Cis People are Transphobic (And you're probably racist, too!)," he stated, "If you've followed me this far and you agree that all people are psychologically affected by marginalization, but you disagree with calling these biases *racism*, *transphobia*, or *misogyny*, then there's really no point in arguing further." I asked Milo if he could elaborate or give an example of these types of disagreements.

I don't know that [once the conversation boils down to disagreement over the definition of words, the conversation will not be productive] is necessarily true in all cases because certainly the meaning of words is certainly extremely important... When we're debating a word... a lot of the times it's between a feminist-y or a queer circle and then anti-feminist people, a lot of it is over whether or not like racism can be applied to white people, like can white people face racism. Certainly everyone agrees that, you know, people can say nasty things towards white people because they're white, but then we

disagree over what term to use for that. I think that those conversations are not productive because everyone feels so strongly about what that word should mean... Words can have different meanings to different people. I think we understand the basic concepts that you can insult white people but white people do not face the same levels of discrimination that Black people do or cis people do not face the same level of discrimination that trans people do. So, on that level, it's not productive to argue... over a word where people generally agree to what we're talking about but don't see eye-to-eye on what term should be used for that.



**Figure 6:** “All Cis People are Transphobic (And you’re probably racist, too!)” Source: Milo Stewart, “All Cis People are Transphobic (And you’re probably racist, too!),” YouTube, April 20, 2016, accessed June 25, 2016, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=E5Brqo0vSNE>.

In response to people attempting to discredit Milo, his gender expression, and his gender identity, Milo created a video (Figure 7) titled, “You don’t have to prove your gender!” This video was filmed in a bedroom setting in high quality picture, creating a sense of closeness for the viewer. A bunkbed is to his left decorated with white Christmas lights, paintings are on the floor against the wall behind him, and a large pink rose in a vase is near the corner of the bedroom behind him to his right. For most of the video, Milo spoke in a “talking torso” format, though there are moments where he steps back from the camera to show his full attire of tightly-



fitting black short shorts, a black and white looser fitting t-shirt, and a flowered tie and later in the video, an oversized black jacket.

Milo responded to many controversial opinions held about trans people and how we should look, think, and behave. While he encouraged viewers to allow themselves to feel comfortable and have fun with their gender identity and expression through the example of his own creative gender play, his understanding of *gender* as being socially constructed and having performative aspects is vastly different than the common conception of *gender* as synonymous with biological sex. His attempts to explain how everyone experiences gender differently based on factors such as our culture, our personal attributes, our interactions with the “male or female or gender non-conforming figures we have in our lives,” and how labels can “only get so close to describing the actual phenomena that is gender” received, for the most part, oppositional readings, revealed by the 2,740 of predominantly oppositional comments and the video’s 8.77 ratio of 6,116 dislikes to 697 likes.<sup>102</sup> Some comments reveal a complete rejection of the encoded ideology that there are more than two genders or that trans people face any kind of oppression. Though his snarky humor and insistence that he does not care who he offends just for being himself perhaps provokes defensive reactions, many commenters have chosen to use the comment section on Milo’s videos as forums for their racist, sexist, homophobic, ableist, and misogynist ideologies.

Some of the most shocking comments come from trans people or non-trans people attacking Milo in the name of trans people. One commenter stated, “You are NOT trans gendered. If you were going from a female to male you would try everything you could to look, sound and act like a guy. You wouldn’t dress in feminine clothes or wear makeup. Stop

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pretending to be trans, you are not helping actual trans people to live their lives.”<sup>103</sup> Yasper

Madmoon wrote,

This is just about personality and receiving your body as a positive thing and dealing with it. While you stupid feminist somehow direct it to... Transgender people being oppressed? WHAT. I see myself as a male and I am born in female body. SO WHAT. I don't need to change anything that a person 200 years ago wouldn't/couldn't. It's unnatural, unhealthy and excessive. It is purely directed to looking good to OTHER PEOPLE. But okay. This video is s\*\*t since you're Milo. Still shouting to innocent people who didn't remember your pronouns or didn't want to remember is NOT OKAY. Being aggressive to everybody about this issue isn't going to solve anything. Trans bathrooms are excessive to me since girl's bathroom smells much nicer usually. Where you go drop a s\*\*t doesn't have anything to do with gender. You're SO sensitive. EWW.<sup>104</sup>



**Figure 7:** “You don’t have to prove your gender!” Source: Milo Stewart, “You don’t have to prove your gender!,” YouTube, May 25, 2016, accessed June 16, 2016, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5zq1UWM7W0Q>.

When asked how he deals with all of the negative interactions he has had with his viewers, Milo responded in an exasperated kind of way, “Not well.” He continued,

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103. TheRogueWerewolf, YouTube comment, 1 week ago, access June 19, 2016, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5zq1UWM7W0Q>.

104. Yasper Madmoon, YouTube comment, June 18, 2016, accessed June 19, 2016, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5zq1UWM7W0Q>.

Most of the time I just make myself *not* read comments or just *not* involve myself in that drama because it is not productive... A lot of it is super personal attacks or just like dumb insults people use online. A lot of it is also people who maybe are LGBT, but they see me as a threat to the community for some reason. They think that I'm too outside of the normal narrative of being a trans person. They don't think that I am "really trans."

In his video, he started a "76genders" hashtag for people of all gender identities and expressions to post on social media. Many have chosen to use #76genders to mock Milo on Twitter, YouTube, Instagram, and personal blogs. It is unclear why Milo is the target of such a disproportionate number of negative reactions; however, interactions with his videos show that one cannot assume YouTube will inherently foster connection or community building, despite a YouTuber's best intentions. Ariel expressed similar opinions as Milo about the importance of language for trans people.

Obviously, the language that you use to describe your identity isn't all of what your identity is... What's difficult about being trans, I think even more so than just being gay or being bisexual or being pansexual or being asexual. I think those identities don't become as much about language as being trans because I think being trans is very much about how people perceive you, how people label you, how people talk about you, how people behave around you... I think the thing that people have to keep in mind is that it's gonna constantly evolve. The way we talk about gender now, gender identity now, is not gonna be how we talk about it in the future... Language is a very powerful tool and the fact is, people from different backgrounds, people from different kinds of privilege, frankly, have different ways of speaking about different things.

As a non-binary person, Shaetanica finds it frustrating when people use the "born in the wrong body" expression. She saliently said, "I don't like it. My body is mine, and I love my body. I'm not in the wrong body. I'm just in the wrong culture, a culture that doesn't acknowledge that penis-having bodies can be femmes or females or women and vagina-having bodies can be masculines or men or whatever else. I'm in the wrong society. Or at the wrong time. I'm not in the wrong body."

Shaetanica's channel, in part, works to expand peoples' understandings of gender. In a short 2 minute and 4 second video (Figure 8), she explained how she understands gender to be a

construct, how she sees her non-binary identity fitting into that understanding, and how rewarding it has been to honor both the masculine and feminine aspects of her identity. Referring to one of her previous videos, she explained how it is not mutually exclusive to like “having both an overgrown clit and being a chick with a dick.” YouTube provides a platform for Shaetanica to express her gender and educate others in an easily understandable way. Viewers are invited in through her use of the vlogging style and the playful nature in which she presents her lived experiences.



**Figure 8: “I’m non-binary! What does it mean? (MTF Transgender)”** Source: Shaetanica Sanguine, “I’m non-binary! What does it mean? (MTF Transgender),” YouTube, November 28, 2015, accessed June 16, 2016, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kU-YqfFN4fs>.

This video has received 672 views, 28 likes, and 1 dislike.<sup>105</sup> Victoria R. responded to Shaetanica’s video with a negotiated reading, commenting with, “Just don’t invalidate those of us who still adhere to the binary!,” followed by, “It seems a bit of a common theme among

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people these days, is all. It's a huge counterargument used against trans folk as well, which is absolutely absurd but I was just reminding folk that some of us do still adhere to it!"<sup>106</sup> Victoria R.'s responses reflected an alternative decoded message without devaluing Shaetanica's encoded message while still expressing that Shaetanica's experience of transness should not be generalized. While most of Shaetanica's interactions have been positive, she has had trolls comment on her videos. She explained,

What I don't get, what *I* don't get, is trolls will subscribe to you. It's like, that's your life? You just want to go hate on people on the internet, like, that's, okay, like, I just, it's just... It's unfortunate that this kind of disagreement, I guess, at the core is so inherently negative and vile... I know YouTube does a better job than Facebook, I feel, about regulating certain kinds of comments... You know, they say "Don't feed the trolls." I feed 'em sometimes, you know, and part of it I see is as a way for me to practice with people, with people who are just ridiculous, you know, practice seeing if I can't back them into a corner somehow, where they can see themselves. I don't know if it's something that I've been able to do, but it's something that I keep in mind when I choose to interact with these people... It doesn't happen very often where people are negative at me and then it turns into a positive thing, but I really like when it does.

Reflecting back on the first upload to their channel, Love is Vulnerability highlighted the importance of having finding accurate language to describe one's gender identity.

I don't actually go back to my earlier videos very often because I feel really uncomfortable looking at myself at that time, but there have been a couple moments where I've gone back to that first video because I remember how jolting it felt to say out loud "I'm a non-binary transgender person." And, I think my face looked surprised because *I was* surprised. I think that was an important moment for me.

In this introductory video, Love is Vulnerability talked about how one of their motivations for starting a YouTube channel was to add to the diversity of stories being heard about trans people. They explained how their motivations have become more self-focused since they first started vlogging.

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106. Victoria R., YouTube comment, 6 months ago, accessed June 19, 2016, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kU-YqfFN4fs>.

I think as time went on I realized I was doing it more *for myself* than I was for any community because so few people were actually watching... I hadn't really thought that much about how useful and beneficial it would be *to myself*. In general, I think I started out just kind of not knowing for sure what was going to happen, so I guess I'm in the same place... In terms of the diversity of stories, yes, I think that's still important and so, still, every time I make a video, I try to put all the tags in there, because when I was starting watching YouTube videos, it was like the same type of people over and over again that I saw. Not to make their stories sound boring or anything, but it was a bunch of white F to M guys that I was watching. That just wasn't really me and so I think it kind of warped what I thought I wanted. I started trying to look for other people, other kinds of narratives, and I found some, but sometimes it's just difficult to find them. So I wanted to have mine available should it be useful to anybody... Every once in a while I'll get a note. And you know, somebody's watching them! Not that many. *Really*, not that many... but views go up. I don't think it's just magic that makes that happen, so somebody is watching them.

Love Is Vulnerability tries to keep *non-binary* in their video titles as a way to make sure that their videos are available to anyone specifically seeking out videos created by non-binary trans people. In addition to this motivation for including the descriptor *non-binary* is so that people do not assume they identify as FTM. They elaborated,

And they still do [assume I identify as FTM]. Like someone sent me a note on Tumblr, I don't know, three weeks ago or something, asking me about what I thought about white people thinking that the historical character or the historical person of Mulan that the cartoon is based on, you know, what I thought about people assuming that that person was F to M, and they, in their question, were like "As a Chinese F to M person, you know, what do you think?" And so, people just still get confused on that, so I'm just triple emphasizing. Every time.

Love Is Vulnerability offered this explanation as to why non-binary voices are invisible in the media: "Well, probably just because it's hard to understand. I mean gender, in general, is hard to understand. And it's just sheer numbers. People don't get it. Um, social construction of gender! It's hard to talk about to anybody that doesn't know. And even trans people, it's hard to talk to trans people about it and not everybody recognizes that."

Ariel's channel is often used to discuss highly-contested terminology that gender and sexual minorities use to describe their experiences, identities, and opinions, such as cissexism,

TransFace, non-binary, aromanticism, and pansexuality.<sup>107</sup> Ariel is 21 and will be a senior in college next year. Ve started a new vlog in May 2014 that highlights “trans issues, gender issues, and other issues and videos of ver performing.”<sup>108</sup> This channel currently has 660 subscribers.<sup>109</sup> In addition to encouraging acceptance from people with differing understandings of gender, Ariel’s motivations inspiring ver vlog included wanting to support other trans and queer people, especially trans or gender non-conforming youth.

I hope that my channel inspires other trans people, particularly some people who are feeling confused about their gender or aren’t feeling like people will accept them for who they are, to feel like they can have a future and they can be happy and they can find people who will accept them for who they are... particularly for people who don’t feel like they fit into the binary genders, you know people who don’t feel like they are male or don’t feel like they’re female... There’s kind of this expectation that you are going to be *something* that I think people just instinctually have.

Ariel spoke on the unintentional effects of “politically correct” language enforced by both trans and non-trans people.

One shouldn’t simplify the trans experience overall, and I think language like being “born in the wrong body” or suggesting that being trans requires someone to have body dysphoria of some kind inherently or like the narrative that you’re going from one gender to another gender. I think when people are inherently sticking to that kind of narrative and always kind of going with that, I think that’s problematic... I think there is a point where you do get too caught up in political correctness, and you’re not willing to listen to someone. I think if there’s a transgender narrative that’s kind of politically correct or if there’s like a politically correct way to describe *one’s own* trans narrative, for example if you *can’t* say you’re born in the wrong body, if that’s something like one shouldn’t say about their experience, if someone can’t say “I was a boy and now I am a girl,” if we’re saying, “Well no no, you were always a girl” and correcting people, that does a disservice to people who maybe do feel like, maybe someone who comes out later in life, they have to kind of understand their identity in a way, “Well, now I’m this person, but I was this person.”...I think that we should have room for trans perspectives that aren’t necessarily told in a way that we necessarily relate to or that certain people relate to or that *I* relate to,

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107. Ariel explains TransFace as when cisgender actors play transgender characters.

108. Ve/ver/vis are gender-neutral pronouns. Ariel Violet, “About Description,” YouTube, accessed June 9, 2016,

<https://www.youtube.com/user/QueenArielViolet/about>.

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because there's always gonna be diversity in how transgender people understand their identity.

In addition to the many hegemonic oppositional readings, many commenters, such as COURTNEYS AUNT SARA, have been unable or unwilling to understand the language Ariel used to convey the importance of self-identification and ver message that some trans activism is harmful. In this resistive reading, COURTNEYS AUNT SARA stated,

ok wait so a cis is a person born a say a woman and feels as a woman and lives as a woman but is same same gay? What? SERIOUS QUESTION; after watching a tone of gender based videos how do so many in the LGBT community live a normal life when even the definitions are soooo confusing. Ex. gender fluid, gender queer, or my favorite " Non-Binary". Really? Why make it all so convoluted and hard to understand.<sup>110</sup>

Evidenced by comments to many trans YouTube videos, deviations from the most common language used by trans people are not always well-received. With greater representation of trans people that deviate from transnormativity in some way comes resistance to changes in language in the form of hateful comments and messages expressing one's biases and prejudices. This can be especially discouraging when coming from other people who identify with a gender or sexual minority.

## ***2.2 Obstacles to Challenging Transnormativity***

Previous studies, as well as several of my interviewees, have revealed “community” as a strong reason people are drawn to YouTube. To better understand the challenges one may face in using YouTube to challenge transnormativity, it is helpful to further conceptualize and interrogate what community means and looks like for trans YouTubers who are both consuming trans videos as well as producing their own content. From my analyses regarding community, I have concluded that the reach of messages challenging transnormativity can be limited by

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110. COURTNEYS AUNT SARA, YouTube comment, 10 months ago, accessed June 19, 2016, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Wx4s1Thr2CI>.



divisions between trans YouTube communities due to segmented audiences as well as tensions between gender and sexual minority communities.

### *2.2.1 Segmented Audiences*

Though trans YouTubers do have some interactions with their viewers through comments and messages, the virtual community YouTube offers might include more silent connection with others' lives as opposed to frequent personal interactions and outward signs of support. Trans YouTube, as with other subcultural online spaces, becomes whatever its users make it. Melvin does not believe there is one unified trans community, on YouTube or otherwise. He prefers to use the language of "trans communities."

In my observation, I've seen more and more young people documenting their transition since I started in 2009/2010, and I see a diversity of gender identities. I think earlier on you just saw trans women and trans men and not a lot of gay trans men. Like there were mostly straight trans men, straight trans women who were feminine. Masculine trans men were straight. I see just a proliferation of different kinds of trans folks, and I've also seen a diversity in terms of, more recently, like super recently, more diversity in terms of how people talk about transition. Because I think back then a lot of people focused on the physical stuff, maybe social interactions, but I'm seeing more recently people getting into deeper discussions and different nuances related to gender and transition, so that's been great.

Although, as Melvin pointed out, trans YouTube is becoming more diverse in terms of a multiplicity of voices and experiences, trans YouTube audiences are segmented largely based on common interests and a desire for resources that are not necessarily applicable to all trans people. Viewers seek out videos that reflect their interests and identities, thereby affirming their preconceived notions about transgender. Though this segmentation offers some form of community and knowledge sharing for many trans people, trans YouTube audience segmentation poses difficulties for the reach of messages challenging transnormativity.

Because of the fact that YouTube is such a public forum, issues of privacy are a factor for some trans YouTubers. Melvin explained that after many trans men have top surgery, they don't

feel connected to the label “trans” any longer and just “want to live their lives as men.” For other trans people, they may discontinue their channel in order to “live a no disclosure life,” and still for others, personal issues might get in the way of maintaining an active vlog. Love is Vulnerability shared positive feelings about the connections they made on YouTube especially during their coming out process, though they also acknowledged that perhaps because of infrequency of their video posts and comments, the “kind of community that [they have] been involved in... has just been very slight.” They also discussed concerns about their students and family’s reactions if they were to make their content more accessible.

When I was trying to come out to my mom, I think sharing the experience that I was going through online, whether through Tumblr or through YouTube, kind of helped make me feel like it was a little more worthwhile instead of it just being my pain and suffering that I was dealing with. I was at least making it available to other people who might go through a similar circumstance or something like that... I don’t know how many hours I’ve spent online watching other people’s videos probably years before I was ever making any kind of videos myself... Just knowing about different types of trans people, I think, was really helpful and seeing other people changing helped me imagine that that might be okay. I mean, even though I knew it was okay, it’s really hard when you’re applying it to yourself. I think that, for me, it just helped to have more and more and more images of people doing that and talking about it and talking about having troubles with it but still finding it worthwhile and still being happy that they made that decision... If I ever decide to have any kind of surgery, I’m sure I’ll be consuming a whole bunch more videos and commenting on other people’s stuff and following new people... But it’s awesome just to know you can call on people and you can ask them questions and most of them want to help you out, or if they don’t want to help you out it’s not because they don’t want to. It’s because maybe they’re not on YouTube that often.

While YouTube provides an outlet for Love is Vulnerability to express themselves, offer support to viewers struggling with similar situations, and challenge transnormativity through openly talking about their lived experiences, they do not have the viewership they expected when first creating their vlog. As they are Chinese-American, non-binary, and started their vlog in their 30’s, they embody many aspects that do not fit the stereotype of a “typical” trans vlogger. They do mention their medical transition in passing, though this is not the focus of their videos.

While their channel has a comparatively small number of followers, Love is Vulnerability found YouTube a great resource as a viewer. Melvin, Milo, Shaetanica, Darnelle, and Ariel all reiterated finding value in following other YouTube videos created by other gender and sexual minorities. In regards to who follows his vlog, Melvin indicated, “At first, yes [it was mostly transmasculine people following my channel]. However, a lot of women have also followed my vlog, either because they’re just curious and want to follow or just wanna watch my videos. I’d say it’s probably definitely half to three quarters of trans people and a fourth just friends or just people that are just curious.” Melvin reported few offline relationships with his followers, though many people have recognized him from his channel at various events and conferences he has attended. Melvin discussed one specific YouTubers very helpful as a viewer before he started HRT.

That was a long time ago. [*laughs*] I remember feeling encouraged by a lot of videos... There was this one guy who was an older trans man, African American. I think he was probably in his late 30’s/40’s, was physically transitioning. And working class. He spoke about how much his mother’s support meant to him. His mother supported him in every single way through his transition. She’s even in a couple of his videos. That video stands out to me years later because I had never seen, or at least at that point, I had not seen a Black parent, particularly a Black mother, support their transgender son in that way. I came out to my family last, and I did not come out to them until after I started my testosterone. I was very concerned about how that was going to go, and so I think when I was watching that video my reaction was, “Wow, this could be a possibility for me. I could get a positive reaction from my family, and not just be, you know, just be thrown out.”

Milo feels he has “a little bit of a LGBT community on YouTube that [he] belong to, amongst a lot of other smaller LGBT YouTubers.” Milo’s videos originally did not focus on his LGBT identities, but he was drawn to the trans YouTube community. He explained,

As I was figuring out my identity, I started watching a bunch of LGBT YouTubers to sort of help me figure out the process of coming out and figuring out what labels are right for you and that type of stuff, and I found just a wonderful trans community online that I really wanted to join, so I thought I would by trying to make my own videos... While I would still love to be part of a broader community, I feel like I have sort of found my

place in the online LGBT community. So, I don't think I'm making videos to search for that now. Now I feel like I'm put in much more of the position of being an educator, and I make YouTube videos just to share my life now. YouTube feels a lot more personal to me now, now that I have a lot of friends on YouTube and stuff like that.

YouTube videos and other new media have served as major sites for Milo's non-binary trans identity formation. He expressed these feelings about the "born in the wrong body" expression and his experiences using YouTube:

I think that I would have agreed with, that I felt that I was born in the wrong body, at one point in my transition. When I was starting to come out, I identified with the male identity a lot more strongly than I do now. I had a lot more dysphoria. I was watching a lot of YouTubers who were all getting top surgery, getting bottom surgery. I think I felt like I needed to be like that or *that* was the way to be trans, so I was like, "I am not female, so I must be this. I must be, like *this* must be wrong, because I knew that it wasn't right." And then I learned that, oh yeah, non-binary identities are a thing. There are different ways to be a trans male, other than just entirely transitioning entirely into you know, a body that's typically seen as male.

The other five interviewees each reported having few, if any, close relationships with other trans YouTubers. Shaetania's interactions were mostly with trans femme, trans female, and non-binary viewers, though she does have an upcoming video collaboration planned with a younger trans man who lives in Australia. Shaetania shared her thoughts on the value in YouTube trans community.

I was inspired by a lot of the videos I had seen, specifically in terms of transition stuff. In fact, it was another YouTuber's video that documented her transition that really connected with me because there was a lot of similarities between our stories. Both of us were in the Marines and had gotten married and all the, like tried to, tried *really* hard, right, to be this male person everybody thought we were... I have connected with members who comment on my videos, and I feel like there's definitely a community there.

Regarding the demographics of her subscribers, Darnelle stated that her viewership consisted of "a little bit of everybody," with a "large portion of them belong[ing] to the LGBT community."

Regarding her relationships with other trans YouTubers, she explained, "I have a lot of trans viewers. I mean, I watch other trans peoples' videos, like Gigi Gorgeous and Julie Vu. I like her,

but I don't have any close relationships with them. I think most of the interactions are between me and my viewers." Darnelle also noticed that her audience mostly consisted of viewers who reflect her race and gender identity.

I think most of people that reach out to me, that interact with me, are Black trans people. I do have a couple of white trans women who talk to me. I haven't really communicated with a trans man yet. Um, I'm not sure why, but, I think what it is, is trans men tend to stay around other trans men, and trans women stay around other trans women. I think it's a support thing. I would like it to be different, but I think that's just kind of default. Most people that I interact with and what I've seen is a lot of the trans women who I talk to and support me are Black trans women, so I think that's kind of what I've noticed. It's not really white trans women.

Love Is Vulnerability found the following story about a trans person they follow on YouTube but hasn't yet met in person quite comical:

Like there's some person that is a friend of a friend, and I watched all their YouTube videos. And so this friend that I know was saying, "Oh, I have this trans guy friend and I didn't realize that he was trans until really recently." He's telling me all these stories and I'm like [*strokes chin*], "So, what's your friend's name?" [*laughs*] And I know who this person is and so I know all this stuff about this person that even my friend, the one that I know, doesn't know. And so it's kind of, you know, there have been various times where this friend is like, "Oh, you know, we're gonna have a gathering and all these people are gonna be here," trying to get us connected because we're the only trans people that he knows. And, I don't know, it hasn't happened yet, but I'm always just thinking, "How am I gonna do this when I meet him in real life?" Because it's like, "So, how's your mom?" [*laughs*] "How are things going...?" I have these almost close encounters [with trans YouTubers]. Also, that same person, we had joined a common Facebook group for academic people, and like queer trans people of color stuff, and I wanted to be like, "Hey! I know you! That's cool!" But instead, I had to be like, "Oh, hi. Welcome to this group," because I don't want to freak people out that I know all about them and care deeply for them, and they have never met me.

Ariel discussed the way vlogging is particularly helpful.

Obviously watching YouTube videos can never replace human connection, can never replace real friendships that you have with people in your life... I know in both middle school and high school, there were a lot of times where I felt very isolated and I didn't feel very happy with where I was in my life. I think sometimes it is something that can help someone kind of get through a difficult time... Rather than simply just reading about something... actually seeing an actual person who you can see and relate to in some way, I think, can be very powerful.

As trans culture evolves, more expressions and understandings of trans lives are being represented on YouTube. One's self-image and self-understanding can be heavily informed by the available representations of race, gender, sexuality, and other social categories. Years of one's journey can be viewed simultaneously, providing support to people at various stages of their own gender journey or transition. While some elements of community are lost due to the nature of digital environments, trans YouTubers bring attention to issues not otherwise visible in mainstream media.

### *2.2.2 Tensions Between Gender and Sexual Minority Communities*

Though many trans people have made strong connections as viewers and as YouTubers, the following remarks by Shaetanica, Ariel, Milo, and Melvin further support my claim that although the accessibility of YouTube creates opportunities for community, the communities that trans people create are often exclusive. While many trans YouTubers desire broader community building with different kinds of trans people, this movement toward coalition building has yet to gain momentum. For example, Shaetanica has noticed division between transfeminine and transmasculine people, both online and offline. On what she wishes for the future of trans YouTube, she shared the following:

I would like to see less division, because I feel like no matter where you turn within the trans community, there's division... The two communities of transmasculine trans men and trans women or trans femmes in Portland do not talk to each other. They never interact with each other. There's a lot of hatred between these two groups of people in Portland, and I don't understand it. And the only thing I can think is they're not talking to each other. The few times that I brought up non-binary issues in the group that I was in, I didn't make any friends that way. I want there to be less of that. I want there to be more acceptance and less hate. There's too much of that already... I hear from non-binary people, definitely. I don't know that I have any transmasculine followers. Part of that I'm sure is because I'm not talking about a reality in which they can share, at this point. I realize that, in connecting with a group that is not your own, it's important to find common ground in order to be able to connect with, and I haven't been talking about any, I feel, or at least much, common ground. I have ideas to because, for example, why is toxic masculinity a thing with trans men or within the transmasculine community? Why,

like, didn't, like, don't you see it? And in the same way, like with the trans women community, it's the toxic femininity, picking everybody apart and all of that. There are things I want to talk about. I just haven't gotten to those common grounds.

Many YouTubers create video replies in hopes of generating dialogue between different audiences. Ariel shared this story about a video response ve published in June 2014:

I made one video [Figure 9] where I was responding to a situation where some people were essentially suggesting that Chris Crocker was not trans. It was a whole debacle... Then Chris Crocker saw it and shared it on Tumblr and Twitter. So, that was a little bit of an interaction I had, but I think that's about the extent [of interactions with other trans vloggers].

Because vlogging, specifically, displays the body as its main visual, "passing standards" are commonly hailed upon trans people whose appearances are not considered "normal." As ve explained, Ariel created a video response (Figure 9) to a specific incident in which trans activists labeled Chris Crocker a "privileged cisgender gay" after Chris Crocker, who "lived a lot of her life presenting herself as very female" and has recently started presenting herself in a more "masculine way," made a controversial video in support of Ru Paul. While Ariel recognized certain times when it is "appropriate to call cisgender people out on their privilege," ve stated that ve felt it was unfair to make assumptions about other people's gender identities and their relationship to those identities, even if they do identify with the gender they were assigned at birth. Ve elaborated, "Basically, trans people don't have a monopoly on struggles with gender identity." This video was recorded in the standard direct-address vlogging format and has received 5,110 views, 75 likes, and 30 dislikes,<sup>111</sup> most of the comments being from non-trans people.

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111. Updated July 20, 2016



**Figure 9: “Misgendering and/or Unfairly Dismissing People as Cisgender”** Source: Ariel Violet, “Misgendering and/or Unfairly Dismissing People as Cisgender,” YouTube, June 4, 2014, accessed June 9, 2016, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Wx4s1Thr2CI>.

Further supporting my claim that the vlogging genre conventions facilitate in the objectification of trans bodies, numerous comments were personal attacks on Ariel’s appearance, mannerisms, and assumed gender and sexuality. For instance, NEVER\_AGAIN commented in this oppositional reading, “DISGUSTING ! If ur born a guy you are a guy !!! You sir ... lady ..... IT have a mental disorder !!”<sup>112</sup> In another oppositional reading, Robert West wrote, “What do your parents think about you dressing up like an absolute freak. Are they proud that you waste your time talking about pronouns and multi-gender bullshit.”<sup>113</sup> Shaetanica’s thoughts on why there is such an emphasis on physical changes in YouTube videos provides some context for this sort of dismissal.

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112. NEVER\_AGAIN, YouTube comment, 1 year ago, accessed July 20, 2016, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Wx4s1Thr2CI>.

113. Robert West, YouTube comment, 1 year ago, accessed August 16, 2016, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Wx4s1Thr2CI>.



I think because, as a society, we are focused on the physical. I've been thinking a lot just even about my transition because, as a non-binary person, I hate the idea of there being this standard that people have to reach for them to be acceptable. It's frustrating because, you're right, so much of it is focused on the physical aspect. I tried to do my [transition] video [Figure 10] acknowledging the physical aspect but talking a lot about the internal trip, the internal journey along the way. But, still, I feel like so much that comes through is the physical because that's what, visually, what we see. I feel like, in a way, transition videos reinforce that passing standard... The last trans group I was in was segregated into trans women and trans men, and I never felt comfortable or accepted there. So much of the talking, so much of what was talked about, was focused on these physical binary passing standards. I think that that's why so many videos are focused on the physical, too, is because it's something we, within our own communities, breed. It was really frustrating for me. That was the first and only group I've been to so far that was segregated by gender. Not once in six months was there ever a legitimate conversation about patriarchy. If something like this came up in the terms of like passing and physical standards and having so much focus on that, the answer in the group was "Well, that's what it means to be a woman." I feel like that's very, just, dismissive of the reality of the situation that we all live in.



**Figure 10: “Before and After MTF Transgender Veteran Transition Timeline 2015”**

Source: Shaetanica Sanguine, “Before and After MTF Transgender Veteran Transition Timeline 2015,” YouTube, July 15, 2015, accessed June 19, 2016, [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-xj\\_HhbUHXo](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-xj_HhbUHXo).

In addition to the many oppositional readings targeting Ariel's appearance, there were some more positive reactions that speak to the tensions between various trans communities. In one

preferred reading, Nicholas Collins demonstrated the lack of discussion around such difficult topics between trans people.

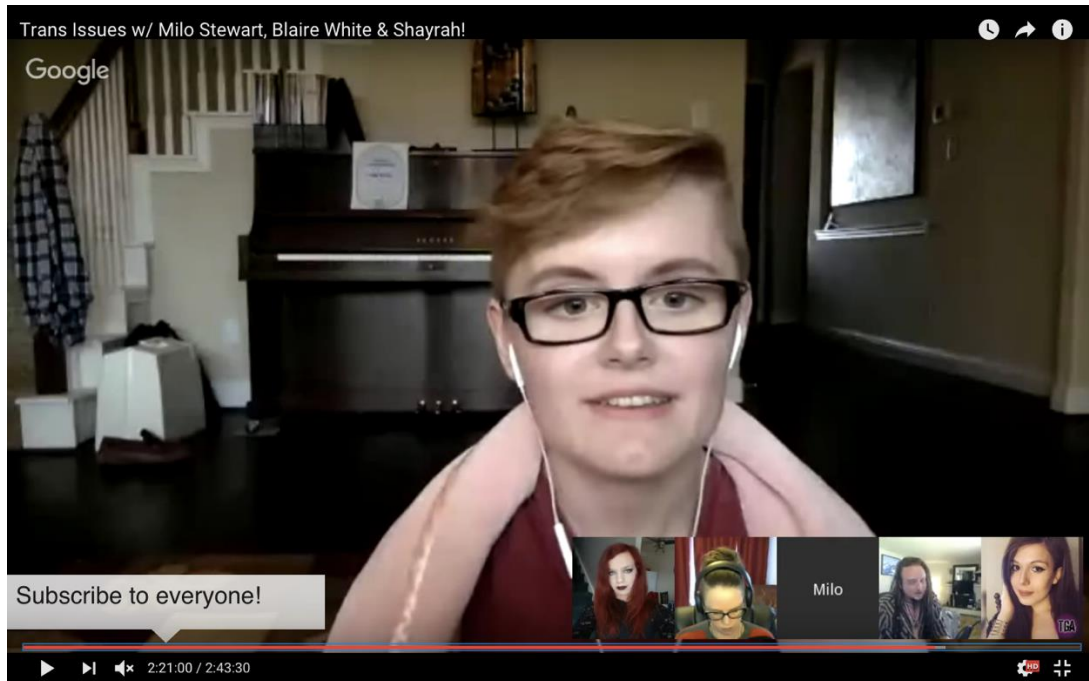
I'm so glad I've found this video. I'm trans and I've really been struggling with the trans community in my area as it just seems to be perpetuating so much, often unwarranted hate and dismissal towards cisgender people. It makes me sad as its so unproductive most of the time and then competently devalues any fair points they might later try to make. Thank you for making this, it means a lot to see someone else being brave enough to call trans people out on this.<sup>114</sup>

Similar to Ariel's use of YouTube for transfeminine community, Milo originally sought community through transmasculine-centered collaboration channels but has since created his own network of support. Milo is a substitute for the collaboration channel FTMtranstastic, though he laughed and said, "but they never use their substitutes." When asked if he has had any positive interactions with people who disagree with them, Milo described a live stream (Figure 11) involving The Transgender Atheist and Blaire White [an anti-feminist trans woman that has created several video responses attacking Milo] as "start[ing] off as fairly constructive" and then quickly devolving into a "screaming match." Milo explained how the live stream forum that was attempted to create dialogue between trans people with varying opinions was not terribly productive.

I didn't want to sit through, you know, people debating over whether or not I'm really trans, because that's not worthwhile for me. So, in some ways, I've been able to have constructive conversations... I have constructive conversations within my sort of LGBT feminist-y community on YouTube. I have a friend, who's really lovely, called Paul Roth, who he's not LGBT but he is a super-big ally. We did a live stream where I talked about my experiences being LGBT in some ways and then he added in his thoughts and how the same type of things apply to his experiences as a person of color, so I've had more positive experiences and more constructive conversations *not* with talking with people who make the reactionary content that attacks other YouTubers.

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114. Nicholas Collins, YouTube comment, 6 months ago, accessed July 20, 2016, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Wx4s1Thr2CI>.



**Figure 11: “Trans Issues w/ Milo Stewart, Blaire White & Shayrah”** Source: The Transgender Atheist, “Trans Issues w/ Milo Stewart, Blaire White & Shayrah!,” YouTube, May 22, 2016, accessed June 27, 2016, [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DkVXKzc\\_1FQ](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DkVXKzc_1FQ).

Milo wishes for the future of trans YouTube to offer a more welcoming trans community.

I certainly hope that we get a lot more diversity in the community and that the community as a whole gets a lot more attention than it’s getting right now. I hope that we can be a lot more friendly to each other and a lot more, just kind and good to each other and even if we disagree, have positive conversations. I have a friend who made a video in reaction to my “You don’t have to prove your gender” video. And to begin with, he sort of made his reaction video like a lot of other people have made reaction videos towards my videos, in a very negative attacking manner, like calling me a girl and just gross stuff. And then he made an apology video that that’s not how he should’ve behaved. I think that showed a lot of maturity, and I wish other parts of the trans YouTube community could show that maturity.

Melvin has created several videos more specifically related to sexuality in relation to trans embodiment. In his video titled, “Gay FTM dating experiences,” (Figure 12) Melvin described two specific experiences of dating cis gay men that he met on OkCupid, both of whom were interested in him before they realized he was trans. One of the dates was going really well until Melvin realized his date had thought his “Nobody Knows I’m a Transsexual” shirt was a joke.

Melvin described the reactions of one of these men as feeling “disingenuous.” Through these men making assumptions about his body, with remarks such as “I don’t know if it would work for me,” Melvin felt he was “being reduced to [his] genitals.” This video is targeted toward two different audiences: 1) to cis gay men, and 2) to other gay transgender men. To the former, Melvin highlighted the ways in which many gay men tend to immediately sexualize other gay men, particularly Black gay men and femmes, and pointed to the many ways cis gay men hold cissexist beliefs of what “being a man” entails. He encouraged cis gay men, especially, to challenge their assumptions about manhood and about trans bodies. To the latter audience, Melvin imparted these words of encouragement: “We are beautiful. We are valuable, we’re desirable, we’re sexy, and our value does not lie in what is or isn’t between our legs.” Melvin received backlash this video, especially from gay cis men. He explained,

The “Gay FTM dating experiences” video was a weird experience for me because I got a lot of comments from gay cis men sending me why it was a problem that I was trying to date cis guys and not disclose my gender upfront and just saying transphobic things about like, well, you’ve seen the comments... I think that it was a learning experience, showing me how prevalent transphobia was within cis gay male communities. I mean, I have had that experience outside of YouTube as well, but when we talk about transphobia in general we don’t often think about gay people, like people within the LGB community, as perpetrators of that, and so this was definitely eye-opening.



**Figure 12: “Gay FTM dating experiences”** Source: itsGOTtobegroovy, “Gay FTM dating experiences,” YouTube, February 23, 2015, accessed June 6, 2016, [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DLVx\\_w1LZ\\_0](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DLVx_w1LZ_0).

This video has received 5,697 views, 207 likes, and 9 dislikes, with the majority of comments being preferred readings.<sup>115</sup> Other responses were defensive, due to the commenters’ assumption that because Melvin was asking people to challenge their assumptions about trans bodies (and the often rigid beliefs underlying these assumptions) that meant that people were not allowed to have preferences for certain genitalia. Others held onto rigid distinctions between sex and gender, such as in this oppositional reading:

LOL. One can dream I suppose. It’s not an assumption that no no transman has a penis. Not one Male would be fooled by the surgical attempts made today. The tissue can’t be mimicked. Arm tissue is not penile tissue. Saline and mechanical pumps connected to prosthetic balls aren’t blood and veins. And females lack the muscles, testis, DNA and the prostate to ejaculate anything resembling semen. Maleness will never be co-opted in this way because doing so would require cloning to achieve nature’s authenticity.<sup>116</sup>

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115. Updated July 20, 2016

116. Kings2beat, YouTube comment, 5 months ago, accessed June 6, 2016, [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DLVx\\_w1LZ\\_0](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DLVx_w1LZ_0).

This comment, and the many like it, further demonstrate how the message trans YouTubers are attempting to convey are undermined by the scrutiny of their bodies. Melvin shared the potential value in continuing to engage with people that disagree with him.

There have been some trolls. I don't engage trolls. I try to be careful with only engaging with people I think I have the ability to just sort of challenge in a constructive way. Trolls, I think, are not in that category. So I think in one instance, and it was someone who was commenting on the "Gay FTM Dating Experience" video [Figure 12], I think I was able get to a tiny, tiny piece of common ground with them, but for the most part, I don't know. I think that a lot of people are very comfortable clinging to their biases and ignorance. I tried to engage with them, but it's difficult to tell just based on the comments and the interactions in the comments section what effect my words are having. But the most I can do is engage with them anyway, in the hopes that someone else is reading the comments and that they can also learn something.

Trans people, such as Milo, Melvin, and Ariel, want to use YouTube to speak out against the medicalization and objectification of trans people. In the way these videos are received, however, people who participate in hegemonically oppositional readings often ignore the video's message and instead judge one's looks so that the message is left unheard. Issues that pose obstacles for challenging transnormativity include the lack of dialogue between different kinds of trans people due to a scarcity of interactions and ideological differences. If we truly want liberation of all trans people, a central space for conversation between trans people of differing backgrounds, experiences, and opinions would be highly advantageous.<sup>117</sup> Many trans YouTube communities, as in real life, reproduce toxic beliefs, for example about what it means to be a man, a woman, or trans and, unintentionally or otherwise, perpetuate systems of oppression. At the same time, projects like "We Happy Trans," where trans people of all kinds have uploaded videos answering seven scripted questions sharing their positive experiences being trans, disrupt the common tropes (such as the pathetic transsexual) that mainstream media has often presented about trans

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117. See Katz, "And Deliver Us from Segmentation," 23–26.

people.<sup>118</sup> YouTube creates a platform from which audiences have the capability to hear voices that challenge transnormativity while simultaneously privileging more conventional opinions and experiences. The discourses surrounding these phenomena discussed throughout trans YouTube reveal the truly intense obstacles to overcoming trans oppression, even from within the “LGBT” community.

### 2.3 *Authenticity*

It is vital for trans activism to not become stagnant by continuing to elevate only the voices of white, binary, and medically transitioning trans people. Various conversations around the topic of authenticity are occurring in conversations about trans people, ranging from the “authenticity” of certain trans identities to learning to be and stay true to your “authentic” self. The “born in the wrong body” expression is seen by many to represent “authentic” or “true” transsexuality; however, this is not the way in which all trans people experience their gender.

In Janet Mock’s recently published autobiography, she wrote, “I believe that telling our stories, first to ourselves and then to one another and the world, is a revolutionary act. It is an act that can be met with hostility, exclusion, and violence. It can also lead to love, understanding, transcendence, and community.”<sup>119</sup> In order to better understand our obstacles to challenging transnormativity and collectively imagining a future of trans liberation, I asked several of my interviewees, “What does ‘being authentic’ mean to you?” and these were some of their responses. Shaetunica stressed the importance of listening to and getting to know oneself.

Being honest, really. It’s unfortunately because, in our world, everything becomes commodified, so it can be capitalized, right? That’s how words lose their meaning, they become buzzwords... I feel like authenticity is a similar sort of thing because I don’t know if it goes quite far enough in describing itself, in a sense... It means being true or

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118. “7 Questions,” We Happy Trans\*: A Place for Sharing Positive Trans\* Perspectives, accessed June 27, 2016, <http://wehappytrans.com/tag/7qs/>.

119. Janet Mock, *Redefining Realness* (New York: Atria Books, 2014), xviii.

honest with yourself, so let's maybe say that. That's at least how I generally frame it, for myself. What that means is "Know Thyself," right? Like you can't know if you like skirts or shorts unless you ask yourself the question and you honestly sit and listen to the response. I feel like we, culturally, are taught to ignore ourselves. These feelings and these thoughts and these emotions that we have, we don't really deal with. And so, to me, that's what [authenticity] definitely means in terms of having an honest life or being honest in my engagement with life is that I'm honest with myself and I listen to myself even when it disagrees or has fears about something I currently believe about the world or a way I currently interact with the world... In Iceland, there's this word in their language that's *lífspeki*. It's this idea of having the integrity of everything throughout your life, you know, not having these inconsistencies where we don't listen to ourselves or are dishonest with ourselves. It's how I started my transition, just by listening to myself.

For Melvin, a part of authenticity includes standing up to injustice.

Being authentic means living your truth, standing in your truth, and I think that's difficult when we put pressure on ourselves to be a certain way, even during transition. I think that when we're living our truths, it's important that we do that all the way and not feel to be or act a certain way. I also think it means challenging transphobia and other kinds of "isms" in whatever context we're in... I can't live my life as a trans person and then sit silent when I hear people saying transphobic things or what I like to call trans undercover, when people don't realize I'm trans, and they say misogynist things. That's my favorite. I can't live authentically in my life as a trans man having lived my life as a cis woman and then sitting silent when someone says something misogynist.

Milo described his experience being deemed "inauthentic" or "not really trans."

I don't think there's any way to say what is authentic or what is not authentic, certainly with experiences being trans because every individual trans person has their own experience with being trans that is their authentic experience. Do I feel like I share my authentic experience online? No, because it's also fairly impossible to be entirely authentic online because if I was just, literally just me, in all of my YouTube videos, it would be hella awkward and hella boring and no one would wanna watch that... You know, we're put in boxes that are fairly inaccurate for us and one way or another we have to figure out what is a true path for us... It's amazing that so many trans people are sharing their experiences online but then it's also hard to not compare yourself to all the plethora of voices that are online and realize that, you know, their authentic, true gender experience is different from mine, and I don't have to like model my experience off of them or think that I'm not being trans properly because of how they experience being trans.

Love is Vulnerability offered this insight:

Whenever I hear [authenticity], there are sirens going off that say "Warning, warning!" In terms of there being some sort of set narrative that you have to try to match up with,



obviously that's not a great... that's not a great thing to have happen. Each person should be able to live their life and follow whatever narrative that seems good for them. But I think there is something to be said for following your passions, following your desires, following what feels right to you, what feels good to you... I think a lot of trans people and queer people, for so long, you know, for a lot of parts of their lives, fought against what seemed right to them, based on what they heard they were supposed to do. And so, being authentic is important because you're not listening to other narratives. You're not listening to the norm that was thrust upon you... I think the reason the sirens go off is because I think about people talking about like, authentic Chinese food, for example, and it's like "what is that?" You're just thinking about, you know, what you think Chinese food is supposed to be. Like, you think that Chinese people don't eat potatoes? They eat potatoes! Actually, I don't know if potatoes is really that big in Chinese cooking, but it doesn't seem like something that would fit and I'm sure it *could* fit. The world doesn't have to stay the same as what it was twenty years ago or thirty years ago or just what one group of people thought that vision of that group was.

Darnelle poignantly stated,

The thing is not every trans person wants to medically treat themselves. Not every trans person wants to get surgeries and things like that... I think [people's transitions are] so individualized and so subjective. I think it's a judgement to say that you have to do this or you have to do that. Hormones are a pretty scary thing... It's okay to not want to be on hormones. It's a personal choice. Um, and I wanna know where the rule book is... There's not a rule... I don't think everyone has to be on hormones, and it's not practical for everyone to be on hormones. I mean, they're expensive, not everybody has access to doctors and stuff like that. I think it's really ridiculous that somebody would discount someone else because they're not making the same choices as you are. You know what I'm saying?... At the end of the day, you just do you. Do what you're comfortable with. Be comfortable, you know? Unless they're paying for it, who cares? I'm the only one paying my bills, so therefore I'm the only one making decisions, and if they were paying my bills, I'm still doing what I want to do anyway, so. You know, that's my motto, and it's gotten me pretty far.

### 3 CHAPTER 3: CONCLUSIONS

#### 3.1 *Significance*

To explore the value, and difficulty, of using YouTube to challenge transnormativity, I considered the ways six trans YouTubers are using their channels beyond discussing the physical aspects of medical transition as well as many of the ways audiences are engaging with trans YouTube content. Through this analysis, I have shown that creating trans cultural productions via YouTube is a particularly accessible way to voice one's own lived experiences and challenge mainstream media's medicalized version of trans identity. While YouTube is highly accessible, requiring few very technical skills, the reach of one's message is hindered by such factors as YouTube's privileging of transnormative content, resistance to shifts in language usage, divisions between trans YouTube communities due to audience segmentation and tensions between trans communities, and the objectification and scrutiny of trans bodies enabled by the visuality YouTube provides.

The genre convention of trans vlogs is using one's channels as a way to document one's medical transition. Many channels do not follow this convention and many choose to use their channel to discuss issues that intersect with their trans identity, which is one way trans YouTubers can challenge the medicalized assumptions underlying transnormativity. Broadening the scope of one's YouTube channel to include topics intersecting with one's trans identity humanizes the experiences of trans people, especially those who are living in ways that are not deemed "normative." My interviewees expressed finding it highly rewarding to create videos that can serve as both personal outlets as well as educational tools for various audiences.

Practical matters, such as style, time investment, editing, and tags, influence the likelihood of coming up in search engine results and thus greater viewership. Depending on how

controversial the topic is that a trans YouTuber is interested in discussing or how invested they are in how their audience receives their message, one may style their videos in certain ways to attempt to elicit certain reactions. Some trans YouTubers would like for their offline friends to have access to their videos, but with this openness comes the risk of people in their lives having access to content that directly discusses them, thereby limiting some YouTubers' ability to challenge transnormativity. More controversial topics, that I would say stray further from a transnormative narrative, seem to get a more defensive reaction.

These motivations and practical matters were discussed in dialogue within the larger context of the political economy of trans YouTube. YouTube rewards transnormativity in many ways. One's class privilege can affect one's ability to have a consistent viewership, the way one talks about one's trans identity, and one's ability to access gender related medical technologies, if one so desires. Though some trans YouTubers who deviate from transnormative narratives are financially supported in some way by making YouTube content, most are not.

I divided my analysis into two themes: strategies for challenging transnormativity and obstacles to challenging transnormativity. Whiteness, binary identity, and medical transition are "uncomfortable norms"<sup>120</sup> of trans YouTube that have not been duly interrogated. Because of their unique experience of gender, many trans YouTubers who do not inhabit all of these norms use their channels as a way to bring visibility to how one's perceived race, gender, and sexuality inform people's behavior toward you. White trans YouTubers generally have a larger audience for whom they can discuss their experiences. This privileged status does not necessarily mean that it is easy for them to cross societal barriers to disrupt normative notions of what it means to be trans. Trans identity, in contrast to sexual and racial identities, often involves a social aspect

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120. Horak, "Trans on YouTube," 582.

that is heavily informed by language. Disagreements exist over words as seemingly basic as *gender* or *racism*. Because of the automatic defensive nature of many people to evolving language, trans YouTubers are prime targets of hateful rhetoric and personal attacks, especially regarding their assumed physical attributes.

Two obstacles to challenging transnormativity on YouTube include trans YouTube's audience segmentation and tensions between trans YouTube communities. Segmentation exists within trans YouTube audiences based on factors like race and gender identity, with scant communication outside of one's own niche. For example, Darnelle believed her followers were mostly other Black trans women. Likewise, Shaetanica believed her followers were mostly transfeminine and non-binary people. This segmentation was also evidenced by the habits of my participants' trans YouTube viewing habits. Trans YouTubers' messages are largely being received by viewers who share similar sentiments and experiences. While this segmentation is not unexpected, it does limit the reach of messages that challenge transnormativity.

Furthermore, comments on Milo's videos, for example, reveal tensions between some transsexual identified people who believe there are only two genders and trans people who understand the term *trans* in a broader sense. While it is not always the case that trans people with differing understandings of language cannot engage in meaningful dialogue, this phenomenon poses many difficulties for subcultural knowledge sharing, coalition building, and destabilizing transnormativity. The undermining of non-normative messages from other trans people works to reinforce hierarchies between trans communities.

YouTube is a site in which many trans people of color are voicing their experiences of racism and how those experiences intersect with other aspects of trans lives, such as their sexuality and religious beliefs. Simultaneously, many non-binary trans people are attempting to

use YouTube as a way to broaden the language around gender. These videos say to the world, “This is how our stories should be told.”<sup>121</sup> Often when trans YouTubers attempt to educate others on the nature of privilege in various forms, they are met with either personal attacks or semantic disagreements, both of which are ways to avoid engaging in conversations around privilege. Despite the negative interactions some trans YouTubers have encountered, even as extreme as death threats, they still find it valuable to spend their time and energy creating videos for their potential to positively affect others. Though the messages that trans YouTubers are attempting to convey are often met with much resistance, there is inherent value in having agency over the way one’s own narrative is portrayed, regardless of its reception by others. Trans YouTubers are still “willing to be visible”<sup>122</sup> and are striving to authentically articulate their truths.

### **3.2 Limitations**

Purely based on my criteria alone, this study has many limitations. Similar to Katie King’s critique of the global category or “meta-term” of *lesbian* in human rights campaigns,<sup>123</sup> many activists and scholars have questioned the ability of the term *trans* to be relevant cross-culturally. Founding transgender theorists, such as Stone and Stryker, speak about dismantling normative and binary constructions of what it means to be trans or gender non-conforming; however, they do this, some have argued, without fully analyzing how this process of

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121. Laverne Cox, “Laverne Cox Opens Up About ‘TIME’ Cover & ‘Orange is the New Black,’” interview by Katie Couric, YouTube, June 10, 2014, accessed June 27, 2016, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3mgBwCxTRDY>.
  122. Cox, “Laverne Cox Opens Up.”
  123. Katie King, “‘There Are No Lesbians Here’: Lesbianisms, Feminisms, and Global Gay Formations,” in *Queer Globalizations: Citizenship and the Afterlife of Colonialism*, ed. Arnaldo Cruz-Malavé and Martin F. Manalansan IV (New York: New York University Press, 2002), 33–45.

embodiment may function differently for the racialized subject whose racial or cultural identity foregrounds their gender identity.<sup>124</sup> Even within the United States context, many gender-variant people who may fit the definition of *trans* do not find the label or identity of *trans* to accurately describe their experiences or be appealing due to its perceived implications for race and class.<sup>125</sup> To my acknowledgement, this study does not account for all of the ways race factors into transnormativity.

One of my aims has been to study the political usage of *trans*. As I am only fluent in English and am most familiar with transgender politics in the United States, this study has been limited to those who speak English and self-identify themselves as trans within a United States context, though I have observed trans YouTubers who reside in Australia, Canada, Japan, South Africa, and the UK. One way this study could be continued is by analyzing if and how transnormativity functions in the contexts of non-US geographical locations and YouTube's role in the process of globalization. As my interviewees were within the ages of 18 and 34, another way this study could be expanded is by studying how trans youth and older trans people are using the medium of YouTube to challenge transnormativity. Another aspect of trans YouTube that is somewhat limited by my criterion to concentrate on trans YouTube channels that do not focus primarily on the physical aspects of transition is how the way in which trans people talk about the physical aspects of medical transition can challenge transnormativity.

Secondly, I have spoken on only a few of the strategies and obstacles related to transnormativity on YouTube. The aspects of analysis I have chosen are by no means

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124. Katrina Roen, "Transgender Theory and Embodiment: The Risk of Racial Marginalization," in *The Transgender Studies Reader*, ed. Susan Stryker and Stephen Whittle (New York: Routledge, 2006), 656–65.

125. David Valentine, *Imagining Transgender: An Ethnography of a Category* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2007), 3–28.

representative of all the ways one could discuss or study transnormativity on YouTube. I have discussed some of the ways videos are viewed and messages are decoded using the concept of audience segmentation and categories of decoding; however, one could further analyze how audiences watch, not just how we receive, trans YouTube videos. For example, one could analyze if watching on a personal computer rather than a TV affects the ways viewers interact with trans YouTube videos or how concepts such as Halberstam's "transgender look" apply in the context of trans YouTube videos.<sup>126</sup>

And lastly, beyond my chosen criteria, limitations exist as a result of my dataset. I did not directly discuss any issues regarding physical or mental disability, though some trans YouTubers do discuss aspects of disability and trans embodiment on their channels. Likewise, I was unable to interview trans YouTubers who challenge the normative family and relationship structures informing transnormativity. Another area of interest that I was not able to discuss in depth is collaborative YouTube channels and how these channels may function differently to challenge transnormativity than single-user channels. Several of my interviewees have been, or are still, affiliated with higher education academic settings. Though I cannot be certain, it is possible that trans people affiliated in some way with higher education settings were more likely to respond to my recruitment message. It is important to recognize that the perspectives shared by these six trans YouTubers, while diverse in many ways, are only a small representation of some of the ways in which YouTube is being used to challenge transnormativity. That is to say, these perspectives and stories should not be generalized to represent all trans people.

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126. See Judith [Jack] Halberstam, *In A Queer Time and Place: Transgender Bodies, Subcultural Lives* (New York: New York University Press, 2005), 76–96.

### 3.3 *Contribution*

As Karma Chávez, Associate Professor at The University of Wisconsin-Madison, has said, “We don’t build coalitions because we want to. We build coalitions because we have to.”<sup>127</sup> YouTube collaborations that span across race, sexuality, and gender are one way trans people are building coalitions and advancing trans activism. The increasing diversity of trans people creating YouTube channels, as well as the creative usages of these channels, is bringing awareness to a multiplicity of ways of being in the world. The future of trans YouTube will, if nothing else, continue to pose considerable challenges to transnormativity.

Through this analysis, I have provided a more holistic understanding of some of the many ways the medium of YouTube is being used to produce counternarratives to transnormativity, and why. This understanding contributes a critical perspective to ongoing conversations occurring within activist movements as well as academia, aiding us in not just imagining but *creating* a future of transgender liberation.

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127. Karma Chávez, “The Queer Politics of Coalition” (keynote address, *Doing the Body in the 21st Century*, Pittsburgh, PA, April 1, 2016).



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## APPENDIX: SAMPLE INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

- What was your motivation when you first started creating YouTube videos?
  - Have your motivations changed?
- What relationships would you say you have with other trans YouTubers?
- What about with your viewers?
  - Do you know any of your followers in other contexts (either on or offline)?
  - Have you had any negative interactions with your viewers?
    - If so, how do you handle these situations?
    - Have you found any positive outcomes as a result of conversations with people that disagree with you?
    - Is it mostly other trans people that follow your channel?
- How do you feel your YouTube channel affects you?
  - Have you noticed any changes offline as a result of your online participation on YouTube?
- Did you watch other trans peoples' videos before you started creating your own?
- Do you have an intended audience for your various types of videos?
- Do you notice much interaction between different kinds of trans people?
- Have you had any unforeseen technical difficulties with using the medium of YouTube?
- A huge trend in trans YouTube vlogs, as well as in conversations about trans issues, is the topic of authenticity. What does "being authentic" mean to you?
- What role do you think you sharing your narrative on YouTube plays in the larger context of trans visibility?
- Some people feel like the "born in the wrong body" expression oversimplifies what it means to be trans, some people think it's just wrong about the trans experience, others feel other ways. How do you feel about the "born in the wrong body" expression?
- A lot of trans YouTube videos seem to focus on the physical changes resulting from HRT. Why do you think there is such an emphasis on physical changes?
- Do you have any favorite moments on YouTube?
- What do you wish for the future of trans YouTube?