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What Makes Trans Lives More Livable?: An Intersectional Content Analysis of #WeHappyTrans* and #TheGenderTag

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What Makes Trans Lives More Livable?:
An Intersectional Content Analysis of #WeHappyTrans* and #TheGenderTag

by

Jordan Forrest Miller

Under the Direction of Katie Acosta, PhD

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

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ABSTRACT

Building on previous trans YouTube scholarship, this dissertation is based on a content analysis of two digital activism projects: 1) #WeHappyTrans*, a compilation of 59 YouTube video responses posted between 2012 and 2018, and 2) #TheGenderTag, a compilation of 704 YouTube video responses posted between 2016 and 2019. By analyzing the audio and visuals of a subsample (N=80) of these two archives using theoretical and emerging codes, I identified key themes as relevant to digital activism effectiveness and well-being. I discuss implications for policy, public health, healthcare, and community organizing in the conclusion. Contrasting prior medical sociology literature that is not presented from the perspective of trans people and primarily focuses on negative aspects of trans lived experience, I have employed a transfeminist methodology that centers self-definition and self-determination. My methods are heavily informed by transnormativity and intersectionality scholarship. In addition to providing an example of how transfeminist methodology can be applied in the context of digital media, this dissertation fills a crucial gap in literature focusing on qualities of trans lived experience that contribute to increased QoL. My hope is that the findings of this study will be considered collaboratively between scholars and activists in many contexts, including within the growing fields of health informatics technologies and trans public health. The findings of this study are also relevant to several ongoing discussions within the fields of sociology, public health, cultural and media studies, and queer and trans theory.

INDEX WORDS: Medicalization, Robust community support, Transgender, Transnormativity, Vlogging, YouTube

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2022

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DEDICATION

This labor of love goes to my Mama, who I know would be so proud to see me accomplishing my goals. Thank you for bringing me into this world and teaching me to love with grace.

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Thank you to my expansive support system of family, friends, partners, colleagues, mentors, and comrades for supporting me during this massive PhD endeavor. Without their support, I would not have had the resilience to adapt to challenges during the dissertation process. I especially thank Zen, Roger, Hope, Teak, Luke, Frost, Tas, Claudia, Papa, Jewell, Wes, and JoBeth for their steadfast love and presence in my life and Doodle, Peet, Peety, and Eva for talking with me about this stuff out loud with words and encouraging me during the final stretch. I can only smile at how this project's name has evolved over time from a dissertation to dissertating, diss-rotating, and rotating dishes, depending on the day. 😊 I give gratitude to my committee chair, Katie Acosta, for her critical feedback on prior drafts of this dissertation, and my committee members, Wendy Simonds, Dan Pasciuti, and Maura Ryan Bernales, for pushing me to strengthen my analysis and broaden my theoretical implications. Thank you to my mentor through Sociologists for Trans Justice, Aaron Devor, for his continued support to see this dissertation to the end and to seek ways to use my skills moving forward. I also give much appreciation to the vloggers represented within this YouTube archive; your collective story has reminded me that my work is one part of an important and expansive conversation.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS	V
LIST OF TABLES	IX
LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS	X
1	INTRODUCTION.....	1
1.1	Archival Background.....	3
1.2	Theoretical Framework.....	5
1.2.1	<i>Transnormativity</i>	5
1.2.2	<i>Intersectionality</i>	7
1.3	Literature Review.....	12
1.3.1	<i>Trans Health Disparities and Barriers to Quality Trans Healthcare</i>	12
1.3.2	<i>Quality of life</i>	18
1.3.3	<i>Digital Trans Studies</i>	21
2	METHODS.....	25
2.1	Transfeminist Methodology.....	25
2.2	#WeHappyTrans* Sampling Frame.....	26
2.3	#TheGenderTag Sampling Frame.....	28
2.4	Coding.....	29
2.5	Multiperspectival Cultural Studies Analysis.....	32
3	DIGITAL ACTIVISM EFFECTIVENESS.....	35

3.1	Positive Trans Representation	37
3.2	Education on Gender Diversity	49
3.3	Providing Support for Trans and Gender Diverse People	56
3.4	Media Exposure and Receiving Compensation.....	58
4	TRANSDISRUPTIVE DIVERSITY NARRATIVES.....	61
4.1	The Social Construction of Gender Norms.....	62
4.2	The Language of Transition.....	65
4.3	Body Versus Social Dysphoria	77
4.4	Well-Being.....	84
4.4.1	<i>Mental Health</i>	84
4.4.2	<i>Physical Health and Safety</i>	91
4.5	Misgendering	93
4.6	Transition Giving Confidence.....	98
4.7	Trans People as Capably Normal and Productive	113
5	RESILIENCY AND SUPPORT NETWORKS.....	121
5.1	Intrapersonal Resilience	122
5.2	Interpersonal and Community Resilience	128
5.2.1	<i>Trans Role Models</i>	128
5.2.2	<i>Support from Family</i>	141
5.2.3	<i>Support from Friends and Trans Communities</i>	146

5.2.4	<i>Support from Religious Communities</i>	149
5.2.5	<i>Support from a Significant Other</i>	151
5.2.6	<i>Support at Work or School</i>	152
5.2.7	<i>Support from Health Providers</i>	155
6	CONCLUSIONS	157
6.1	Transfeminist Standpoint	160
6.2	Sociological Implications	162
6.3	Limitations and Future Directions	168
	REFERENCES	170
	APPENDICES	195
	Appendix A: 7Questions for #WeHappyTrans*	195
	Appendix B: #TheGenderTag Prompts	196
	Appendix C: Gender Tag Introduction Assignment Example	197

LIST OF TABLES

Table 1: Popularity Statistics	30
Table 2: Stated Motivations for Participation.....	36
Table 3: Negative Influences on Mental Health	85
Table 4: Individual Solutions.....	87
Table 5: Sources of Support.....	122

LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

AFAB: Assigned-female-at-birth

AMAB: Assigned-male-at-birth

Bi+: An umbrella term referring to anyone who does not experience monosexual patterns of desire and attraction (from Sumerau et al. 2018)

DSM: Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders

FTM: Female-to-male

GAI: Gender-affirming interventions

HRT: Hormone replacement therapy

LGB: Lesbian, gay, and bisexual

LGBT: Lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender

QoL: Quality of life

MSM: Men who have sex with men

MTF: Male-to-female

SNS: Social networking sites

SRS: Sex reassignment surgery

U.K.: United Kingdom

U.S.: United States

Vlogger: Video blogger

1 INTRODUCTION

Though varying in their strategies, activists within and outside of the United States (U.S.) have articulated at least one common sentiment: a distrust of “traditional” authorities to accurately represent their lived experience, concerns, and desired outcomes (Collins 1991, 2000; Harlow and Harp 2013; Piepzna-Samarasinha 2018). Many activists feel mainstream media portrayals of protests, for instance, work to discredit their efforts through emphasizing violence (Harlow and Harp 2013). Physicians and other “traditional” medical authorities, likewise, are not trusted by the general public regarding proper medical service provision (Eyssel et al. 2017; Mechanic and McAlpine 2010; Rosich & Hankin 2010; Timmermans and Oh 2010).

As explained by Boyer and Lutfey (2010), “Individuals access and utilize health care differently than in the past. Patients are more actively involved in their own care, have more access to health-related information through the Internet and direct-to-consumer advertising, and are more knowledgeable about managing illness” (Rosich & Hankin 2010:S2). In the last decade, trans people have increasingly utilized YouTube as a social networking site where they receive support, share medical information, share beauty tips and tutorials, and create media that deviates from mainstream trans representation. As I demonstrate in this dissertation, YouTube is abundant in rich health informatics data regarding trans populations, as information is primarily created by and for trans individuals rather than assumed by cisgender public health and medical providers who lack in trans cultural competence.

Building on previous trans YouTube scholarship, (Dame 2012, 2013, 2015; Horak 2014; Miller 2016, 2017, 2018; O’Neill 2014; Raun 2015a, 2015b, 2015c, 2016), this dissertation is based on a content analysis of two digital activism projects: 1) #WeHappyTrans*, a compilation of 59 YouTube response videos posted between 2012 and 2018, and 2) #TheGenderTag, a

compilation of 704 YouTube response videos posted between 2016 and 2019. By analyzing the audio and visuals of a subsample (N=80) of these two archives using theoretical and emerging codes, I identified key themes as relevant to digital activism effectiveness and quality of life (QoL). I discuss implications for policy, public health, healthcare, and community organizing in the conclusion.

Contrasting prior trans medical sociology literature that is not presented from the perspective of trans people and primarily focuses on negative aspects of trans experience, such as deficiencies in mental health (Baral et al. 2013; Herbst et al. 2008; Neumann et al. 2017; Raidford 2016; Rebhook et al. 2017; Scheim et al. 2016; Sevelius et al. 2013), I have applied a transfeminist methodology that center self-definition and self-determination. As described by Masanet et al. (2022), “positive” trans representation depicts a complex understanding of trans lives beyond a sole focus on “coming out” and medical transition.

My analysis is heavily informed by scholarship on transnormativity (Johnson 2016, 2018; Masanet et al. 2022; Ruin 2016; Vipond 2015) and intersectionality (Collins 1991, 2000; Romero 2018; Sandoval 2000). In addition to providing an example of how transfeminist methodology can be applied in the context of digital media, this dissertation fills a crucial gap in literature focusing on qualities of trans lived experience that contribute to increased QoL. My hope is that the findings of this study will be considered collaboratively between scholars and activists in many contexts, including within the growing fields of health informatics technologies and trans public health. The findings of this study are also relevant to several ongoing discussions within the fields of sociology, public health, cultural and media studies, and queer and trans theory.

1.1 Archival Background

Jen Richards, U.S.-based, white, trans woman, actress, activist, and creator of #WeHappyTrans*, posted her initial 7Questions prompts in January 2012 on her WordPress site WeHappyTrans.com. Here she asked other trans individuals to create a video or written response to seven questions related to positive aspects of being trans (see Appendix A), as opposed to sensationalized media representation that solely focuses on the struggles that trans people face, including increased violence, harassment, unemployment, and homelessness (Lang 2013). Richards started the project out of a desire for more media attention to be given to positive trans experiences, contrasting mainstream representation of trans people as inherently deceptive, dangerous, deviant, and doomed to failure (Asakura et al. 2019; Bell-Metereau 2019; Clayman 2015; Disclosure 2020; Ryan 2009; Serano 2007; Stone 2019). Instead of furthering internalized transphobia and shame (Clayman 2015), her 7Questions prompts focused on enjoyment, excitement, satisfaction, inspiration, support, passion, community, and authenticity.

#TheGenderTag, a later prompt-style questionnaire, was created by a popular Canada-based, Latinx, white-passing, non-binary YouTube video blogger (vlogger), A. Wylde. Wylde's motivation behind the creation of #TheGenderTag was to be educated and educate others about a diversity of gender experiences. They asked viewers to create a video response to a prompt of ten questions related to experience of gender and expression (see Appendix B).

This dissertation project fills a gap in medical sociology scholarship that incorporates a transfeminist standpoint that stresses the necessity of centering trans voices in research regarding trans populations (see Abelson 2019; Genova & van der Drift 2020; Johnson 2015; and Martino et al. 2021 for additional examples of applied transfeminist methodology). Richards and Wylde prioritized self-definition and self-determination by asking individuals to respond using their

own words, unfiltered by cisgender gatekeepers (e.g., media producers, medical providers). Contrasting previous medical sociology and public health literature that has been deficit-based, focusing on, for instance, increased risk of violence and HIV/AIDS (Baral et al. 2013; Herbst et al. 2008; Neumann et al. 2017; Raidford 2016; Rebhook et al. 2017; Scheim et al. 2016; Sevelius et al. 2013), the focus of this dissertation is on aspects of trans lived experience that contribute to increased QoL. I contextualize this information within the hostile political climate in the U.S. as related to policy, public health, healthcare, and community.

To examine the relevance of trans archives for public health, I compiled an archive of two digital activism projects on YouTube: #WeHappyTrans* and #TheGenderTag. The former archive is comprised of 59 YouTube contributions to #WeHappyTrans*. The latter is comprised of 704 YouTube contributions to #TheGenderTag. I conducted initial coding on the ten most popular videos from each archive and paired an additional thirty videos from each archive according to a three-tiered system by length. Tier 1 consisted of videos under 10 minutes; Tier 2 consisted of videos between 10 minutes and 20 minutes; and Tier 3 consisted of videos over 20 minutes. Within each tier, 30 #WeHappyTrans videos were selected at random to represent a wide range of popularity and paired with a #TheGenderTag video of similar length and popularity. I coded these 60 videos for analysis. I analyzed the meaning of these archives using a multiperspectival cultural studies approach (Cava 2015; Scodari 1998), in which meaning was explored at the levels of production, content, and reception. Applying the theoretical frameworks of intersectionality and transnormativity, I made comparisons between the archives, including the potential effects of the creators' identities (e.g., race, class, gender, sexuality, age) on the meaning encoded and decoded (Hall 1993) from the archives.

In this chapter, I detail the theoretical frameworks of transnormativity and intersectionality used in coding and analysis. I situate this analysis within relevant research on health disparities, barriers to quality healthcare, and digital trans health scholarship. In Chapter 2, I provide a detailed explanation of the methods used in this dissertation project. In Chapter 3, I analyze the effectiveness of these digital activism efforts, and in Chapters 4 and 5, I present key themes related to QoL. I conclude in Chapter 6, where I discuss implications of my findings as relevant to trans health advocacy and suggest avenues for building upon this study.

1.2 Theoretical Framework

Because of their relevance to activist discourse, I chose the frameworks of transnormativity and intersectionality to apply throughout analysis. Prior to transcription of the full sample, I developed concept-driven theoretical codes. These original codes were applied to all transcripts in the archive and developed further in memos and analysis. The transcripts and visual coding informed additional codes.

1.2.1 Transnormativity

While the identity of 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 the collective movement to end "all discrimination based on sex/gender variance" (Serano 2007:26). In addition to not being institutionally accepted as valid forms of self-expression, the language trans people use to describe themselves is widely contested within trans communities and still largely understood through a medicalized lens. There are virtually limitless ways of experiencing gender and being trans, although not all these forms of self-expression are validated by dominant U.S. culture.

Building on feminist and queer scholarship regarding heteronormativity (Berlant and Warner 1998; Ingraham 1994; Warner 1991), homonormativity (Duggan 2003; Seidman 2002), and doing gender (West & Zimmerman 1987), Johnson (2016) popularized transnormativity within sociology discourse as a hegemonic and “regulatory normative ideology that structures interactions in every arena of social life” (p. 466). Noting the ways in which trans people are held accountable to our displays of gender, Johnson (2016) demonstrated how documentary films by trans men illustrate how the legitimacy of trans experiences is granted in accordance with medical standards. Understood as a normative ideology that shapes all social interactions, transnormativity is “both an empowering and constraining set of ideals that deem some transgender identifications, characteristics, and behaviors as legitimate and prescriptive while others are marginalized, subordinated, or rendered invisible” (Johnson 2016:484). Both empowering and constraining, transnormativity is invoked within community, healthcare, and legal settings (Johnson 2016).

Like how mainstream gay and lesbian rights movements employ homonormative politics regarding “proper” or “good” gay and lesbian citizenship (Castillo 2015; Duggan 2003; Garwood 2016), mainstream trans movements employ transnormative politics that rely on assimilationist and exclusionary ideals of U.S. transpatriotism (Fischer 2016a). As an assimilationist political strategy within dominant U.S. discourse, transnormativity assumes a hierarchy of transness that privileges people who display attributes valued by U.S. society, regardless of personal identity (e.g., binary or non-binary) or desire for medical transition (Aizura 2006; Currah and Moore 2013; Johnson 2016; Masanet et al. 2022; Vipond 2015). The privileging of whiteness, binary identification, medical transition, and gender cohesiveness constructs the “good” trans citizen. Trans people, especially those who do not reflect “good” transnormative values, are negatively

impacted through denial of care, social estrangement, religious condemnation, violent hate crimes and street harassment, police violence, loss of familial and community support, and institutionalized discrimination in healthcare facilities, prisons, housing, and the workplace (Butler 2004; Irving 2013; Johnson 2015, 2016, 2018; Miller 2018; Serano 2007; Spade 2011). These harmful processes of exclusion are heavily gendered and racialized, most highly impacting trans people of color (Calcavente 2017; Fischer 2020; Gossett et al. 2017).

YouTube is a common site for trans people seeking to find more diverse trans representation than is commonly represented in mainstream media. Participatory action research with trans youth has shown benefit in creating artistic mediums to challenge transnormativity and find self-recognition (Asakura et al. 2019). Motivations for engaging in this type of digital activism varied. By sharing details of their day-to-day lives, both directly and indirectly related to their gender, vloggers found personal enjoyment and empowerment in connecting with their viewers and contributing to a greater understanding of gender; however, with increased visibility was increased harassment and backlash. By being visible on such a public platform, trans vloggers have provided support for viewers by providing emotional support and aiding in their self-understanding (Alexander & Losh 2010; Dame 2012; Masanet et al. 2022; Miller 2016, 2018; O'Neill 2014; Raun 2010, 2012, 2015, 2016).

1.2.2 Intersectionality

Building on the Black feminist tradition of the late 1970s and early 1980s, in particular the political work of the Combahee River Collective, scholars such as Collins (1991, 2000), Crenshaw (1991), and Davis (1981) popularized the theoretical framework of intersectionality to name Black women's exclusion from mainstream white feminism (Bowleg 2012; Romero 2018). Activist strategies operating in the tradition of intersectional Black feminism move away from

one-dimensional identity politics toward a transversal politics of coalition (Collins 1991, 2000, 2017). Collins, at her 2017 keynote address at the University of Kentucky, stressed that while her work on intersectionality was being given more consideration within sociology, an overlooked aspect of coalition building is the act of “flexible solidarity”. In practicing flexible solidarity, activists ally with others “until you can’t anymore” (Collins 2017). The context in which Collins spoke was of alliances between Black women and Black men in the fight for racial justice. While describing this context, she acknowledged how healthy boundaries were essential to forming accountable coalitions.

Flexible solidarity has many applications for intersectional social movements, including the necessity of accountable coalitions across identities. Rather than focusing on individual rights and identities in our activist strategies, critical feminist scholars advocate for a transversal politics of coalition that critiques “the authority of nation-states in creating and reproducing historically constituted, socially stratified population groups” (Collins 2017:1470; Yuval-Davis 1997). Similar sentiments for a politics of coalition arise within disability activism. Piepzna-Samarasinha (2018) described a politics of coalition as a “cross-movement building strategy”. The dialectical relationship of oppression and activism within Black feminism (Collins 1991, 2000) and disability activism (Charlton 1998; Dolnick 1993; Piepzna-Samarasinha 2018) overlaps with that of transfeminism, particularly in the acknowledgement of care work (e.g., Mothering, emotional labor) as both a devalued form of usually unpaid and feminized labor and a neglected form of activism.

Collins (1991, 2000) cited two dimensions of Black women’s activism that are analogous to the goals of transfeminism: 1) the struggle for group survival and 2) the struggle for the transformation of institutions. Much like the “safe spaces” described in *Black Feminist Thought*

(Collins 1991, 2000) where Black women can freely exchange ideas, various social networking sites (SNS), such as Facebook, Instagram, Reddit, TikTok, Tumblr, Twitter, and YouTube, function as *networked counterpublics* (Renninger 2015) where trans people, particularly youth, build community and exchange knowledge (Dame 2013, 2015; Jacobsen et al. 2021; Jenzen 2017). Queer counterpublics are spaces where multiple goals and strategies co-exist and form a networked public that is counter to heteronormative values (Asakura et al. 2019). Networked counterpublics are rich in resources created by and for trans communities (Ahmed 2018; Bailey 2015; Bivens 2015; Cannon et al. 2017; Cavalcante 2016; Cipolletta et al. 2017; Dame 2013, 2015; Fink & Miller 2014; Hawkins & Giesecking 2017; Horak 2014; Jackson et al. 2017; Jacobsen et al. 2021; Jenzen 2017; McInroy & Craig 2015; Miller 2018; Raun 2015a, 2015b, 2015c, 2016; Warner 2002). Martino et al. (2021) described #TheGenderTag as a “subaltern counterpublic” where trans and non-binary youth “are afforded the possibility to engage in communicative forms of self-expression and ‘participatory parity’ (Fraser, 1990) not always afforded to them within the cisnormative contexts of their everyday lives and specifically in the education system” (Frohard-Dourlent 2018; Sinclair-Palm 2017). This content analysis revealed that while these projects serve as counterpublics, their impact was limited by their lack of an explicitly intersectional lens and YouTube preference for transnormative content.

As described by Bowleg (2012), the theoretical framework of intersectionality “posits that multiple social categories (e.g., race, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, socioeconomic status) intersect at the micro level of individual experience to reflect multiple interlocking systems of privilege and oppression at the macro, socio-structural level (e.g., racism, sexism, heterosexism)” (p. 1267). Reproductive justice movements centering Black women have developed a praxis of intersectionality that works to reduce harm done to the bodies and lives of

oppressed and marginalized people (Romero 2018). Romero (2018) recounted the ways in which eugenics have been a major campaign for white reproductive justice movements:

Women listed unfit for motherhood under compulsory sterilization law included women of color and immigrant women. Sterilization was the only means of birth control provided for many Native American, Mexican American, Puerto Rican and Black women when abortion rights activists resumed campaigning in the 1970s (p. 47).

Acknowledging the context in which the term originated within Black feminism, Bowleg (2012) proposed three core tenets of intersectionality for public health applications: 1) an understanding of multiple intersecting identities, 2) a centering of historically oppressed and marginalized populations, and 3) an analysis of how individual health behaviors connect to macro socio-structural context of health. In line with these tenets of public health applications of intersectionality, I coded mentions of identities and the participants' relationship to identities. At the level of encoding, I contextualized how Richards' and Wylde's positionality and motivations influenced the lens of these projects. I reviewed secondary texts connected to the archives to get a better understanding of the context of #WeHappyTrans* and #TheGenderTag within YouTube and within trans media at large. I assigned case descriptors for race, sex assigned at birth, gender identity, medical transition status, and other identities to further my application of transnormativity and intersectionality in the coding process. Following transcription, I coded the visual and audio transcripts using concept-driven theoretical codes and emerging codes.

The theoretical framework of intersectionality gave insight into how structural barriers affect well-being. One's ability to meet societal expectations is largely influenced by parents' social positioning, including economic status and educational attainment (Romero 2018). Material conditions among vloggers varied on factors such as insurance access, medical

transition status, and financial dependence. Intersectionality, paired with transnormativity, aided in my understanding of how vloggers uniquely navigated systems of privilege and oppression.

In line with Collins' impetus to create a collective Black feminist standpoint that replaces controlling images of Black women, counternarratives to controlling images of trans people are necessary to combat trans oppression and state a collective transfeminist standpoint. While controlling images of Black cisgender women have been as mummies, matriarchs, jezebels, and welfare queens, controlling images of trans people, particularly Black transgender women, have represented trans people as inherently deceptive and deserving of disgust. Collins (2000) emphasized the importance of establishing a Black feminist standpoint based on the perspectives and lived experiences of Black women. A similar, yet distinct, transfeminist standpoint is needed to capture the intersectional lives of trans people. Contrary to mainstream trans representation that relies on medicalized understandings of trans experience, alternative representation is available on YouTube and other SNS frequented by trans and gender diverse people.

In this dissertation, I contextualize the ways in which experiences interfacing with medical gender-affirming interventions (GAI) are constrained by the medical, clinical, and psychiatric establishment through a diagnostic of gender dysphoria (DSM-V) (Johnson 2016; Konnelly 2021; Martino et al. 2021). Informed by medical and psychological understandings, the "born in the wrong body" narrative is the most widely known and accepted narrative of transness (Benjamin 1966; Johnson 2016; Klonkowska & Bonvissuto 2019; Masanet et al. 2022). The transnormative patient who conforms to binary identification and medical diagnosis, therefore, becomes constructed as the "good" trans patient who is deserving of access to medical GAI (shuster 2019). Trans people seeking access to medical GAI navigate transnormative expectations in a variety of ways (Johnson 2018). The degree to which trans people, in particular

trans people of color, are able to embody transnormative ideals is one crucial component to understanding the impact of psychiatric diagnosis (Johnson 2018; Snorton 2017). Building on intersectional disability justice work (Clare 2017; Piepzna-Samarasinha 2018), the findings from this dissertation contribute to a paradigm shift away from trans people as broken and in need of repair through medical intervention, while simultaneously acknowledging the complexity of the medical institutions in which trans people seek access to insurance coverage and culturally competent and comprehensive healthcare.

Consistent with the motivations for these digital activism projects, both archives function as activist platforms in their resistance to sensationalized trans representation. Using an intersectional and transfeminist framework, I evaluate these digital trans activism efforts and illuminate aspects of trans lived experience that contribute to well-being. To contextualize these theoretical frameworks, I reviewed research regarding trans health disparities and barriers to quality trans healthcare, as well as of health-related literature within digital trans studies.

1.3 Literature Review

1.3.1 Trans Health Disparities and Barriers to Quality Trans Healthcare

Though the U.S. expends over 18% of its gross national product on medical service provisions, vast health and access disparities still exist nationwide (Hankin & Wright 2010; Rosich & Hankin 2010). Trans people are estimated to comprise roughly 1.4 million adults in the U.S., or about 0.6% of the U.S. population (Flores et al. 2016) and represent one of many minority populations that are severely underserved in the U.S. medical system (Sevelius et al. 2013; Spade 2006). Transnormativity within medical discourse gains power primarily from medical providers who not only create obstacles to achieving desired bodily modification but do

not yet, as Spade (2006) articulately stated, have “a commitment to gender self-determination and respect for all expressions of gender” (p. 325).

The social construction of what is determined an illness in need of medical intervention has been documented by scholars of intersex studies (Davis 2015; Fausto-Sterling 2000), disability studies (Clare 2017), and trans studies (Spade 2015). Trans people, if they desire to change their secondary sex characteristics and/or identification records to match their gender identity and presentation, must navigate a highly restrictive medical and legal system to achieve their aims (Johnson 2016). In the U.S., the decision to transition hormonally or surgically is controlled through the gatekeeping of therapists, psychiatrists, doctors, and surgeons (shuster 2019). 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* (previously designated *gender identity disorder*).

The medical and psychological establishment presents a double bind for trans people desiring access to hormones and surgeries. 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” (Johnson 2018; Miller 2016; Spade 2015; Stone 2006). As trans people perform the repetitive acts of reciting an often-oversimplified narrative of their experience to medical providers, and the medical establishment pathologizes trans individuals with a psychiatric disorder in need of medical treatment, transnormativity is upheld (Miller 2016; Spade 2015).

Konnolly (2021) encouraged scholars of trans linguistics to acknowledge the nuance of trans people describing their experiences to medical providers according to diagnostics to access medical GAI. Trans patients seeking medical GAI have the option to either 1) educate their medical providers on the nuances of their trans identity and risk denial of access, or 2) recite medical criteria for gender dysphoria. While some trans people do experience gender dysphoria as described in the criteria for diagnosis, the act of reciting knowledge of medical criteria serves as a performance designed to access care and mitigate safety and risk within a transnormative system (Johnson 2018; Konnelly 2021). While some trans people oppose gender dysphoria being attached to trans identity as a mental disorder, many stress the need for diagnosis to access gender affirming interventions (Johnson 2018). Scholars such as Sues Schwend (2020) have made compelling arguments for an international human rights framework that includes the removal of diagnosis of a mental disorder to access medical GAI.

Through limited medicalized and binary portrayal, mainstream media disseminate 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 trans is to be “sick” and thus in need of treatment. As Vipond (2015) explained, “this model relies on medical practitioners being deemed ‘experts’ in the field of transsexuality, while trans persons zirselves are seen as uninformed patients” (p. 33). As trans people are already in a vulnerable position within institutions which strictly enforce binary ways of thinking about gender, transnormativity especially affects 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 (Irving 2013; Miller 2016; Spade 2015).

The growing fields of trans public health and medical sociology are documenting the effects of the medicalization of trans identities and experiences. Consistent across trans public health and medical sociology research, trans people in the U.S. experience higher levels of stigma and discrimination than cisgender adults. This stigma and discrimination is correlated with increased rates of psychological distress and other mental health conditions (Bockting et al. 2006; Bockting et al. 2013; James et al. 2016; Kosenko et al. 2013; Sevelius et al. 2013). Many sociologists of health argue that stigma is a fundamental cause of disease (Phelan et al. 2010), limiting people from accessing health resources, including social support, autonomy, and validation (Hatzenbuehler et al. 2013; Johnson 2018). Among the many negative health outcomes of stigma and discrimination on trans populations are high rates of depression, anxiety, eating disorders, suicidality, and tobacco and substance use (AJHP Voices 2017; Bockting et al. 2006; Bockting et al. 2013; Cocohoba 2017; IOM 2011; Scheim et al. 2016; Spicer 2010). The social determinants of gender dysphoria have not been adequately explored (Johnson 2018).

The processes of stigma and discrimination vary from region-to-region within the U.S., and access to trans-related healthcare is highly class-dependent; even with insurance, many insurance companies deem trans-related expenses, such as hormone replacement therapy (HRT) and various gender affirming surgeries, “cosmetic” and deny claims based on this categorical exclusion (Rosh 2017). A diagnosis of gender dysphoria is generally required for insurance coverage. In a 2015 survey of 141 OBGYN providers in the U.S., 35.3% and 29% reported feeling comfortable providing healthcare for male-to-female (MTF) and female-to-male (FTM) patients, respectively. 38.4% were aware of the recommendations for MTF patients with prostate

cancer, and 59.4% knew the breast cancer screening protocol for FTM patients (Unger 2015). Gynecological recommendations for transgender/genderqueer assigned-female-at-birth (AFAB) patients are also applied inconsistently by medical providers (Harb et al. 2019). In the Canadian universal healthcare system, disparities still exist due to outright denial of care and providers' lack of training to provide trans competent healthcare (Giblon & Bauer 2017). In the Argentinian universal healthcare system, avoidance of healthcare has been positively associated with exposure to police violence, internalized stigma, experiences of discrimination by healthcare workers or patients, and living in the Buenos Aires metropolitan area (Sociás et al. 2014). Decisions regarding proper treatment for trans patients are often based on clinical guidelines that are not supported by scientific evidence (shuster 2016).

As a result of stigma and discrimination within social institutions, trans people face structural barriers to quality health, such as unemployment, homelessness, and lack of food (Raiford 2016; Spicer 2010; Torres et al. 2015). Because many trans people do not have insurance and/or have insurance that does not cover HRT, some obtain hormones informally rather than from a licensed medical provider. Accessing HRT through alternative means comes at the risk of hormones being altered or needles that are non-sterile. In the absence of culturally competent medical supervision and prescription, trans individuals run the risk of HIV-infection and toxicity via excessive dosing (Cocohoba 2017).

Many trans people desiring medical GAI and who have been unable to access gainful employment, stable and affordable housing, and consistent meals may turn to survival sex work. Trans women of color and transgender men who have sex with men (MSM) who engage in survival sex work are highly impacted by HIV/AIDS and often do not have access to HIV prevention and treatment resources (Baral et al. 2013; Herbst et al. 2008; Neumann et al. 2017;

Raidford 2016; Rebchook et al. 2017; Scheim et al. 2016; Sevelius et al. 2013). Especially in rural areas, healthcare service delivery to trans individuals is lacking (Harb et al. 2019; Logie & Lys 2015; Seelman et al. 2018), thereby perpetuating the conditions for this precarious state of trans health.

Community-based and patient-driven solutions to trans healthcare inequity have been shown to decrease trans health disparities and improve patient satisfaction (Eyssel et al. 2017; Logie & Lys 2015; Reisner et al. 2015; shuster 2019; Spanos et al. 2021). Trans health scholars have recommended strategies to combat structural barriers, including fostering resilience by connecting trans youth with trans adult mentors (Asakura et al. 2019; Singh et al. 2012; Torres et al. 2015). Additionally, trans health scholars have recommended the inclusion of trans-specific content in medical school curricula and clinical training (Harb et al. 2019; Obedin-Maliver et al. 2011; Poteat et al. 2013; shuster 2016, 2019). Positive outcomes have also been shown when healthcare providers continue their education by attending trans-specific trainings and workshops (Khalili et al. 2015; Sekoni et al. 2017; Unger 2015). The benefits of community-driven initiatives inspired me to explore digital activism campaigns created by trans people to explore aspects of trans lived experience that contribute to increased QoL.

Trans people report a general lack of trust in the healthcare system, in part due to stigma and previous negative experiences with medical providers (Eyssel et al. 2017; Poteat et al. 2013; Sevelius et al. 2013). Authority and power are traditionally relegated to medical providers who are not trained to provide trans competent care (Poteat et al. 2013; shuster 2019). The video responses analyzed in this dissertation provide tangible examples of how the medicalization of trans identity negatively impacts well-being.

Scholars in several fields have noted the need for public health efforts to use intersectional approaches in their research to alleviate structural inequalities and discrimination (Seelman et al. 2018; Sevelius et al. 2013; Williams et al. 2017). Though public health and medical sociology research focusing on trans health disparities has increased visibility and understanding of trans health inequities, this approach has largely been limited to a medicalized lens and has neglected to explore the power dynamic of doctors and patients. With this dissertation project, I aim to shift the focus of trans public health and medical sociology toward a transfeminist methodology that holistically captures well-being. With this shifted focus and intersectional lens, I contextualize well-being within the U.S. medical system in which most vloggers in this archive were attempting to function.

1.3.2 Quality of life

Trans individuals report significantly lower QoL compared to cisgender individuals (Ainsworth & Spiegel 2010; Jellestad et al. 2018; Kuhn et al. 2008; Lindqvist et al. 2017). In a 2018 retrospective cross-sectional multicenter study conducted collaboratively by health scholars and professionals in Switzerland:

Both transfeminine and transmasculine individuals reported a lower QoL compared to the general population. Within the trans group, nonbinary individuals showed the lowest QoL scores and significantly more depressive symptoms. Medical GAI are associated with better mental well-being but even after successful medical transition, trans people remain a population at risk for low QoL and mental health, and the nonbinary group shows the greatest vulnerability” (Jellestad et al. 2018:1).

Jellestad et al. (2018) included four mental health domains in this self-reported questionnaire -- vitality, social functioning, emotional role functioning, and mental well-being --

and four physical health domains: physical functioning, physical role functioning, bodily pain, and general health. They found significant correlations between gender, employment, and QoL. Compared to the general population in Switzerland, both transmasculine and transfeminine individuals reported lower scores in nearly all measurements of mental QoL, particularly in terms of social functioning. Jellestad et al. (2018) postulated minority stress and social stigma as contributing to this disparity. In a 2014 study of transgender women's experience with the universal Argentinian health care system, being exposed to police violence, internalized stigma, having experienced discrimination by healthcare workers or patients, and currently living in the Buenos Aires metro were all positive associated with healthcare avoidance. Transgender women with extended health insurance, who had "either social security or private health coverage in addition to the universal public health coverage" and a job outside of sex work, reported less avoidance of healthcare (Socías et al. 2014:6).

In studies in the U.S., Switzerland, France, Belgium, and Turkey, medical GAI have been correlated with higher self-reported mental QoL (Ainsworth & Spiegel 2010; Başar et al. 2016; Kaptan et al. 2021; Meier et al. 2011; Newfield et al. 2006; Rotondi et al. 2011; Wierckx et al. 2011), though the largest cross-sectional study in China revealed that not using hormone therapy, having no regular partners or casual partners, less discrimination from friends, less social discrimination, knowledge of HIV prevention, and hope were positively associated with mental health (Master et al. 2016). Several trans health studies show a strong correlation between access to medical GAI and QoL. Among the positive outcomes of medical transition are increased psychological function, lessening of gender dysphoria, increased satisfaction with body image, and increased sexual function (Barcelos & Budge 2019, Colizzi et al. 2014, De Vries et al. 2014;

Keuroghlian et al. 2015; Lindqvist et al. 2017; Murad et al. 2010; Papadopoulos et al. 2017; Reisner et al. 2016; Tucker et al. 2018, White & Reisner 2016; Wilson et al. 2015).

In a study of trans women by Kuhn et al. (2008), QoL measures related to general health, including role limitation, remained significantly lower than controls (comprised of “healthy female medical staff with at least one previous abdominal or pelvic operation”) after 15 years post-sex reassignment surgery (SRS) (p. 1686); and physical and personal limitation remained significantly higher than that of controls. Emotions, sleep/energy, and incontinence were similar to controls (Kuhn et al. 2008). In a 2011 study in Belgium, transsexual men indicated SRS increased their QoL and sexual well-being, and individuals in the sample who were in a relationship scored higher in social functioning than those who were not in a relationship (Wierckx et al. 2011). Harb et al. (2019) documented negative physical health outcomes with prolonged HRT usage, such as vaginal atrophy for AFAB individuals using intramuscular testosterone. Trans health studies indicate that more longitudinal studies, as well as qualitative data, are needed to assess the long-term impact of medical GAI on well-being (see Poteat et al. 2013).

In addition to exploring the relationship between medical GAI and QoL, trans health scholars have explored additional predictors of QoL, including stigma-related stress, perceived levels of discrimination, and social support (Başar et al. 2016; Budge et al. 2013; Budge et al. 2014; Reisner et al. 2013; Zeluf et al. 2016). In a study conducted in Turkey, Başar et al. (2016) found that family support was the primary predictor of psychological well-being and QoL, and support from friends “predicted better QoL in all other domains” (Başar et al. 2016:1137). Perceived support from a significant other has also been associated higher psychological and physical QoL (Başar et al. 2016). Among a sample ($n=207$) of FTM individuals in Ontario,

sexual satisfaction was found to be a protective factor for depressive symptoms. Frequent exposure to transphobia has been associated with higher odds of depressive symptoms, and FTMs who were planning to medically transition but had not yet begun the process were at increased risk of higher depressive symptoms (Rotondi et al. 2011). Avoiding or delaying care due to trans identity is commonly reported (Budge et al. 2013, 2014; Harb et al. 2019; Reisner et al. 2013). Meanwhile, scholars have associated social support and facilitative coping (e.g., seeking help) with lower levels of anxiety and depression, and lack of social support and avoidant coping (e.g., avoiding emotions) with higher levels of anxiety and depression (Budge et al. 2013, 2014). These benefits of support systems on QoL reflect research that utilizes the minority stress model to explore the relationship of support systems for LGB populations (Budge et al. 2013).

1.3.3 Digital Trans Studies

While “expert” status has traditionally been granted to cisgender medical providers who may not be adequately trained to serve trans patients and who are working within the constraints of medicalized modes of diagnostics and precarious insurance plan coverage, trans people are creating virtual archives to share medical information and to represent their lived experiences. Various SNS, such as Facebook, Instagram, Reddit, TikTok, Tumblr, Twitter, and YouTube, function as *networked counterpublics* (Renninger 2015) where trans people, particularly trans youth, give and receive support from other trans people. For many, vlogs support self-empowerment and transformative identity and community development without transnormative gatekeeping expectations (Etengoff 2019). Even with this potential for YouTube to serve as a networked counterpublic for trans people, YouTube’s algorithms privilege videos that produce

the most profit (Rodriguez 2022) and transnormative narratives are the most visible within trans YouTube content (Horak 2014).

Trans people use various SNS to explore their gender identity and expression, as well as document their processes of self-actualization (Hegland & Nelson 2002; Hill 2005; Raun 2015a, 2015b, 2015c, 2016). Many trans people choose to share their experiences online to provide a visible source of support for other people going through similar experiences or questioning their gender (Cannon et al. 2017; Miller 2018; Raun 2016). Bailey (2015) discussed how Black queer and trans women represent themselves on digital media in ways that promote healing and actively resist the biomedical industrial complex (Jackson et al. 2017). YouTube, the site of this content analysis project, is highly frequented by trans people for a variety of purposes, including for makeup tutorials, vlogging, and as source of information related to medical transition (Dame 2013, 2015; Miller 2018; Raun 2015a, 2015b, 2015c, 2016). Trans YouTube serves as a counterpublic, within the limitations of visibility being dictated by YouTube algorithms (Rodriguez 2022). As revealed in my content analysis, some YouTubers receive monetary compensation for their content, which further illustrates how YouTube content is situated within capitalism. I discuss this topic further in Chapter 3.

Gender studies scholars have explored the benefits and limitations of digital activism in a variety of SNS contexts. One emerging research area within digital trans health scholarship is the usage of crowdfunding through micro lending platforms (e.g., YouCare, GoFundMe, and Give Forward) for services such as name and gender marker changes, HRT, and various gender affirming surgeries (Barcelos & Budge 2019; Farnel 2014; Fritz & Gonzales 2018). Scholars have studied how media, such as mobile apps, can be used to alleviate or exacerbate health disparities and have shown how person-facing health informatics technology provides the

capability to build community (Parker et al. 2012), reduce harm (Strohmayr et al. 2017), and disrupt barriers of access (Ahmed 2018; Unertl et al. 2015). Ahmed (2018) suggested the creation of a free and publicly available health informatics technology that employs a “trans competent interaction design” (p. 66). Such technology would embody trans-inclusive design and make health services, such as online voice training, more accessible.

Though the Internet has allowed for the mobilization of trans movements (Shapiro 2004), scholars have questioned the overall effectiveness of digital activism to create social change. While pockets of SNS function as networked counterpublics where people give and receive support, many SNS platforms place limitations on self-representation, for example through limited available gender categories and name restrictions (Haimson & Hoffmann 2016). Many trans people do not find the negative repercussions of being visible as trans online worth the benefits (Byron et al. 2019; Cavalcante 2016). As discussed by Milo Stewart, a popular white, non-binary YouTuber with 37.9K subscribers:

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” (Miller 2016).

As discussed by Stewart, trans vloggers who discuss controversial topics are often met with intense resistance and opposition. For Stewart, the most difficult comments to receive were from other trans people or cisgender people attacking Milo in the name of trans people. Over the course of Milo's time as a YouTuber, they have received threats, sexual harassment, and

invalidation of their non-binary identity. Several videos attacking Stewart went viral. While vlogging content has fostered connection and community building, vloggers must be willing and able to risk the backlash of being visibly trans (Miller 2016).

Critical trans studies scholars (Fischer 2020; Gossett et al. 2017; Lenning et al. 2020) have explored the relationship between increased visibility and increased political backlash, violence, and surveillance. Using the dialogue around #Free_Cece as an example, Fischer (2016b) argued that the success of social media activism to transform racist and transphobic systems of oppression depends on offline activism and community organizing supporting online efforts. Two white cisgender men slurred at and attacked CeCe McDonald in Minneapolis in June 2011. One had a Swastika tattoo on his chest and was known as a loving father figure in his community. He claimed self-defense, arguing that McDonald was deceiving and threatening to him. McDonald was arrested for two counts of second-degree murder. LGBT organizers formed CeCe Support Committee, which succeeded in reducing McDonald's charges and prison sentence from a maximum of 40 years to a maximum of 41 months. While the CeCe Support Committee was able to use its networks to bring media attention to McDonald's case and ultimately lessen the sentence, lead organizers of this effort acknowledged that their outreach was limited by the lack of Black leadership and partnership with racial justice focused organizations. McDonald is still disenfranchised due to her felony-status (Fischer 2016b). This context is especially important to emphasize when evaluating the effectiveness of trans activism efforts to increase safety for trans people, which I further contextualize in Chapter 3.

2 METHODS

In this chapter, I outline my chosen methods for my content analysis. I demonstrate how the compiled archive is a particularly rich location to explore the limitations, and potential, of digital activism, particularly in the archive's ability to fill crucial gaps in health information regarding trans populations. With this dissertation, I fill a major gap in public health and medical sociology scholarship by providing a multiperspectival qualitative content analysis of trans YouTube content using grounded theory methods and transfeminist methodology. I understand the lived experiences represented within this dissertation as multi-faceted and by no means monolithic or exhaustive and have sought to represent these perspectives in their complexity. The findings regarding well-being have strong implications beyond trans health advocacy, which I discuss further in the conclusion chapter.

2.1 Transfeminist Methodology

I chose these two digital activism projects as the focus of my content analysis for their implementation of a transfeminist methodology, and I applied this theory of methods in my research design. Among other qualifiers, a transfeminist methodology privileges self-definition and self-determination. With the goal of positive representation, Richards included 7Questions with a shifted focus toward topics including support systems, joy, community, and authenticity (see Appendix A). In inviting other trans individuals to share their stories and experiences via responses to #WeHappyTrans*, Richards created a platform for activism outside of traditional media outlets. Likewise, the platform for #TheGenderTag, created by A. Wylde, was informed by the need for self-definition regarding gender identity and did not begin with trans equating deficiency or lack. Rather, Wylde emphasized lived experience, gender expression, family planning, and desire.

Based on grounded theory principles (Charmaz 2006), I practiced critical reflexivity in my role as a researcher through reflexive memo writing. In addition to contextualizing the positionality and motivations of those who contributed to #WeHappyTrans* and #TheGenderTag, I contextualize my positionality and influence on the research. Rather than assume I am a neutral and objective observer of this archive, I understand my analysis as contributing to a transfeminist standpoint.

I come to this work as a white, non-binary, transmasculine, queer scholar who used YouTube as a resource to guide my own process of medical transition via testosterone, starting in 2013. After six years of struggling to cope with navigating the medical system to access testosterone and experiencing negative side effects of prolonged use, I discontinued HRT. This vantage point, in conjunction with my educational training and experiences as a community organizer, informs my interpretation of these data and the implications I see for trans health advocacy, and beyond.

2.2 #WeHappyTrans* Sampling Frame

The #WeHappyTrans* sampling frame consisted of all available YouTube video responses presented or translated to English (N=59) to Richards' 7Questions prompts (see Appendix A). I originally located sixty video responses through extensive YouTube searches. I used the following search terms: #WeHappyTrans*, We Happy Trans, and 7 Questions. One video was presented in American Sign Language (ASL) and one in German. I included the response presented in ASL, which was translated by its creator to English. As I am only English-speaking and currently lack the needed resources to thoroughly analyze the video contribution presented in German, I excluded this response from the sampling frame. The remaining 58

videos were in English. As such, the sample used for analysis comprised a total of 59 video responses.

I included videos in the archive with published dates ranging from the inception of #WeHappyTrans* in January 2012 through October 2018; the majority (~80%) were posted between 2012-2013. I did not include written responses and additional video responses posted to video repository sites outside of YouTube. In February 2022, I contacted each vlogger included in the #WeHappyTrans* subsample through the personal contact information provided on their YouTube channel to receive consent to use the name they used in their video response, an updated chosen name, their YouTube username, or a pseudonym. Except for Jen Richards, the creator of #WeHappyTrans*, I chose a pseudonym when I did not receive a follow-up or could no longer locate the vloggers' channel or find contact information. I decided not to use a pseudonym for Richards given her active involvement as an actress and activist.

#WeHappyTrans* video responses ranged in length from 1 minute, 59 seconds to 35 minutes, 11 seconds, for a total length of 11 hours and 45 minutes. To create the #WeHappyTrans* sampling frame, I listed each video response and then assigned each a unique identifier. I selected the Top 10 most popular video responses for initial coding, and then I chose thirty videos from the 59 #WeHappyTrans* videos and paired each with a #TheGenderTag video according to a three-tiered stratum of length. Tier 1 consisted of videos under 10 minutes; Tier 2 consisted of videos from 10 minutes to 20 minutes; and Tier 3 consisted of videos over 20 minutes. Ten videos were randomly selected for each tier. Last, I transcribed all selected videos with the help of paid transcription software Transcribe by Wreally LLC.

2.3 #TheGenderTag Sampling Frame

#TheGenderTag sampling frame consisted of all publicly available video responses presented in English (N=704) to the original “Gender Tag” YouTube video created by A. Wyld in July 2015 (see Appendix B). I originally located 722 video contributions. Eighteen were presented in Spanish, French, or German (see Tortajada et al. [2021] for an analysis of Spanish trans YouTubers). Due to my lack of resources to translate these contributions, I did not include these 18 videos in the sample. Contributors published video responses between July 2015 and May 2018. I conducted initial coding on the Top 10 most popular video responses.

From this sample of 704 video responses, I selected 30 additional videos to code. These 30 were selected by creating a three-tiered system by length, as I did for the #WeHappyTrans* sample. Tier 1 consisted of video responses under 10 minutes; Tier 2 consisted of video responses from 10 minutes to 20 minutes; and Tier 3 consisted of video responses over 20 minutes. Once 10 #WeHappyTrans* videos were randomly selected within each tier, I paired these 30 videos with a video from the #TheGenderTag sample. I matched videos as close as possible by popularity. In February 2022, I contacted each vlogger included in the subsample through their personal contact information provided on their YouTube channel to receive consent to use the name they used in their video response, an updated chosen name, their YouTube username, or a pseudonym. I chose a pseudonym in cases where I did not receive a follow-up or could no longer locate the vloggers’ channel or find contact information.

Video responses included in the #TheGenderTag sampling frame ranged from 1 minute and 30 seconds to 59 minutes and 37 seconds. As in the creation of the #WeHappyTrans* subsample, I listed each video response and assigned a unique identifier. To measure qualitative

differences in archival content, I coded the Top 10 most popular videos from each project and then coded the sixty paired videos.

2.4 Coding

I employed aspects of qualitative content analysis (Schreier 2012) and grounded theory (Charmaz 2006) for coding and analysis. I collected data in April 2020. Following pairing and transcription of the subsample of #WeHappyTrans* videos ($n=30$) and #TheGenderTag videos ($n=30$), I coded the verbal (transcript) and visual material (YouTube videos) using the assistance of NVivo for PC (Version 11.4). I used a combination of codes that were concept-driven based on prior literature and theory related to my research questions, as well as data-driven, emerging inductively from the content. I made comparisons between archives and followed the word-by-word, line-by-line, and incident with incident steps of grounded theory coding (Charmaz 2006; Schreier 2012). In addition to coding the verbal and visual text, I wrote memos to aid in developing transfeminist methodology and identifying patterns emerging from the data.

I coded data and concept-driven main categories and subcategories using a constant comparative method (Charmaz 2006) to generate focused codes. Visual codes related to motivations included facial expressions, hand gestures, room décor (e.g., Pride flags), and other aspects of the setting and display. What participants said, as well as how they said it, were coded when relevant. Following in the tradition of qualitative content analysis and grounded theory, I first conducted initial coding of the top 10 most viewed #WeHappyTrans* and #TheGenderTag videos. Preliminary concept-driven codes aided in dividing the archive such that comparisons could be made. I derived concept-driven codes from the theoretical frameworks of intersectionality and transnormativity. Concept-driven theoretical codes included aspects of self-identity previously explored in relevant scholarship related to experiences of race, assigned sex

at birth, gender identity, gender expression, and medical transition status, as well as more abstract concepts such as authenticity, community, resilience, and care work.

Following initial coding of the Top 10 videos, I applied the final coding frame to the full subsample of #WeHappyTrans* and #TheGenderTag videos ($n=60$). Preliminary codes greatly informed analysis, though I remained open to the addition of codes that did not emerge in initial coding. The results of the content analysis produced material for analysis using case and group comparisons. Statistical patterns emerged when analyzing variation by popularity (see Table 1); these findings are discussed in Chapter 3.

In Table 1 below, I present quantitative information revealing a wide range of audience reception to the video contributions within this archive. These measures were reported on the vlogger's channel and the individual videos. I made note of each video's popularity frequencies (i.e., number of views, number of likes and dislikes, number of comments, and number of subscribers).

Table 1: Popularity Statistics

	#WeHappyTrans*	#TheGenderTag
# of views (min - max); mean	(16 – 82,682); 3,484	(7 - 967,543); 6,708
# of likes (min – max); mean	(0 – 500); 32	(0 – 63,000); 333
# of dislikes (min – max); mean	(0 – 20); 1	(0 – 4,900); 52
# of comments (min – max); mean	(0 – 116); 8	(0 – 7,653); 48
# of subscribers (min – max); mean	(0 – 9,600); 1,153	(0 – 2.4 million); 7,180

As demonstrated by these wide ranges, audience involvement varied greatly both within and between the projects. I used these frequencies, along with prevalent codes, to make cross-

tabulation comparisons and pair the samples for in-depth analysis. I also used data mapping techniques and detailed memos throughout the research process to aid in comparisons.

A social constructionist understanding of gender as not based in biology was consistent across participants; however, participants of #WeHappyTrans* often spoke in binary terms, reflecting an understanding of binary trans categories (i.e., trans women and trans men). Several vloggers, while identifying as binary trans women or trans men themselves, named their support for those who are non-binary. Binary language regarding gender was more common in #WeHappyTrans*. This pattern reflects the earlier creation of the project as compared to #TheGenderTag (2012 vs. 2016), as common language around gender was quickly evolving during this time span (Miller & Fink 2014).

Reflecting the gender identity of their creators, most participants of #WeHappyTrans* were trans women ($n=29$), and individuals who identified as non-binary, genderqueer, or agender were more represented in #TheGenderTag ($n=25$). Nine contributors to #WeHappyTrans* were trans men, one was bigender, and three were non-binary or genderqueer. #WeHappyTrans* vloggers identified with the following gender identities: transgender woman, trans man, woman of transgender history, trans woman, woman of transsexual experience, queer lesbian-leaning pansexual post-op trans woman who is also a femme-leaning tomboy, trans female, female, transfeminine, mostly femme, bigender (man/guy and woman), transgendered, and trans guy.

Twenty contributors to #TheGenderTag were trans men. Two participants included in #TheGenderTag sample identified as cisgender female, one as mostly cis, and one as a lady-type woman/man girl-person. Non-binary identities varied widely. #TheGenderTag vloggers named the following gender identities: male, FTM, transgender, non-binary, agender, genderfluid, trans man, trans guy, transgender man, genderqueer, trans male, demi-boy, transgender, boy, guy,

dude, transgender male, cisgender female, transmasculine, fluid, non-binary trans man, gender neutral, demi-girl mostly cis woman, lady-type woman/man girl-person, man, trans, masculine, trans boy, little man, super funny queer genderqueer trans guy/glittery hot pink polyamorous unicorn, pansexual queer trans man, androgynous, unicorn, gender flux trans guy, demi-guy, demi-gender, boyish, polygender, queer guy, aporagender, nano-boy, and nano-girl. Notably, no trans women or transfeminine individuals were represented in #TheGenderTag subsample.

Racial and ethnic identities represented in #WeHappyTrans* included two Black trans men, one Lebanese and Armenian trans man, and eleven women of color, including six Black/African American women, and 26 white or white passing people. No contributors to #WeHappyTrans* directly named their race being white. In total, 14 of 40 (35%) of the #WeHappyTrans* sample were people of color, all appearing to reside in the U.S. Ages ranged from late teens to late 60s. One #TheGenderTag contributor mentioned their race being white, and no other vlogger mentioned their race directly. Six of the 14 were transmasculine people of color, including two Black men, one Black non-binary person, and one genderqueer person of color. One was a Black cisgender woman. In total, 7 of 40 (17.5%) #TheGenderTag contributions in the sample were from people of color. 17 of 20 (85%) contributors of the Top 10 videos of both projects were white or white-passing, and 74% were white or white-passing within the overall subsample. One vlogger lived in Sweden, one in Australia, and two in the United Kingdom (U.K.). The remainder resided in the U.S. Ages represented in #TheGenderTag range from 15 to approximately 40.

2.5 Multiperspectival Cultural Studies Analysis

Though the primary focus of analysis was the content of this archive, the context in which the archive came to be is an essential component of understanding the meaning of these

cultural artifacts. Foundational in the field of cultural studies, Hall (1993) described encoding as the process by which messages are created and decoding as the process by which messages are received. One rationale for this categorization, according to Hall, is that there might be different ideological messages embedded into texts than there are interpreted from them. This process depends on such factors as one's context, understanding of cultural-specific codes, and socioeconomic status.

Building on this rationale, I employed a multiperspectival cultural studies approach (Cava 2015; Scodari 1998) in my analysis. To portray a holistic understanding of the benefits and limitations of digital activism, I have contextualized the archive of #WeHappyTrans* and #TheGenderTag contributions within the archives' production and reception. The impetus for this approach stems from the notion that, as Wolfsfeld et al. (2013) stressed, "One cannot understand the role of social media in collective action without first taking into account the political environment in which they operate" (p. 119). As such, my analysis of the production and reception of #WeHappyTrans* and #TheGenderTag frames the implications of this content analysis project. I have cited available interviews and other secondary data when relevant.

In Chapter 3, I focus on key aspects of digital activism effectiveness. In addition to discussing the ability of these projects to inspire off-screen change, I analyze how effective these projects were in achieving their creators' stated goals of more positive and diverse representation. In Chapter 4, I outline themes deriving from the content analysis that related to QoL, including the social construction of gender norms, transition, dysphoria, misgendering, well-being, the benefits of social and/or medical transition, and activist strategies. The focus of Chapter 5 is on how support networks positively impacted well-being. In the Conclusion, I further reflect on transfeminist methodology, revisit my findings, and discuss the implications of

trans archives for those who wish to better advocate for trans health, including policymakers, community organizers, and public health and healthcare providers.

3 DIGITAL ACTIVISM EFFECTIVENESS

As social media are increasingly being utilized as a news source (Gottfried and Shearer 2016; Harlow and Harp 2013; Newman et. al 2016), studying digital activism campaigns in relation to broad contextual factors -- such as racialized-gendered citizenship (Glenn 2002; Romero 2018), wealth inequality, access to education and technology, and political unrest -- is essential to understanding their overall effectiveness in creating lasting social change (Cockerham 2013; Conrad & Barker 2010; Hankin & Wright 2010; House 2002; Phelan et al. 2010; Mirowsky & Ross 2003; Rosich & Hankin 2010; Sacker et al. 2011; Wolfsfeld et al. 2013). Intersectional analyses and evaluation of digital activism efforts are needed to inform strategies for successful social movements. Beyond providing insight for trans activism, this archive allows for a greater understanding of the mechanisms of gender oppression more broadly. Through the lens of the digital trans archive, we better understand how individuals living within a highly restrictive gender paradigm navigate binary and biologically constructed gender norms. Viewing this trans archive with a critical analysis of the political economy of trans YouTube also allows for a holistic understanding of the limitations of activist efforts.

Both trans studies and digital activism scholars have critiqued the assumption that greater social media usage inherently inspires collective direct action (Gossett et al. 2017; Wolfsfeld et al. 2013). In fact, Wolfsfeld et al. (2013) found through their study of 20 Arab countries and Palestinian territories during the tumultuous period of anti-government protests known as the Arab Spring, the greater the Internet and social media use per capita, the less protests. If this pattern holds within the context of trans activism, collective efforts need to be reevaluated. Where should activists direct their energy and time? Is trans visibility distracting us from doing the work? With an understanding of the limitations of visibility, scholars such as cárdenas (2017)

suggest shifting the focus of digital trans activism away from visibility as an end in itself and toward a change in “affective conditions” and “material conditions of safety” (178). The findings of this study support this shift if the collective goal is liberation from oppressive systems.

In this chapter, I analyze how the motivations for creating #WeHappyTrans* and #TheGenderTag relate to their effectiveness in creating lasting social change. I measured the impact of these projects according to goal achievement and realization of benefit (see Joyce 2014). To measure goal achievement, I coded for stated motivations for participation. I contextualized these goals in relation to their political importance, level of effort on the part of the actors, and the level of attention the campaigns garnered.

To best understand the level to which these projects were effective in achieving their goals and producing benefit, it is important to understand the wide array of motivations of contributors for participating. I found seven primary motivations for contributing a video response to #WeHappyTrans* or #TheGenderTag, as shown in Table 2 below. These categories were not mutually exclusive and only represent motivations that were stated directly.

Table 2: Stated Motivations for Participation

To support trans people, and others exploring their gender and/or expression	<i>n</i> =44
To promote their work	<i>n</i> =38
To educate viewers on gender diversity	<i>n</i> =33
To create more positive trans representation	<i>n</i> =17
Asked directly to contribute	<i>n</i> =12
To normalize trans people	<i>n</i> =9
To receive compensation	<i>n</i> =4

In one of the largest digital activism data sets (N=426), the goal of activists was to mobilize citizens into offline boots-on-the-ground (BoTG) activism (Goodling 2015:62). Neither Richards nor Wylde explicitly stated a goal of increasing BoTG activism. Instead, they were motivated by a desire for positive and diverse representation. While these projects were only one part of Richards' and Wylde's activism, their effectiveness in creating social change was limited due to the framing of their projects and the constraints of YouTube as a platform. While these networked counterpublics are valuable sites for self-reflection and social support (Asakura et al. 2021), narratives that reinforce transnormativity are most popular within trans YouTube content (Horak 2014). In the following sections, I discuss how the motivations for contributing to these projects relate to their effectiveness in reaching stated goals and the benefits and limitations of these strategies in addressing oppression.

3.1 Positive Trans Representation

As discussed by Richards and others in the Netflix film *Disclosure* (2020), there is a growing movement for positive trans representation in modern film. Positive representation does not teach fear as a reasonable response to trans people by using trans characters (played by cisgender men) as scapegoats for trans panic defense and internalized shame. Examples of trans characters portrayed as repulsive are found in shows and movies such as *Maury*, *Jerry Springer*, *Family Guy*, *Hangover 2*, *The Crying Game*, and *Ace Ventura*, or brief characters whose fate is rape and/or death, such as in *Dallas Buyer's Club*, *Nip/Tuck*, *CSI: New York*, *NYPD Blue*, *Cold Case*, *Chicago Med*, *Code Black*, *The Danish Girl*, *Boys Don't Cry*, *Albert Nobbs*, *Yentl*, and *Victor/Victoria*.

When represented positively, trans and gender diverse people are depicted as whole people, rather than as a plot device to be exploited for shock value. Furthermore, positive

representation is ideally created by trans directors and producers who can create shows and films based on trans lived experiences, and trans characters are played by trans people, rather than by cisgender people (Abbott 2013; Cavalcante 2013; Clayman 2015; *Disclosure* 2020; Phillips 2006; Sloop 2000). Examples of positive trans representation include shows like *Her Story*, *Pose*, and *Sense8*. *Transparent* was also lauded for its inclusion of more complex trans characters and employing a majority trans film crew; however, Jeffrey Tambor, the cisgender man cast as a trans woman in the show, was fired for sexual harassment.

Positive trans representation is needed to counteract sensationalized media of trans lives; however, as argued by critical trans studies scholars, the increase in trans visibility has exacerbated trans violence and surveillance (Banks 2021; Fischer 2020; Gossett et al. 2017; Keegan 2018). Still, trans representation that celebrates trans lives has been experienced as empowering, both for trans people who are seeking representations they can relate to and within the media industry, as trans people are gaining notoriety and respect (see *Disclosure* 2020).

YouTube, the site of this content analysis project, is highly frequented by trans people, especially as a source of information related to medical transition (Dame 2013, 2015; Miller 2018; Raun 2015a, 2015b, 2015c, 2016). Often filling a gap in support from healthcare providers, vloggers have used their platforms to educate others about trans people and provide support. With the intent of supporting others, vloggers have reported receiving psychological benefit in creating content. Altruistic motivations or not, vloggers with high visibility put themselves at risk for harm.

#WeHappyTrans* is one digital activism effort created to supplement sensationalized representations of trans characters depicted by media producers in Hollywood. With the goal of positive trans representation, Richards used her existing platforms to encourage viewers to share

the positive aspects of their lives. Richards employed a transfeminist approach in asking viewers to respond to these prompts using their own words. Noticing the limited reach of her project, Richards quickly asked for additional support to ensure more racially diverse representation.

Overall, #WeHappyTrans* contributions received an average of 3,484 views at the time of data collection (ranging from 16 to 82,682), as compared to the much larger reception of #TheGenderTag with an average of 6,708 average views (ranging from 7 to 967,543). #TheGenderTag also received a higher number of likes, dislikes, comments, and subscribers (see Table 1). Wylde was already a popular YouTuber when they created #TheGenderTag in 2015. As of March 2022, they had 34.8K subscribers with almost three million views to their channel. Though #WeHappyTrans* garnered less attention than larger digital activism projects like #TheGenderTag, Richards was successful in eliciting 60 video responses on YouTube, plus additional written and video responses collected on WeHappyTrans.com¹.

Richards has played an important role in motivating BoTG activism, changing the landscape of trans media, and addressing trans oppression. Roughly a year after the creation of #WeHappyTrans*, Richards launched the *Trans 100* project, a yearly honorary celebration of trans activists around the U.S., held in Chicago. Several contributors to #WeHappyTrans* have attended and been honored at the event. Richards was featured on Caitlyn Jenner's show *I Am Cait* (2015), played the main role in, and wrote and produced, the multi-award-winning web series *Her Story* (2015) and was a lead character on *Tales of the City* (2019). She has also been featured in many other TV roles (Richards & Zak 2015). #WeHappyTrans* is just one activism effort spearheaded by Richards. Though her stated goal in creating #WeHappyTrans* was not to inspire BoTG activism, Richards was successful in uplifting trans individuals who are involved

¹ WeHappyTrans.com is no longer active.

in BoTG work. Richards is now a prominent Hollywood actress who advocates alongside other trans actors and actresses, including Janet Mock and Laverne Cox, for trans characters to be cast by trans people.

In January 2012, Richards created the webpage WeHappyTrans.com to feature video and written responses to a set of 7 questions (see Appendix A). Her introductory video is self-recorded in the typical person-facing “talking torso” style of YouTube vlogs (Dame 2012; Raun 2012), creating an intimate relationship between Richards and her audience. The “talking torso” vlog style captures her face and shoulders while sitting on her couch. She appears confident, optimistic, and well-prepared for the launching of this project. I read her gender expression as feminine. She is wearing a black blouse; her long red hair matches her dark burgundy lipstick and is complimented by her eyeshadow and dangly silver earrings and rings. The background consists only of her window with blinds drawn and red curtains on both sides of the window. As did many participants in #WeHappyTrans* and #TheGenderTag, Richards utilized editing software to produce her initial 7Questions video.

She explained some of her motivations for creating the video in her introduction and encouraged others to post a video or written response of their own or with a friend. After releasing her introductory video, Richards utilized the platform Trans Chat, a monthly two-hour Twitter chat dedicated to various trans-related topics, to garner greater participation. Richards also solicited trans people within her existing social networks to add to the diversity of representation offered (Lang 2013). Noah Alvarez, a Latinx trans man and activist, and others, were included in the organizing team within months of the project’s creation. Eight contributors in the sample were directly asked by Richards to participate in #WeHappyTrans*, two of whom were recruited as part of the #WeHappyTrans* Musician Series.

Video responses revealed that Richards was not alone in desiring more positive trans representation. Seventeen vloggers reiterated Richards' goal of positive representation. Many understood their video responses as contributing to this goal. One vlogger noted that while there was "good" representation of gay and lesbian communities, there was little for various gender identities.

Lucas, a genderqueer person of color living in Canada, appreciated the effort to increase trans visibility and saw his video as contributing to positive trans representation. Lucas's video response opens with a fisheye camera view and then an edited slide with his first and last name large and in all caps in rainbow colors and The Gender Tag in black at the bottom. I perceive Lucas's expression as masculine, and he appears small in stature. He is stealth in his daily life, meaning he is read as a cisgender man. He is not invested in sharing his genderqueer identity to people he does not intend to get to know. He recorded his video response against a white wall. He is featured standing and wearing a black Calvin Klein tank top. He has olive skin and tattoos on his left shoulder and arm. His hair is short, black, and longer on the top. His eyebrows are thick, and he has a mustache and a soul patch. He also shows the camera his underarm hair. He discusses having been on testosterone, having had top surgery, and pursuing a hysterectomy. He offered viewers to contact him for emotional support. His YouTube channel largely focuses on documenting his medical transition and sharing cover songs, including recorded songs as his voice was changing on testosterone.

In reference to trans representation, he stated: "We can show other individuals who are maybe uncomfortable or not sure about coming out that we're happy. We're comfortable. We're safe, and you can be who you want to be in life. And that's huge." While his video was intended to support viewers who may feel alone in their experience of gender through positive

representation, Lucas does not interrogate how his sense of comfort, happiness, and safety relates to his ability to be perceived as a cisgender man in his daily life. Lucas illustrated the way he engaged with institutional gender constructions by concealing his trans identity, though when in intimate settings he more freely expressed his feminine aspects. Much of Lucas's resistance to binary gender constructions was expressed online, rather than in his daily life.

Taylor is in their 20s, white, born in England, non-binary, and an organizer in a large Northeastern U.S. city. They were asked directly by Richards to contribute a #WeHappyTrans* video response, and they greatly supported Richards' efforts to bring visibility to "happy trans narratives that we can relate to." I understand their gender expression as masculine-leaning. The video begins with Taylor by the beach. They are dressed in a vertically striped dress shirt, with the cuffs rolled just below their elbows and a thin silver tie. They have no facial hair. Their hair is short and light brown, and they have on black-framed glasses and are wearing small black plugs in their ears.

Taylor experienced positive representation within their trans community, rather than solely online. Taylor highly benefited from attending a trans support group at their local library. There, they witnessed positive stories from trans people at various levels of "awareness, transition, or transformation." Though their privilege as a white, medically transitioning transmasculine person closely connected to academic spaces was not discussed directly, they elaborated on the benefit of having access to trans and queer communities and acknowledged the need to create supportive spaces, particularly for queer and trans youth. As an organizer, they helped host monthly benefits for queer organizations in their city. Through organizing, they expressed their resistance to binary gender systems. These connections provided mentorship for

them, especially as they were medically transitioning. With their video response, they offered this support to others.

Jamie Price, a white genderqueer musician in Canada and the most recent contributor to #WeHappyTrans*, also desired positive and happy trans representation. Their video response featured them wearing a red band t-shirt with a circle logo in the center and speaking into a high-quality microphone. I read their gender expression as masculine-leaning. They have no facial hair. They have short brain hair in a faux-hawk style, with the sides shaved short, and are wearing dark brown glasses. They are appreciative of Lana and Lilly Wachowski for creating their first explicitly trans character, Naomie on Sense8. They cite this character as an example of a positive representation of a trans woman. They desired increased quantity and quality of trans representation, as compared to films that have used trans people for shock value. They explained:

[I]t doesn't revolve around her being trans. It's not the only thing she's got going on. She's a hacker and she's figuring out the whole mystery of the plot line. At the same time, the fact that she's trans does influence what happens to her. There are some major things about her - her mom being transphobic in one or two of the episodes, and she has some scary medical related stuff that I won't spoil for you... [A]lso, she's a pretty happy-go-lucky person and she's got a girlfriend who loves her, and they've got a healthy romantic and sexual life... [I]t was really surprising for me when I saw those two characters have a sex scene together because it was so happy, and it wasn't presented any differently from any of the other characters' sex scenes. And they never show what Naomie's genitals look like, which was a big deal to me because it's not relevant. You don't need to know, right? I feel like a lot of shows make too big a deal about what kind of genitals people have, and it always makes me really uncomfortable. I enjoyed the movie *Transamerica* at the time

that I saw it but it still made me really uncomfortable that they showed the main character's private parts because it seemed like it was meant to be shocking.

In addition to their video response to the #WeHappyTrans* project, they saw their work as a musician fitting within the goal of creating positive trans representation. The positive aspects they wished to express included humor about the awkwardness of coming out as trans and the ways gender is expressed as a spectrum of experience. The stories they sing about end with “characters supporting each other and being really loving and caring,” opposing common tropes of trans people as inherently doomed to failure and untimely death. Demonstrating their effectiveness in creating such representation, one viewer commented:

I just want you to know that hearing things about your gender journey, and just listening to your music, has made such a difference for me. I'm still figuring myself out, but knowing that someone like me can find such a happy place in the world makes my heart ache in a good way. Thank you for being you

This interaction demonstrates the ways in which positive representation supports trans communities. Price found benefit in consuming positive representation, and others likewise found benefit in Price’s content. Price does not discuss how their race impacts their experiences of gender, though they do choose to resist societal pressures to conform to a masculine or feminine role and do so visibly as a musician. As they discussed in their video, they were no longer trying to fit themselves into a masculine role. Instead, they have crafted a lifestyle as a musician that is not dependent on working within institutions that enforce binary gender norms.

Kat Blaque, a Black trans woman, was another YouTuber who contributed a #WeHappyTrans* video response with a stated motivation to contribute a positive trans narrative that contrasts sensationalized media representation. Blaque’s video was self-illustrated with

voice overs. To begin, she drew herself with brown skin, long wavy dark maroon hair, thick black winged glasses, and a piercing on her lower right lip, next to “Kat Blaque’s 7 Questions.” I read her illustrated expression as feminine. She shared her narrative so that “hopefully people will see me and see what I do and how I live and who I am as a person and recognize that not all trans women are those crazy girls going on *Jerry Springer* talking about ‘I’m a man.’” She wished to disrupt these negative stereotypes and broaden people’s mind about what it means to be a trans woman. From the feedback she receives from her viewers, her YouTube channel is contributing to this goal.

While supporting other trans women of color by providing representation and otherwise challenging racist ideology, Blaque’s trans activism was based on a politics of economic contribution and productivity. She stressed that trans people are “just like you” and that she would “like for the world, essentially, to respect trans people and recognize that we’re people, too. And that we pay our taxes, and we work hard just like you.” She looked to trans women like Janet Mock, Calpernia Addams, and April Ashley as representations of success, despite significant circumstances. While Blaque was successful at creating representation that deviates from sensationalized trans representation, she reinforced transnormativity through upholding capitalist standards of who is deserving of social support.

This activist strategy of seeking for social recognition by appealing to the ability of trans people to be productive workers (and citizens) supports what Fisher (2016a) named transpatriotism. As described by Fischer (2016a), “Engendered through exceptional forms of transnormativity, transpatriotism is grounded in an unmarked whiteness that incorporates certain previously stigmatized transgender bodies into the fold of US empire” (p. 570). Blaque failed to critically examine the exploitative class relations illuminated by “successful” trans women

(Irving 2013). Irving (2013) analyzed how the construction of transsexual subjectivities by early medical experts, early trans theory, as well as contemporary trans activism has reinforced dominant and exploitative class relations and constructed the “transgender working body” as an assimilationist tool for gaining civil rights. This strategy for trans inclusion further excludes those on the margins (Miller, 2016). Blaque’s political strategy, given her popularity, provides an example of how transnormative content is privileged within trans YouTube content. While challenging sensationalized media representation, Blaque presented her “positive” trans narrative in a way that also reinforced transnormative expectations.

Reinforced by YouTube’s algorithms, the most visible trans YouTube content rarely challenges the “uncomfortable norms” of whiteness, beauty standards, and gender cohesion (Horak 2014; Raun 2012, 2015; Miller 2016). In turn, a monolithic transsexual narrative is created, creating the parameters for who is able to access a livable trans life (see Miller 2016 and Spade 2011). In this archive, white narratives were the most popular. Four of the Top 10 most popular #WeHappyTrans* videos were created by white trans women and one by a white bigender person. Three trans women of color had videos in the Top 10 most viewed #WeHappyTrans* contributions, though the highest popularity among them was 89% less than the most visible #WeHappyTrans* response. The majority of #TheGenderTag video responses were from white or white-passing people; many non-binary perspectives were offered. The predominance of young, white, binary-identified, medically transitioning trans YouTubers within the larger genre of trans YouTube content reflects the focus of mainstream LGBT movements, such as that of the Human Rights Campaign and the “It Gets Better” project created by Dan Savage (Kim 2010; Puar 2015). Highly visible trans people, such as Christine Jorgenson, Renee Richards, and Caitlyn Jenner, have come to be understood as what trans means to the general

public, without an awareness of the “ambiguities and polyvocalities” of trans lived experiences (Miller 2016; Stone 2006:231-2).

The #WeHappyTrans* prompts reflect Richards’ privilege as a white trans woman and successful actress. As Richards has discussed in previous interviews, for example, question number three relied on an assumption that respondents will want to change their gender expression through medical means. As a result, non-medically transitioning trans people may have been less likely to participate in the #WeHappyTrans* project.

The most popular #WeHappyTrans* video response was created by Charlotte, a white transfeminine porn star. Her video received 82,682 views at the time of data collection. Her video also received the most engagement within the archive with 116 comments, 550 likes, and 20 dislikes. Charlotte’s video was recorded in medium resolution. She is sitting in a circular cushioned chair. Behind her you see a green wall and curtains designed with black and white leaves. To her left is the edge of a white bookshelf, with a pink stuffed animal that holds other toys. I perceive her gender expression to be feminine. Her hair is long, black, and straight, and her bangs are cut across her forehead. She has shaped eyebrows and has on dark eye shadow and heavy mascara and eyeliner, light foundation and blush, and lip gloss. She is wearing a white hairband just above her bangs and a white t-shirt.

Charlotte’s comments section revealed mixed reception. Most comments came from viewers who were inspired by Charlotte to be more open about their gender or sexuality. Many viewers complimented her appearance and sent congratulatory comments about Charlotte’s marriage to her husband. While her intention was to provide positive representation and support other trans people, other viewers asked invasive questions about her genitals, misgendered her, and self-reflecting on their confusion about their attraction to her. The overemphasis on

Charlotte's physical appearance served as a distraction from her insight regarding conflict within trans communities.

The next most popular #WeHappyTrans* video featured a white trans woman, Arianna, with 34,610 views, 168 likes, 4 dislikes, and 35 comments. Her video was filmed in medium resolution and focused on Arianna sitting on her couch in front of her living room banister. There is a green pillow to her right and a maroon pillow with gold flowers to her left. I perceive her gender expression to be very feminine. She has long, straight dark maroon hair and is wearing a red lace tank top under a red cardigan. She is wearing a silver necklace with a red pendant, as well as a silver ring on her left ring finger. Her eyebrows are shaped, and her makeup consists of dark eyeliner, mascara, foundation, blush, and lipstick. Her nails are painted maroon.

As in the reception of Charlotte's video response, most comments were supportive; however, many viewers asked invasive questions and hyper focused on her physicality. For example, one commenter wrote, "Are you post op ...you look beautiful btw". Some viewers complimented her appearance, and others related to personal details she shared about her upbringing. The overemphasis of Charlotte and Arianna's physicality reveals patterns of audience reception that help us to better understand the limitations of digital trans activism. As shown by the reception of the most popular #WeHappyTrans* videos, viewers tended to hyper focus on physical aspects of vloggers and their transition, even when contributors intended to provide visibility related to their trans lived experience beyond physical changes.

The focus of mainstream LGBT activism has been on seeking inclusion in institutions like marriage and the military. While insinuating social "progress," gains in institutional inclusion have made little substantial change to the material lives of trans and gender non-conforming people, particularly low-income trans people of color (Fischer 2020; Gossett et al.

2017). As revealed in this content analysis, positive trans representation was desired by some to distance themselves from assumed negative roles; however, it is not clear if and how positive representation and heightened visibility alleviate trans oppression. Heightened trans visibility has been critiqued for this paradox. Still, trans communities desire more positive representation and find it necessary to combat transphobic and racist depictions of trans and gender non-conforming characters on screen (Disclosure 2020).

Both projects were credited as contributing to positive representation of trans lives, and vloggers who participated emphasized the necessity of a diversity of trans experiences being amplified to combat the negative impact of sensationalized trans representation (Asakura et al. 2019). While these projects were successful in eliciting trans narratives that counter sensationalized trans representation, vloggers like Blaque reinscribed transnormative values of productive citizenry and respectable transness in their efforts to normalize trans people. I revisit this topic in Chapter 4.7.

3.2 Education on Gender Diversity

In July 2015, A. Wylde, a popular YouTuber with 34.8K subscribers as of March 2022, created a similar prompt vlog style project called #TheGenderTag. This digital activism project consisted of 10 questions related to gender and gender expression. While Richards specifically sought positive trans representation, Wylde stressed the importance of greater awareness of gender diversity. Wylde was not alone in desiring greater awareness of gender diversity; thirty-three contributors within the archive expressed a motivation to educate others on trans lived experience.

In their introduction video, viewers meet Wylde sitting in the familiar “talking torso” vlog style (Dame 2013). Their video is filmed in high resolution, with light editing between prompt

questions. Wylde spoke to the camera sitting on their dark blue couch with scattered books on the stand to their left. Behind them is a whiteboard with a green marker and a poster for Heart Hold Soul Silver. I perceive their gender expression to be masculine-leaning. They have short brown hair and no facial hair. They are wearing small white plugs in their ears and a silver stud on the right side of their nose. They have on a white t-shirt with the sleeve slightly rolled up on one side; the shirt features repeating rows of large emoticons, including the heart eye smiley, the blue head gasping, a diamond, a shining pink heart, a ghost, smiley with sunglasses, and the X-ed out eyes emoji. With the ultimate hope to improve society, Wylde invited viewers of all identities to respond with a video on their personal experiences of gender. They provided the list of questions in their description and a link to the additional video explaining the terminology used in the prompt. They hoped for this project to spark more conversation about gender and ultimately bring more understanding. In the first year, 715 video responses were added to the playlist.

As a follow up to #TheGenderTag creation, Wylde delivered a TedX talk on the topic of authentic gender expression in March 2016. After being misgendered “sir” at 18 after cutting their hair short for the first time, they started thinking about gender experiences and decided to create #TheGenderTag. During this TedX talk, they presented a montage collection of #TheGenderTag video responses and demonstrated ways in which a binary gender system is socially constructed. They named hijras in India, machi in Chile, and Two-Spirit individuals of Native American tribes as examples of how gender systems vary across cultures. They stated, “And that’s something to be revered. It’s not considered a flaw. It’s considered a gift.” While terms of gender and sexuality cannot be applied cross-culturally (see King 2002 and Roen 2006),

Wylde found benefit in understanding Indigenous ways of relating that do not rely on a strict binary system.

Wylde discussed how strict gender roles are assigned to men and women within dominant U.S. culture. For men, they listed the following: goal of career, strong, outspoken, emotionless, baggier clothes, easy to anger, short hair, protective, leader, and body hair. For women, they listed: gentle, goal of family, passive, reserved, emotional, tighter clothes, patient, long head hair, nurturing, supporter, and shaves.

Through the process of collecting video responses for #TheGenderTag, they learned of the expansive language used to describe gender outside of a strict binary paradigm and realized the harm in these cultural norms. Creating #TheGenderTag project raised Wylde's consciousness around gender diversity, which allowed them to feel more secure in their personal choices to defy or act in alignment with societal expectations. They encouraged others to think critically about gender and make authentic choices about their gender expression. While their intention to increase awareness of gender diversity is laudable, Wylde did not interrogate their privilege as a Latinx, white-passing, non-binary person or speak to the consequences of defying social norms. In particular, Wylde's assessment does not discuss how individuals navigate risk and safety within binary systems. Still, they were able to reach a wide audience and challenge hegemonic understandings of gender.

Kaylie, a trans woman of color, explained how she created YouTube videos to pass along knowledge gained through transition. Kaylie is a popular YouTuber with 3.12K subscribers as of April 2022. Most of her videos document her process with HRT and her breast augmentation. Kaylie's video is filmed in high definition in natural lighting. The video featured her sitting in front of her bed, which has a white down comforter and white pillows on it. The wall above the

bed is decorated with several artistic images of women. I perceive her expression to be very feminine. Kaylie's wig is long, straight, and black, her eyebrows are shaped, and she is wearing red dangling earrings. Her makeup includes thin eyeliner, light pink eyeshadow, foundation, and lip gloss. She has on long black nails and a black tank top.

Based on her personal experiences navigating transition, she hoped to make it easier for trans people in the future. Through educating others on how to interact with trans people in a respectful way, Kaylie alleviated the burden on trans people to educate those they encounter. Kaylie's response was the 6th most popular #WeHappyTrans responses, receiving 4,458 views, 81 likes, 2 dislikes, and 9 comments. Like for Charlotte and Arianna, comments to Kaylie's video largely focused on physical attributes. All of Kaylie's comments were supportive, including compliments on her earrings.

In part due to Wyldes's participation as a YouTuber, #TheGenderTag project became popular very quickly. Four YouTubers in the archive shared that were asked directly in messages or comments by their viewers to upload their own #TheGenderTag response. Several vloggers in the archive ($n=6$) contributed a video as a part of a series on a collaborative trans channel.

In addition to being directly asked by the creators and viewers to contribute a video response ($n=12$), three vloggers created their video response to answer their viewers' questions about their gender. Sarah, a white vlogger who was unsure of their gender at the time, had been questioned about their gender by viewers. They are featured in their video in their bedroom with high resolution recording. Behind them you see their duvet cover over their bed and albums decorating their bedroom walls. I read their expression as masculine. They are wearing a gray Nirvana t-shirt, black choker necklace with a hematite stone in the center and have short ruffled and wavy brown hair. In their first #TheGenderTag contribution, they began with, "Hi! There is

not a day that goes by in my Internet life that I am not repeatedly asked, ‘What the freak is your gender?’ Clearly everyone’s very concerned. Everyone has a lot of queries. Today we’re gonna answer them. And I am so goddamn nervous” [laughs]. Though said with humor, Sarah’s hesitancy offers insight into how viewers interact with trans YouTubers. They are a very popular trans YouTuber with 1.15 million subscribers as of April 2022.

While video responses to #TheGenderTag educated Wylde and viewers on gender diversity (their primary stated goal), responses in this archive reveal a predominance of white narratives of trans experience. The Top 10 most visible #TheGenderTag responses were created by white or white-passing AFAB trans people -- two binary-identified trans men, one agender person, one gender neutral person, and five non-binary transmasculine people. Two vloggers, both non-binary, AFAB, and white or white-passing - had two videos within the Top 10 most viewed. Only five vloggers mentioned their race directly.

While Wylde aimed to increase understanding of gender diversity, Martino et al. (2021) found a lack of direct questions about race and intersectional experiences to limit #TheGenderTag’s ability to “interrupt and trouble” racial hegemony (Noble 2012). White or white-passing vloggers comprised the most popular among #TheGenderTag responses in this archive; only 17.5% of the #TheGenderTag responses were from people of color. Without specifically asking viewers to reflect on their intersectional experience of gender, the onus of bringing up these topics was left to vloggers.

Max, a transgender non-binary YouTuber, received the most engagement with 1,776,788 views between his two gender tag videos. Max started his video response with an impersonation of Oprah: “You get a new video, you get a new video, *you* get a new video!” while wearing his shirt from The Oprah Winfrey Show; he had visited when on tour for a show called Hella Gay.

While he expressed gratitude for the support he has received, Max did not directly reflect on how his experiences of gender are influenced by his race, class, age, nationality, or other factors.

Public comments to Max's second gender tag response were overwhelmingly empathetic and supportive, several mentioning Max's confidence inspiring them to come out to their families and asking to be adopted, as he mentioned he was adopted in his video. Like with other highly popular video responses, many comments included commentary on physical attributes (e.g., Max's voice cracking and deepening from testosterone). Some of these comments were supportive, others mocking and hostile, and others self-reflective.

Reflecting a known lack of education regarding gender experiences in formal education systems (Blair and Deckman 2019; Frohard-Dourlent 2018; Human Rights Watch and Gender Spectrum 2014; Martino et al 2021; Ullman 2017), vloggers in this archive expressed a desire for more education and higher consciousness regarding gender diversity ($n=33$). To provide this needed education, contributors offered their contact information to serve as a resource for viewers who had additional questions about their responses to the prompts, or about gender and sexuality in general. Several used YouTube regularly to educate about gender.

Some stated explicit "rules" for trans etiquette, like not assuming someone's pronouns ($n=8$), or, alternatively, assuming people's pronouns based on their what their expression indicates, regardless of if they "pass" ($n=1$). James advised, "Don't be a dick. Ask people's pronouns. Don't assume. Cause that's shit and it's 2016." Their partner Will agreed: "Just try to understand what people are going through because nobody is 100% like straight on the line." In stating appropriate trans etiquette, these vloggers demonstrate how the medium of YouTube has been used to reclaim authority and expertise over trans identity (Dame 2013). Resisting a medicalized and binary understanding of trans, James and Will stressed how gender is

experienced on a wide spectrum and expressed how they would like to be addressed, without compromise. The description to their video response includes an explanation about how they now identify as transgender men and use he/him pronouns exclusively. Their couple's video response was among the Top 10 most viewed #TheGenderTag responses, receiving 52,691 views. Their channel has 13.9K subscribers and features several cosplay videos. Of the 210 comments on the video, most are supportive; several compliment their appearances, including their shaped eyebrows and glasses. Some, however, asked invasive questions about their genitals and invalidated their gender identities by insisting there are two and only two genders, or that they are girls. These comments show strong resistance to broadening beyond a binary and biologically determined gender paradigm.

Mirroring vlogs that function in the temporality of "hormone time" (Horak 2014), many vloggers ($n=35$) included updates related to their medical transition, often measured from first dose of HRT. Ralph, a white transmasculine vlogger, for example, began his #TheGenderTag post with his two-months on testosterone updates about acne, his mustache, washing his face since starting testosterone, and the deepening of his voice.

Participating in dialogue via YouTube videos is one way trans and gender diverse people have formed their identities and made sense of their experiences. Facilitated by the medium of YouTube, vloggers documented their process of coming to recognize themselves. In this process, vloggers resisted, negotiated, and reinforced hegemonic understandings of masculinity and femininity. Comparisons between highly visible and low visibility videos revealed little engagement in the comments with less views and hostility and an overemphasis on physical attributes on the part of the viewers in the most popular videos. As I discuss in Miller (2016), an overemphasis of medical transition is one mechanism of reinforcing transnormativity. The most

visible narratives within trans YouTube are ones that reinforce a medicalized understanding of transness and highlight physical changes from medical transition. These findings reveal the mechanisms gender oppression relies on and suggest limited impact from increasing awareness of gender alone.

3.3 Providing Support for Trans and Gender Diverse People

Support for trans people, and people who were questioning their gender and exploring their expression, was named as a main motivator for creating a video response ($n=44$). Support included providing trans narratives viewers could relate to, encouraging viewers to refrain from harming themselves, to stay strong, and to otherwise seek mental health support if they are experiencing suicidal thoughts. Three contributors, who also identified themselves as organizers, stressed the importance of tending to the needs of trans youth, particularly trans youth of color.

Bradley, a white trans man, is one vlogger who offered direct support to viewers. Bradley's video featured him sitting in front of an air conditioning unit and a dark blue wall. The lighting is dim, and the video is recorded in medium resolution and with some background noise. Bradley is wearing a green polo shirt and steel-framed glasses. I perceive his expression to be masculine. His hair is thin, and he has facial hair connecting his sideburns to his beard.

In addition to co-moderating a site dedicated to trans men, Bradley also worked as a co-director and regional representative for a trans non-profit based in a medium sized Southern city. There he helped connect trans people to resources, including healthcare providers and assistance with financial budgeting. He acknowledged that the outreach of this organization was primarily limited to trans men, as it was mostly trans men or people in a relationship with a trans man serving on the board. He was a dad and enjoyed being able to raise his kids with a fluid understanding of gender and allow them to express themselves outside of societal expectations.

Bradley's narrative highlights the formalized care work occurring within trans communities. Based on his narrative, much of his activism did not challenge hegemonic constructions of gender but rather supported trans people through teaching skills to help them be functional within capitalist institutions. Increasing access to medical GAI was a major component of Bradley's activism. While supporting trans people who reflected his work's clientele, the medicalization of transness was not challenged.

Noting how many trans people feared being disowned or financially cut off from their families of origin, Melissa/David, a white bigender vlogger, explained that she/he wanted trans people to feel safe and for "people to understand that this is just one more shape that people come in." While she/he found bigender subforums under androgyny forums, these did not resonate with her/his experiences. She/He needed spaces with others who could relate to her/his gender experiences, as she/he did not identify as a crossdresser or a transsexual – the only two categories available to her/him when she/he was first exploring her/his gender.

Not finding a bigender community, Melissa/David purchased domain names and server space to start her/his own bigender forum. She/He later expanded the server to include journals and video chats rooms. She/He credited her/his ability to foster online community to her/his technology skills. Though she/he noted a "selfish component" to creating an online bigender community, the program was ad-free and entirely self-funded.

At the time of filming her/his #WeHappyTrans* video response, she/he had been running bigender.net for almost three years. Her/His motivation in creating YouTube videos and founding bigender.net was to create "safe spaces" for bigender community; however, she received opportunities to speak at universities as a result of her online activism. She/He encouraged people to join the bigender forum, as well as to get in touch with her via comments,

messages, or email. For some vloggers, like Melissa/David, online networks were their primary means of connection with other trans people. While she/he did not critically consider her/his privilege in being able to create these online spaces for individuals who identified outside of binary gender constructions, her/his online activism illustrates the ways trans people are forming their identities and support networks.

With an intention to support trans people and others experimenting with their expression or identity, vloggers participated in care work by sharing their own relationship to gender in the public forum of YouTube and sometimes offering individualized support. In this effort, they also provided trans representation outside of the mainstream. As revealed in the video responses and their comments sections, many viewers did feel less alone in their experiences as a result of viewing trans vloggers' content. Exchanges between creators and viewers were revealed as an essential component to online trans support networks.

3.4 Media Exposure and Receiving Compensation

As discussed by Zhang (2022), while medical transition may decrease gender dysphoria and increase safety for many trans people, material and cultural benefits also accompany passing and meeting hegemonic beauty standards. While financial gain did not seem to be a primary motivator for any participants, almost half of contributors ($n=38$) used their video response as an opportunity to discuss work they were involved in. In addition to being asked or inspired to create a video response, a few vloggers ($n=4$) were being compensated for their YouTube videos to some degree.

Vloggers receiving compensation provide nuanced details that allow us to better understand the political economy of trans YouTube. Some, like Bradley, were employed with non-profits and others trans-focused organizations. Others were sponsored. Kate, a young white

gender-questioning vlogger, had offered to promote a hat company in exchange for free snapback hats. They jokingly stated: “You know you’ve made it big on YouTube when you get paid in hats instead of money.” In addition to compensation via hats as an extra incentive for Kate to create a video response, they used their channel to explore their gender expression and identity. Sponsorships like Kate’s are common among LGBT YouTubers, particularly within beauty YouTube. While most care work is unpaid, these vloggers provide examples of care work that is compensated.

Phoenix, a white “super funny queer genderqueer trans guy/glittery hot pink polyamorous unicorn,” in the U.K., won 5,000 pounds for an Adobe t-shirt competition, allowing them to access a camera to use for a non-profit called MyGenderation. MyGenderation was also planning a collaboration with Lush, a soap product mentioned by five vloggers in this archive.

Phoenix’s video is recorded with a high-quality camera with slight editing between questions. Phoenix has focused the video to have blurred the background workspace and tools behind him and closed captions in English. Phoenix is standing in his video, wearing a soft gray crew neck with a microphone clipped to the collar. I perceive his expression as masculine. Viewers see the top of his tattoo with a branch of flowers just under his collar. He has bleached his hair and it is styled longer on the top than the sides; you see his brown roots coming in slightly. He has a shortly trimmed beard and mustache.

Through financial compensation, Phoenix was able to produce a high-quality video response, receiving over 7,000 views. Noticing the high definition, one viewer commented: “Excellent video :D (also, holy production quality Batman!)” YouTube’s primary aim is to monetize content (Rodriguez 2022), and videos are judged based on their professional aesthetic and ability to produce this outcome (Müller 2009). As I discuss in Miller (2016), audience

retention and viewership has been correlated with higher quality and more heavily edited content. As with the majority of video responses, Phoenix does not critically examine their privileged position as a white genderqueer trans guy being compensated for their trans YouTube content.

As discussed by Malatino (2019; 2020), in the act of creating educational resources and providing support for viewers, trans vloggers engaged in the (usually unpaid) labor of care work (Seeck 2021). As shown by the motivations for participation in these projects, most contributors were in a privileged enough position to have the time, energy, and access to technology to contribute their video response without financial compensation. While monetization did not seem to be a primary goal of any vlogger, financial motives revealed in this content analysis provide insight into the material benefits of increased visibility. These motivations are important to contextualize when evaluating digital activism effectiveness. Though neither of these projects prompted critical reflection on vloggers' intersectional experiences of gender, narratives revealed a wide array of financial privilege and access to resources and suggest areas to be improved within activism efforts. These narratives also reveal the complexity of producing visible content within capitalism. While not all motives were truly altruistic, these projects served as networked counterpublics where trans and gender diverse people received support and exchanged knowledge. Reflecting prior literature on trans YouTube content, the most popular videos in this archive reinforced transnormativity, while also challenging biologically determined gender identity. Based on these findings, future digital activism efforts would benefit from an incorporation of a critical analysis of the intersectional nature of gender oppression.

4 TRANSDISRUPTIVE DIVERSITY NARRATIVES

As shown in the provided literature review, it is well-documented in quantitative and qualitative trans health research that culturally competent and accessible health services to trans populations are lacking. Trans health disparities are even greater when structural barriers, such as institutionalized racism, housing and food insecurity, lack of employment opportunities, and geographical location, are considered alongside trans identity (Raiford 2016; Seelman et al. 2018; Spicer 2010; Torres et al. 2015). Furthermore, avoiding or delaying needed medical care is well-documented among trans populations (Budge et al. 2013, 2014; Harb et al. 2019; Reisner et al. 2013).

To build trust between medical providers and trans populations, medical providers have employed community-based and patient-driven solutions to trans health inequities, which has signaled to trans populations that many medical providers are not seeking to maintain authority and expert status over trans patients. Strategies that center self-determination have been shown to decrease trans health disparities and improve patient satisfaction (Eyssel et al. 2017; Logie & Lys 2015; Reisner et al. 2015; Shuster 2019; Spanos et al. 2021). This archive of YouTube video responses provides a robust example of how trans people are claiming agency over their own narrative of transness outside of medical institutions.

In this chapter, I demonstrate the benefits of utilizing digital archives to continue education on gender-related topics and ultimately improve trans health advocacy. My findings indicate a much-needed shift away from medicalizing trans identity and toward fostering positive identity and community building. With the overall goal of advocating for trans health reform that adequately addresses the intersectional nature of trans health disparities, digital trans archives are rich in information related to health behaviors told from the perspective of trans individuals

themselves, contrasting predominant information about what it means to provide trans care that is often not patient-informed or science-based (shuster 2016). Trans narratives that challenge transnormativity, including linear and medical standards of transition and binary trans identity, have come to be known as *transdisruptive diversity narratives* and are apparent within this trans YouTube archive. These narratives demonstrate the many ways that trans people are using SNS to assert their agency in resisting transnormative expectations (Etengoff 2019; Tortajada et al. 2021) and reveal critical nuances of trans experiences that are not captured in medical diagnostics or mainstream representation.

Due to the nature of person-facing YouTube vlogs, trans vloggers are hailed as experts on trans experiences, shifting expertise about trans away from the control and authority of cisgender medical providers, film directors, and other gatekeepers of trans narratives. Rather than making diagnoses, trans vloggers express expertise through giving advice to their viewers (Dame 2013; Horak 2014; Martino et al. 2021). To best understand factors contributing to well-being, I coded the transcripts and visuals of the 80 videos included in the archive for themes related to documented factors of mental and physical QoL, including employment status, social support, social and physical functioning, stigma, and minority stress. Several key themes arose, including the social construction of gender norms, the language of transition, body versus social dysphoria, mental and physical health and safety, misgendering, transition giving confidence, and trans people as capably normal and productive. I address each in turn in the following sections.

4.1 The Social Construction of Gender Norms

Societal expectations associated with gender identities were defined directly, and indirectly. Gender expression was generally conceived of as existing on a spectrum of masculine to feminine, though these categories were often accompanied by air quotes to demonstrate the

socially constructed nature of these categories. “Masculine clothing” was specified as clothing marketed toward men and boys and “feminine clothing” as that which is marketed toward women and girls. Masculinity was more often equated with dark colors (e.g., black) and light colors (e.g., pink) with femininity. Wearing makeup was generally considered feminine. Painting one’s nails was considered feminine expression, though many did not consider black nail polish to indicate femininity. Some toiletries were considered “gender neutral” (e.g., Dove soap), while other products were specifically named as men’s products (e.g., Axe body spray), as in specifically marketed toward men, or a women’s products (e.g., perfume), as in specifically marketed toward women. Long hair was considered feminine; though body hair was considered masculine -- including hairy legs, facial hair, armpit hair, and arm hair. Shaving these parts of one’s body was considered feminine. Names denoted masculinity or femininity. A deep voice was considered masculine. Further, being a financial provider, and paying for dates, was considered traditionally masculine. Bearing children, raising children, and being a primary caregiver were considered traditionally feminine. Smallness and submissiveness were also considered feminine traits. For vloggers who felt most comfortable being perceived as androgynous, the language of “unisex” or “gender neutral” resonated most. Ideal body types undergirded these descriptions.

Jakob, who is white and transmasculine, is one contributor who discussed the social construction of masculinity and femininity. Jakob had been on testosterone for two months and identified as being “more over by the male side.” His narrative revealed how strict gender norms were a major source of his anxiety, though he was continually working to challenge societal expectations. Jakob’s personal expression was led by his comfort level. I perceive his expression as masculine. Because he did not want his chest to be apparent, he slouched and wore large

shirts. He tended toward tie-dye and sometimes skinny pants, and he allowed his body hair to grow freely, even though he was “grossed out a little” by his underarm hair. He described his perfume as smelling “like a wild wolf man that got lost in a sauna for three months.” Prior to transition, he felt pressure to not leave the house without putting on makeup, which he referred to as his “mask.” He wanted makeup to be considered universal and planned to experiment with makeup again in the future “regardless of identity.”

One cisgender female likened gender dysphoria to her dysphoria related to wrinkles, sagging skin, and age spots. Her husband Tygh, a trans man, specified that her dysphoria was of a different nature than gender dysphoria but still she shared some empathy in this regard. In their couple’s video made during the Winter holiday, they elaborated on the ways they divided their household labor in ways that do not conform to strict norms of masculinity and femininity. The couple mentions how Tygh struggled for some time to feel worthy when his wife worked, and he stayed at home with the kids and sick dogs. Tygh and his wife did not critically examine how power functioned within their dynamic, though they did discuss working through Tygh’s discomfort and learning to honor their contributions as valuable. Tygh and his wife did not assign gender expectations to their responsibilities, such as childcare, house and car repairs, lawn care, cooking, cleaning, and finances. Their resistance to institutional gender constructions occurred primarily through negotiations of household roles.

Gender expression was acknowledged by many vloggers as being situated within a binary understanding of masculinity and femininity that is largely informed by marketing. Even as gender norms were understood as socially constructed, the societal pressures and expectations based on stereotypes were a major consideration in choices regarding outward appearance. Strict gender norms were named as a root cause of discomfort; clothing and expression that was

seemingly contrary to their gender identity often caused discomfort. While medical means were often taken to alleviate this felt incongruence between identity and expression, making steps to express themselves in alignment with their desires often alleviated discomfort.

4.2 The Language of Transition

Before discussing the multitude of ways in which social and medical transition increased QoL for contributors, it is important to highlight how contributors discussed transition and gender dysphoria. Because access to trans-related medical services (if obtained through a medical provider) hinges upon one's ability to articulate DSM-V criteria for *gender dysphoria* (previously, *gender identity disorder*), trans people have learned to recite their narrative for medical providers in ways that align with medical criteria, regardless of one's experience of gender dysphoria (Stone 2006). Without the power dynamic of a medical provider directing the conversation toward strict medical criteria, vloggers in this archive expressed a wide range of experiences with transition and gender dysphoria.

In alignment with a transnormative understanding of transness, two vloggers in the archive adopted a medicalized definition of trans that found gender dysphoria as necessary to identify as trans. For these two vloggers, meeting DSM-V criteria for *gender dysphoria* was the metric for authentic trans identity. Others expressed aspects of their gender dysphoria that did not strictly align with criteria for *gender dysphoria* diagnosis. Many shared how their dysphoria shifted over time, how they did not wish to be perceived as the "other" gender, and how they saw social interactions as a root cause of their distress related to gender. The most common struggles were being misgendered ($n=36$) and experiencing gender dysphoria ($n=35$), though the level to which vloggers were impacted by misgendering and dysphoria varied.

The narratives offered in this archive reveal a wide spectrum of experiences of gender dysphoria and the embedded medicalization of trans identity. The extremity of one's gender dysphoria was sometimes used as a metric to determine if one was "trans enough" to outwardly identify as trans, consistent with research on how the ideology of transnormativity manifests within trans communities (Garrison 2018; Jacobsen et al., 2021; Johnson 2016; Konnelly 2021). Even when gender dysphoria was not the motivation for changing one's body through medical means, individuals were held accountable to transnormative expectations of a linear transition aligning with *gender dysphoria* diagnosis and binary expectations of trans experience (Horak 2014; Masanet et al. 2022). Several vloggers ($n=6$) expressed an "end goal" of transitioning as "passing" as cisgender, while other vloggers had no specific end goal in mind, even when taking HRT. Melissa/David, for instance, named how alleviating dysphoria was not a motivation for her/his medical transition, though she/he did pass as a cisgender woman when presenting feminine. Regardless of how vloggers related to transition and gender dysphoria, transnormative expectations, including medical diagnosis, were used to maintain the boundaries of trans identity.

It is important to foreground the embeddedness of trans narratives in the medicalization of trans identity, revealed in these data as a metric by which trans identity is deemed authentic. Using binary diagnostic language so that one's experience is intelligible to medical providers is often necessary for access to medical GAI and cannot simply be dismissed as a transnormative assimilationist strategy (Bailey 2000; Borba 2017; Johnson 2016; Konnelly 2021). Varying levels of access to medical insurance and other financial resources were revealed. As diagnosis is required for insurance coverage of HRT and trans-related surgeries, trans people seeking medical GAI have necessarily adapted their strategies for access through a medical provider or have obtained medical GAI from other sources, if they were financially capable of doing so. Discourse

regarding “true” trans identity illuminates the mechanisms by which transnormativity is reinforced within trans YouTube content.

As discussed in Chapter 3, young white vloggers remain the most visible within trans YouTube content, and many of these narratives reflect transnormative values of whiteness, medical transition, binary identity, and gender cohesion (Horak 2014; Miller 2016, 2018). Narratives that reinforced transnormative values were most prominent in this archive; however, vloggers’ experiences did not all align neatly with a linear transnormative narrative. Individuals represented in this archive related to dysphoria differently and found creative ways to accommodate dysphoria when it did arise, thus providing transdisruptive diversity narratives that do not conform to the status quo (Etengoff 2019).

Though vloggers did not deem transition essential to identifying as trans, most contributors ($n=53$) named at least one benefit of transition. Vloggers named benefits of medical transition through HRT, surgeries, and other medical GAI, as well as social transition, when vloggers shared their relationship to gender to others, changed legal gender markers, or made changes to their outward expression through non-medical means, such as clothing choices. While struggles with transition were discussed, such as undesired side effects of hormones ($n=10$), vloggers named ways in which both medical and social transition contributed to increased QoL. The positive relationship between transition and QoL was especially strong when vloggers received social support from their family, friends, significant others, coworkers, classmates, online acquaintances, and trans media representation (I return to this theme in Chapter 5).

Only one contributor, Caroline, a white trans woman in her late teens, had no positive experiences to discuss in relation to the #WeHappyTrans* prompt regarding positive aspects of transition. Her #WeHappyTrans* video was recorded in medium resolution and was the fifth

lowest in popularity with just 359 views. She is standing in front of an ajar door and a green wall and wearing a black t-shirt with the name of a community college in a gradient of yellow, green, blue, purple, and pink. I perceive her expression as feminine. Her hair is short and brown, and brushed to the left side. Her nails are manicured, and she is wearing light makeup, including eyeshadow and a deep pink lip color. She spoke expressively with hand motions and with a thick Southern accent.

Though Caroline desired social and medical transition, she did not have the necessary financial means or social support to attain her transition goals. She was “in the closet” about being trans to most of the people in her life and was assumed to be a gay guy at her school and in other public spaces. Though she came out as a gay man to her parents, they denied her sexuality, telling her, “Oh you’ll get with some little girl someday.” She attributed her rural, Southern geographical location as one reason she lacked social support.

Reflecting transnormative narratives, she related to transition as a linear process with specific end goals. While she acknowledged how she “shouldn’t have to pass,” she wished for her external appearance to match what she felt inside. She had boobs naturally, which make her feel better about herself, and she desired her fat to redistribute to her hips and to have surgeries, including a brow bone reduction. She was going by her chosen name in some settings, though she had not yet legally changed her name. She was expressing herself through clothing and makeup more frequently in the way she desired. She did not interrogate cisnormative beauty standards, but rather internalized them as ideal femininity.

As demonstrated by Caroline, vloggers did not have equal access to social and medical transition. Each vlogger’s relationship to transition was different. Only two trans individuals reported enjoying their birth name, though not all had changed their name in all settings. A few

($n=3$) reported legally changing their name or gender marker. Most ($n=78$) had changed their pronouns from the pronouns associated with their assigned sex at birth, at least in some settings. Two vloggers identified as cisgender females and were comfortable with she/her pronouns, and a few trans vloggers ($n=5$) did not feel comfortable asking others to change pronoun usage for fear of not being understood or respected. Many reiterated altering their expression for the comfort of others.

While many narratives were in alignment with transnormative expectations, many vloggers deviated from these norms. A few ($n=3$) stated no current desire for medical transition of any kind, and one discussed being unsure about surgeries. Many ($n=31$) discussed transition without naming any specifics. Several ($n=11$) desired HRT and/or various surgeries in the future. Numerous vloggers named currently being on HRT ($n=35$) and had received at least one desired surgery ($n=10$). One mentioned having been on hormone blockers prior to beginning HRT, and one mentioned receiving electrolysis. Two trans men filmed their video response topless, expressing enjoyment of their top surgery results. Reflecting a common desire of contributors for trans people to be seen as whole people and as more than their transition status, one vlogger specifically stated that her surgical status was unnecessary information to viewers. A few ($n=6$) named having been living “full-time” for an extended amount of time. Two felt their transitions were complete. Several vloggers ($n=8$) specifically acknowledged that each person has their own relationship to gender and dysphoria, or that one’s relationship to dysphoria can change over time.

Though transition and gender dysphoria were not experienced by vloggers in a monolithic way, many vloggers felt the pressure of transnormative expectations regarding transition. Reflecting larger transnormative discourse that measures trans people by their desire

and ability to meet certain expectations of trans experience, one vlogger, Oliver, expressed confusion about their identity and worried that they were not “trans enough,” or did not experience gender dysphoria enough, to identify as trans (Garrison 2018; Jacobsen et al. 2021; Johnson 2016, 2018; Konnelly 2021). Oliver experienced severe distress about not experiencing *enough* gender dysphoria to label themselves as trans. They also did not find cis an accurate way to describe their experiences of gender.

Filmed with a high-quality camera and edited with music clips and typed prompt transitions, Oliver’s video response was one of the Top 10 most viewed #TheGenderTag videos with over 183,000 views and over 1,000 comments. The video featured them standing in their bedroom as they responded to the prompts expressively with hand motions. They are white, have short brown highlighted hair, rosy cheeks, mascara on, and a silver band on their right ring finger. I perceive their expression as androgynous. Behind them, you see their bed, made up neatly with black, gray, and white bedding, in addition to a bright yellow pillow with tree limbs. Behind them, viewers see a blue accent wall behind their bed and blue string lights lining the corner. By the bed is their black nightstand with a black lamp with soft green lighting and a red jar with a candle inside. As they explained at the beginning of their video, they specifically chose their makeup and outfit of a white V-neck, jean vest with hoodie strings, and snapback hat to “challenge the binary” and present a “very gender variant version of [them]self.” Regarding their gender identity, Oliver explained:

I have recently been questioning this a lot lately. I don’t know. While I identify ultimately as a woman, I am superr gender variant. And some days I feel pretty agender.... I have a strong connection to the word demi-girl, but I don’t know if any of these feelings are *extreme enough* [emphasis mine] to ID as non-binary, bigender, or just

not cis. At least not yet. And can you even identify as demi-girl and still be cis? Can I ID as mostly cis? Cause I kind of feel that way sometimes. A friend called me that once - mostly cis. And a little chorus of angels like sang inside me. I really liked it. However, being cis kind of seems like something you either are or aren't.

Oliver is one of many gender-questioning vloggers who has used the medium of YouTube to experiment with their gender expression and process confusion regarding their relationship to gender, sex, and sexuality. Though “mostly cis” resonated deeply with them, the fear that they were “a confused cis person insensitively appropriating” non-binary identities caused them significant distress. In their questioning of their gender identity, Oliver asked with exasperation, “What are the rules? Are there even rules? And if so, who makes these rules? Is it Tumblr?” They revealed in their reflection, a binary understanding of cisgender and transgender indicated one’s identification with societal expectations of gender roles based on sex assignment at birth. This socially constructed binary limited Oliver’s access to trans identity, and thus identification with and access to trans community.

With these concerns about appropriating non-binary identities by identifying with “mostly cis,” Oliver had a therapist on the video to explain the difference in gender dysphoria and body dysmorphia according to the DSM-V. Oliver expressed confusion about to what extent their feelings about their hair were gender dysphoria or body dysmorphia and shared that they avoided hair salons because of the distress that accompanied these feelings. As revealed in Oliver’s narrative, the metric by which they defined trans identity was meeting medical diagnosis for gender dysphoria. The therapist who read DSM-V criteria was the expert they trusted to help them understand how their complicated feelings about their hair related to their gender. In online spaces, such as Tumblr, trans people who ascribe to an understanding of trans as necessitating

gender dysphoria have been named *transmedicalists*, or *truscum* by trans people who oppose the medicalization of trans identity (Jacobsen et al 2021). This metric produced intense anxiety for Oliver, revealing negative impacts of transnormativity and medicalization. The popularity of their video further supports an investment in transnormativity, with the therapist Oliver had a guest serving as an expert on trans lived experience.

While many vloggers described their experiences of changing social and physical aspects of their expression as *transition*, it is important to note that not all vloggers found the language of *transition* suitable to describe their experiences of experimenting with changes to their expression. Alex, a white AMAB non-binary queer person and PhD candidate in ecology, did not use transition to describe their lived experience of exploring their gender and expression differently than what was socially expected. As their first video posted on the Internet, Alex's #WeHappyTrans* video response was filmed with a lower-quality camera in their home office. Viewers see Alex, who has no facial hair and short brown head hair. They are wearing a striped black and white tank top, pendant necklace, and small black plugs in their ears. I read their expression as androgynous and masculine-leaning. Behind them you see the bottom half of the wall with green paneling and the upper portion of the wall painted white, with small decorations over their desk.

While acknowledging that they were being very open about how their “gender stuff” was manifesting differently for them, they did not find “transition” or even “transgression” to describe their experiences of gender accurately. Their experience of changing their outward expression was a continuation of them exploring themselves. Coming up against transnormative expectations with Richards' word choice of *transition* in her #WeHappyTrans* prompt, Alex clarified that while others have applied the language of transition to their experiences of

“crossing boundaries” of binary classifications, transition was not the way they understood their experiences of gender. Counter to a linear narrative of transition that assumes a determined end goal, Alex expressed acceptance of the fluidity of their identity, was open to “woman-typical” or “gender-neutral typical” language being used to describe them and found binary classifications a major source of their distress. As explained in Alex’s narrative, binary assumptions were inevitable and often applied to describe them, regardless of how they related to their gender and expression.

Many vloggers ($n=9$) noted that their experience with gender, and even preference regarding masculine and/or feminine expression, shifted depending on the context (see Abelson 2019). Expression varied for vloggers in online spaces, among social circles, in the workplace, and around family. For example, Reyes, a mid-20s Armenian transgender man, explained their pronoun preferences as dependent on the circles they were in. Filmed in the typical talking-torso vlog style, Reyes’s #TheGenderTag contribution was a part of the FTM collaborative channel Transtastic and featured them sitting on the end of their bed, which was neatly made with a white down comforter. Except for the sock monkey behind them and a small nature scene on the wall to their right, very little decoration is viewable. The focus of the camera is on Reyes sitting on their bed. They have short black hair and are wearing a “summer goth” look - a black Robin Power band t-shirt with red lettering and a graphic of a guitarist in light blue and gray. They chose to resist or conform to institutional gender constructions depending on their level of comfort. Their comfort, and pronoun preference, relied on others have a culturally competent understanding of their identity as a non-binary transgender man. As such, they expressed their identity in queer spaces, other social spaces, and home life differently.

They experienced dysphoria related to different parts of their body that they felt were “too feminine.” They shared experiences in their day-to-day life that served as reminders that they are trans, including being consistently misgendered as a woman and not having access to a gender-neutral public restroom where both they and others felt comfortable. They anticipated the “trans” part of their identity becoming less prevalent over time, as they were only three months into their medical transition on testosterone. As a coping strategy for their anxiety and depression, they tried to “not think about it too much” and wait it out, with the hope that medical transition would alleviate some of their dysphoria. Reyes discussed how accepting fluidity within their identity reduced overall anxiety, even when experiencing significant distress from gender dysphoria.

Accepting fluidity in their transgender male identity meant acknowledging that they navigate various paradigms of gender, feeling what was right for them as they worked through their experiences of gender, as well as being compassionate and open with themselves when they felt pressure to “call things things when they don’t necessarily have names in [their] head.” Offering their trans narrative as no less trans because they “overcompensated” by presenting as a very feminine woman in the past, they concluded their video response with validation for FTMs who do not fit the “traditional narrative” of transmasculinity. With nearly 3,000 views, the video received largely positive reception (with 91 likes, 3 dislikes, and 7 comments). One viewer commented, “The end advice is wonderful!! I always feel like I’m not really trans purely because I don’t have the stereotypical ftm story!! Though I don’t fit the stereotype, I’m definitely [*sic*] not a woman!” Other vloggers also found fluidity and flexibility important to feeling secure in their trans identity, contrary to a transnormative narrative of transition that assumes binary identification and gender cohesiveness.

Melissa/David, a white bigender vlogger, also found her/his journey of transition to not fit transnormative expectations of medical transition and binary identity. Having delayed transition due to being married and having children, Melissa/David now had a strong support system with her/his girlfriend and felt free to express as she/he desired. Altering her/his presentation from David to Melissa, Melissa explained that she had “altered her body from factory standard” through HRT and saw her transition as different than the “traditional transition path that say a... transsexual person would have.” The video is recorded in medium resolution and featured Melissa/David sitting in her recliner. Behind her/him are kitchen cupboards, a refrigerator, and a gated area.

When presenting as Melissa, she wore a polka-dotted strapless blue dress, a ring on her left ring finger, and a bangle on her left wrist. I read her expression as Melissa as feminine. Her hair is straight, brown, and just below her shoulders, and she is wearing light makeup, including eye liner and lipstick. When presenting as David, I perceive his expression as more masculine but with feminine aspects. He wore a collared button-up shirt with vertical stripes in gray, white, and black, with his long hair tied back and with no lipstick on. Melissa/David expressed feeling content with her/his body as a woman and as a man. As Melissa explained:

I’m bigender, so I have two presentations. Two gender presentations that I use to interact with the world... So, I originally started identifying as a crossdresser, but I realized eventually that it wasn’t just about the clothes. It was really about satisfying this sense of femininity or womanhood in my own gender identity that wasn’t just covered under the clothes. It was just the idea... of being and embodying the woman that I know that I am... But I’m also still a man, you know, I still have my days where I very much am a guy and my gender identity is a guy, you know, there is no dysphoria. I’m happy in the

body I was given.... I'm Melissa, and I'm David. I'm not two people in one body. I'm one person with two presentations. And it's just the filter that I use to interact with the world and the world interacts with me.

As demonstrated by Melissa/David, not all people who identify as trans experience dysphoria but may still have the desire for hormones or surgeries. Melissa had taken HRT, as she explained she had changed her body from "factory standard"; however, her stated motivation was not to alleviate gender dysphoria but rather to embody her womanhood more fully. Melissa/David did not feel her/his motivations for HRT aligned with the "traditional" expectations of transition.

While many vloggers resonated with the language of transition to describe their lived experiences, others expressed discomfort with expectations of a transnormative transition narrative and what was presumed to be authentic trans expression. Furthermore, some vloggers did desire social or medical changes but lacked the social support and financial means to make these changes, preventing them from achieving their transition goals. Transition, therefore, was not equally accessible to all vloggers. Vloggers who deviated from transnormative expectations in some way, such as Caroline, Alex, Reyes, Oliver, and Melissa/David sometimes internalized their inability or lack of desire to meet these expectations; however, some recognized that they had internalized external messaging and actively sought to reclaim their narrative of transness and disrupt the notion that there is one right way to be trans. In this process of reclamation of one's own narrative of transness, control of what it means to be trans is shifted from medical authorities to trans people.

As revealed in online discourse and trans media content (Barcelos & Budge 2019; Jacobsen et al. 2021), some trans communities privilege a medicalized understanding of

transness. Due to their greater visibility, transnormative narratives set the parameters for how trans identity may be expressed. Meanwhile, others recognized how transition is not equally accessible and did not dictate their personal narrative as the way all trans people's process ought to look.

The enforcement of binary constructions based in biology were present in transition narratives, as were resistance to these expectations. These transdisruptive diversity narratives demonstrate the utility of this networked counterpublic and indicate a needed shift away from medicalizing trans identity and toward inclusive understandings of transness. Varying understandings of transness and transition need to be understood and contextualized within trans cultural competency trainings for professionals seeking to serve trans populations. Furthermore, the tension between trans people who adopt medicalized understandings of transness and those who understand trans identity in a broader sense can be intentionally addressed within trans communities.

4.3 Body Versus Social Dysphoria

Thirty-eight contributors to #TheGenderTag and four contributors to #WeHappyTrans* ($n=42$) expressed having experienced at least some degree of gender dysphoria at some point in their lifetime. Only two vloggers, one a bigender white vlogger, Melissa/David and one a cisgender Black woman, Cassidy, said they did not experience dysphoria. Though not trans identified, Cassidy recounted several experiences of being misgendered and bullied for her expression. Though she did not experience gender dysphoria, others responded negatively to her "masculine" dress and preference for "what guys... would do." She shared a memory of being bullied in the girls' bathroom during elementary school, before she felt the pressured in middle school "to dress a certain way":

I'd hang out with all the guys and one day, I remember so specifically. I went to the bathroom and it was a girl's bathroom, of course, because I identify as a woman.... I do my business. I'm washing my hands. This was I think third grade, and a group of girls come in and they're like, "*You don't belong here!* [emphasis mine] You're -- Aren't you a boy? You belong in the boy's bathroom! You're in the wrong bathroom!" And they're all just like, on me, and then like they're leaving, and they all like flick me on my forehead. And it was just like, just stupid looking back, like it really hurt, like that day, like it hurt a lot.

Though Cassidy did not identify as transgender, she was still held accountable to societal expectations of femininity in women's restrooms. Cassidy's narrative reveals the negative impact of strict gender norms. Though she did not critically examine the impact her race had on others' interpretations of her, she was treated with disrespect in women's restrooms based on her expression. Countering her negative experiences of misgendering, she felt validated when misgendered in a barber shop, as she received positive feedback on her expression. Her participation in sports and her dress were perceived as masculine, though she felt a strong identification with being a woman.

A few ($n=6$) contributors to #TheGenderTag delineated gender dysphoria into two categories: body dysphoria and social dysphoria. Body dysphoria related to uncomfortable feelings about one's body, often specific parts of one's body, such as one's chest and/or genitals. Social dysphoria referred to interacting in the world and being correctly perceived as the gender they identify. Notably, dysphoria was not asked about directly in the #WeHappyTrans* prompts, making it likely that more of the subsample had experiences with gender dysphoria than is represented in these data.

For vloggers who experienced gender dysphoria, the degree to which dysphoria affected them ranged widely from being a slight annoyance that did not cause significant distress day-to-day, to highly impacting individuals to the point of social isolation, decreased self-esteem, and feelings of unworthiness. Six vloggers described gender dysphoria as affecting their ability to communicate with others and their willingness to go out into the world. For these vloggers, social dysphoria resulted from the way others engaged and described them based on their body. This type of dysphoria was understood as distinct from body dysphoria.

Milo Stewart, who is white and non-binary, also experienced mostly social dysphoria, though feeling comfortable with their body had become easier with time. In Stewart's updated #TheGenderTag response, they shared their experience of feeling a reduction of gender dysphoria by changing their hair style, getting new glasses, and experimenting with their clothes. As Stewart described, dysphoria is not universally experienced in the same way, a nuance of trans experiences that is not captured in medical diagnosis. For them, being perceived as either extremely feminine or extremely masculine caused them dysphoria. Counter to medicalized approaches to gender dysphoria, Stewart had done intentional work to foster positive self-identity and divest from external expectations.

As revealed in these narratives, a binary understanding of gender is embedded into daily interactions in a variety of settings and individuals related to their experiences contextually and with the resources available to them. Vloggers like Cassidy, Reyes, Alex, and Stewart focused on self-perception and honoring one's lived experiences. While Reyes experienced intense distress from gender dysphoria, they did not use this as a measure to determine valid trans identity.

A few transmasculine vloggers ($n=3$) named body dysphoria related to not being able to be shirtless while swimming in public places. They each looked forward to top surgery relieving dysphoria associated with swimming. Skyler Demetri, a white transgender non-binary vlogger, also discussed their dysphoria as mostly social dysphoria but named specific body parts they associated with their body dysphoria. Demetri had been a consistent YouTuber for years and had recently started using YouTube to document his transition. Demetri found issue with many aspects of their body, including their chest and body size, though their dysphoria stemmed more from how others interact with them based on their body and voice. They compared their body to another popular trans vlogger, Ty Turner, who had not had top surgery but had a naturally flat chest.

Clifford was one of three transmasculine vloggers who acknowledged how comparing his body to the “ideal” cisgender man was a major source of dysphoria. Clifford, a white 22-year-old who identified as either male or transgender male depending on the context, experienced high levels of body dysphoria largely related to specific parts of his body that he found inadequate compared to cisgender men’s bodies. He explained:

I like to perceive myself as a cis guy which is, you know problematic for you know, obvious reasons because I'm not a cis guy. I'm trans. So I have a lot of body dysphoria. Obviously top dysphoria. I haven't gotten top surgery yet, but my chest is very small to begin with so binding is fairly easy, but it is very annoying. And I don't feel comfortable like going anywhere, doing anything, unless I'm wearing... my binder.... So that makes me really self-conscious and dysphoric. Especially that it's Summer now, like people are wearing tank tops and you know going to the pool and stuff, where, you know guys aren't

wearing shirts. So, you know, that makes me feel pretty crappy, not being able to take my shirt off, not being able to swim and just do stuff as I want to.

Clifford's next transition steps were to legally change his name and have top surgery he hoped would address his chest dysphoria. Due to getting sick and his membership expiring, he had stopped his gym routines; muscle building and bodybuilding had previously allowed for some level of comfort in his body. In addition to chest dysphoria, he named having bottom dysphoria in bathroom and intimate settings. To mitigate this body dysphoria, he chose to "pack constantly," except when showering or sleeping. He expressed a strong desire to save up money for a stand-to-pee device he could use comfortably in public restrooms. He mentioned that he and his partner had found ways to navigate his bottom dysphoria in intimate settings and how this dysphoria, too, related to his perception of his body not matching the expectations of a cisgender man's body. As shown in Clifford's narrative, he had internalized societal expectations of "ideal" cisgender male bodies. These expectations included being tall and bulky. This pattern of comparing one's body to that of an "ideal" body is reflected in body image literature focusing on various populations (Doiron 2020).

Nicole, a white, 19-year-old genderfluid vlogger, was okay with any pronouns (he/she/they) except for "it," and felt labels should typically not be applied to gender, including to clothing preferences. They did not like being referenced as a girl. Filmed with a high-quality camera and slight editing, Nicole's video featured them standing in their kitchen wearing a black t-shirt with a small circle logo for Steel City: BRING ME THE HORIZON. I perceive their expression as feminine. They have shoulder-length wavy brown hair and are wearing makeup. Behind them viewers see a large kitchen table with wooden chairs on either side and two extra chairs on their right side, next to the corner shelf of photo frames. On their left side, viewers see

the kitchen drawers, and on the counter is a decorative blue and yellow star and moon plate next to a white candle in a glass jar.

While Nicole did not invest in others' assumptions of their gender, they experienced dysphoria related to their chest and significant distress at the thought of bearing a child. Dysphoric feelings arose most when Nicole was in middle school, when they would stuff their bra for social acceptance with the girls. Recently, though, chest dysphoria was resurfacing. They stated, "Now I'm scared that they are both going to start growing a bit more. It's been happening a lot more or I'll look down or I'll just like feel and I'll be like, this is not right. This should not be here." Regarding childbearing, they stated:

I have never ever ever ever wanted to have a baby inside of me. Never. There is never going to be a point in my life where I'm like, hmm, you know what, why don't you grow something inside of me for nine months and let it kick and scratch around inside of me and eat my food and make me fat. Just for me, like obviously for other people they're like, oh it's a miracle of life and blah-blah-blah-blah-blah. But for me, I am terrified. That is terrifying. That is scary. Don't do that. Don't grow inside me. No, nu-uh. Uh-uh-uh. This is my body. You do not, no.

Nicole was not alone among AFAB contributors in experiencing great distress at the thought of childbearing. Twenty-four AFAB vloggers adamantly did not want to bear a child, one (Nicole) was interested in surrogacy, and sixteen contributors were interested in adoption. As revealed in the comments, Nicole's experience resonated with many of their viewers. One commenter wrote, "I can so identify myself with the things your [*sic*] are seeing. I have no problem people calling me a girl or seeing me as one, but I am super dysphoric about my body and also the idea of being pregnant freaks me out." Nicole's dysphoria, therefore, was related

more to their body (particularly their childbearing capacity) than to social interactions. Sofia, who is white and genderfluid, explained their dysphoria as related to an imagined incongruence of their body and identity. They largely credited external assumptions based on their genitalia and expression as the source of their dysphoria. They explained:

I don't experience it [dysphoria] all the time. I wouldn't even say most of the time, but it is frequent enough to turn into a problem sometimes. The way it affects me is it really worsens my depression and makes me feel bad about my body and bad about my identity, as if because I don't have “male” parts or neutral parts, because I have “female” parts, that I'm not the gender I am, which isn't true, but it's still upsetting.

As shown in these narratives, vloggers conceptualized social dysphoria and body dysphoria as related but with different causes. Vloggers credited social dysphoria to how others perceived and interacted with them and body dysphoria to an internal sense of incongruence between identity and body. Furthermore, vloggers described this incongruence as deriving from comparisons to what was assumed to be “ideal” (cis) bodies. Such nuance is not captured by DSM criteria for *gender dysphoria*. Vloggers greatly internalized cisnormativity, such that comparisons to others negatively impacted their mental well-being. These findings indicate a need for more research on the impact of strict gender roles and beauty standards.

For many vloggers, medical GAI greatly reduced dysphoria and improved well-being; being supported in social transition through changing their name, pronouns, and outward expression also improved well-being. Even when experiencing distress from misgendering, many vloggers made intentional effort to improve their well-being. Many vloggers in this archive demonstrated strategies for increasing their sense of self and reducing their investment in external judgement and validation. Named benefits of social transition suggest efficacy in

moving away from overemphasizing medical intervention in trans health advocacy work. As shown in these narratives, vloggers were held accountable to strict gender norms and consequences ensued when they did not meet these expectations. While medical GAI should be made accessible to those who desire it and are able to give informed consent, individuals who are being bullied for their expression, questioning their gender, and who express experiencing gender dysphoria need greater support in developing positive identity and self-esteem.

4.4 Well-Being

To best understand aspects of trans lived experience that contribute to QoL, it is essential to understand the many factors negatively impacting trans people's well-being. Seventy vloggers in the archive (87.5%) named struggles with being trans, transitioning, or expressing themselves differently than socially expected. Vloggers mentioned many factors of mental and physical health, as well as proposed solutions to addressing these collective struggles. Understanding mental and physical factors negatively influencing well-being can greatly inform strategies for trans health advocacy, as can the proposed solutions to addressing trans health. Reflecting the future orientation of the trans vlog genre (Etengoff 2019), all but one video response ($n=79$) included societal, communal, and individual-level solutions to improving trans people's well-being. Some factors of well-being require shifts at the community and societal levels to be addressed, while others can be shifted internally. These insights illuminate strategies to increase well-being through self-care practices and other mental and physical health support.

4.4.1 Mental Health

In Table 3 below, I include aspects of trans lived experience that negatively impacted mental health. These factors were rarely experienced as isolated influences; rather, multiple

factors occurred at the same time and sometimes with positive influences counteracting some of the negative impacts on mental health.

Table 3: Negative Influences on Mental Health

Gender dysphoria	<i>n</i> =33
Mental health conditions	<i>n</i> =22
Struggles to express themselves as desired	<i>n</i> =17
Distress from fear of judgement for not meeting external expectations	<i>n</i> =16
Distress from grappling with trans identity	<i>n</i> =13
Anxiety	<i>n</i> =11
Finances and lack of financial resources	<i>n</i> =10
Bodily discomfort	<i>n</i> =7
Depression	<i>n</i> =4
Negative interactions due to expression	<i>n</i> =3
Navigating binary bathrooms	<i>n</i> =3
Racism	<i>n</i> =2
Sexist harassment	<i>n</i> =2
Shame regarding trans identity	<i>n</i> =2
Difficulty with sexual intimacy	<i>n</i> =2

As shown in Table 3, gender dysphoria was the most named negative influence on mental health (*n*=33). While vloggers were not impacted to the same degree and many found ways to navigate their gender dysphoria, dysphoria highly impacted vloggers' mental health. Vloggers particularly noted how their gender dysphoria resulted in low self-esteem and negative emotions toward body and identity. As a result of gender dysphoria, several vloggers (*n*=6) avoided public spaces or struggled with communication. Seven vloggers discussed how discomfort in their body negatively impacted their mental health. Two named experiencing shame due to their trans identity, and two attributed their difficulty with sexual intimacy to their gender dysphoria. Thirteen vloggers specifically discussed distress from grappling with their trans identity. These nuances of gender dysphoria, including the different ways vloggers experienced and attempted to resolve social and body dysphoria (as discussed in section 4.3), are useful points of consideration for trans health advocates.

Mental health conditions, including anxiety ($n=11$) and depression ($n=4$), were the second most named negative influence on well-being ($n=22$) and sometimes occurred alongside gender dysphoria. For example, Elijah, a white 21-year-old trans guy, described his anxiety and dysphoria making it difficult for him to view anything positively, including his clothing and tasks at hand. Five vloggers cited finding (and naming aloud) a suitable label for one's gender identity as a significant source of anxiety. This anxiety often occurred early in their exploration and questioning of gender. Anxiety around trans identity resulted for a variety of reasons, including the expectation that a label would never fully explain one's gender, that others would not understand, and that they would be disowned by their families or even by trans communities. Naming or "coming out" as trans simultaneously felt incomplete and allowed individuals a way to find community with others with similar experiences of gender.

In addition to mental health conditions, many vloggers ($n=17$) struggled to express themselves outwardly in alignment with their desires. Vloggers altered their expression due to how others responded or may possibly respond. Sixteen vloggers feared not meeting others' expectations about how they should express themselves. Others' perceptions and actions were frequently named as negatively impacting mental health. Distress was often credited to societal pressure and expectations. When vloggers were able to outwardly express as desired without fear of negative reactions, harassment, or violence, their well-being was supported.

Three vloggers named negative interactions due to expression as negatively influencing well-being, and two named sexist harassment as negative impacting their well-being ($n=2$). Three vloggers discussed the need to navigate binary bathrooms as a factor negatively influencing mental health. In addition to negative reactions based on gender identity and expression, two vloggers discussed how their mental health was negatively influenced by racist

interactions. Ten vloggers named finances as a significant source of stress. These data suggest a need for intersectional approaches to trans health advocacy that capture the nuance of trans lived experiences. While trans health efforts can be aimed at reducing incidents of harassment through trans cultural competency trainings and other harm reduction efforts, increased trans mental health can also be achieved through working with trans people to not internalize external messages.

4.4.1.1 Individual Solutions

Vloggers employed a variety of strategies to alleviate the harmful impact of these factors on mental health. As shown in Table 4 below, vloggers enacted several individual-level solutions to improve their mental health.

Table 4: Individual Solutions

HRT	<i>n</i> =35
Creative outlets	<i>n</i> =35
Divestment from external standards and judgements	<i>n</i> =16
Surgeries	<i>n</i> =10
Self-care	<i>n</i> =10
Exercise	<i>n</i> =4
Therapy	<i>n</i> =3
Foster greater self-esteem	<i>n</i> =2
Hormone blockers	<i>n</i> =1

While many sought medical GAI to alleviate gender dysphoria, others did not desire or could not access hormones and/or surgeries. Indicating their reality of living within environments that were invested in strict gender roles, many wished for societal shifts to allow for freedom of expression. In addition to physical changes to their bodies, vloggers intentionally invested in creative outlets (*n*=35), self-care (*n*=10), and other healing practices to support their mental health.

4.4.1.2 Communal Solutions

In addition to strategies enacted at the individual level, vloggers suggested community-based solutions. Four vloggers named a desire for stronger trans community; of these, one recognized a need for interdependence and accountability within community. Vloggers received many types of support from trans community, including emotional support; financial support through crowdfunding; media representation to which they could relate; legal support; knowledge about transition; mentorship; and networking.

While many contributors found value in relationships with other trans people, two contributors discussed the damaging effects of in-fighting within trans communities. Charlotte experienced in-fighting from trans women within her trans erotica community and from trans women opposed to her participation in sex work. Charlotte described her experiences with other trans women in this way:

I do adult work, like I get naked. And that makes some trans people, usually trans women, very angry with me. And they think I'm like perpetuating the misleading stereotype that trans women are oversexed, or that we're only good for sexy things, or something.... We're either the butt of the joke, or we're, you know, some sort of sexual thing. And I understand that. But I also feel that I have the right to do porn the same way anybody else does, regardless of if I'm trans. If I'm comfortable and consenting and that is in my life the only way I can make money, as opposed to living in a freakin' shack like I was as a kid. I really don't have to explain that to anybody and it doesn't make me less trans. It doesn't make me an enemy to the trans community. But yeah, I wanna see less in-fighting.... Like, trans women fighting trans women, or trans women fighting with trans men, or you know, vice versa. It's kind of like self-defeating, I

feel, for an already pretty small community in comparison, I guess, to other communities, for us to fight each other. It just doesn't really make much sense because we can't really move forward if we're all fighting with each other. Like, "You're not using the right terminology!" Or, you know, if you want to keep your penis, that means you're this, and you're not really a whatever.

Naming insecurity and self-loathing as a cause of the harmful behavior that she wanted to move away from, Charlotte explained how she had actively worked to stop gossiping, especially about other trans women and their physical appearance. This lateral surveillance of other women's physical appearance has been named as the "girlfriend gaze," where "women are trained to control and discipline each other's bodies" (Winch 2015; Zhang 2022:9). She believed this behavior was connected to misplaced anger. Resisting this patterning, Charlotte was working on reducing competitiveness and comparison to the other women.

The fear of negative feedback from trans people was especially anxiety-inducing for Charlotte, though she did not allow this worry to stop her from publishing her #WeHappyTrans* video response. Sharing her life, including her excitement about her wedding, was a motivation for Charlotte to be vulnerable in sharing her story. Her narrative revealed complicated dynamics within trans communities where beauty standards are reinforced and suggests several strategies for addressing trans oppression and improving mental health. For Charlotte, an intentional divestment from the external expectations of her as a trans sex worker *from other trans sex workers* was key to maintaining her mental well-being. In this case, Charlotte changed her behavior in service to a larger trans community, and ultimately to a societal shift away from cisnormative beauty standards. This strategy, along with other strategies to reduce

competitiveness and comparison, could be used intentionally within communities that seek to improve accountability.

4.4.1.3 Societal Solutions

As with narratives around social dysphoria, many health concerns were attributed to social causes, including the U.S. political climate, lack of employment opportunities, and external judgement. As shown in Table 6 below, while vloggers found many ways to improve their own mental health and support others, societal changes were understood as necessary to improving trans well-being.

Table 6: Desired Societal Changes

Support for trans people, including educational and employment opportunities	<i>n</i> =13
Support for gender variance and fluid gender expression	<i>n</i> =13
Greater acceptance of human variance	<i>n</i> =12
More educated populace	<i>n</i> =12
Humanize trans people	<i>n</i> =10
Greater willingness to listen and learn new things	<i>n</i> =9
Love and compassion	<i>n</i> =8
Respect for trans people	<i>n</i> =7
Greater understanding and consciousness about trans experiences	<i>n</i> =7
Trans visibility and representation	<i>n</i> =5
Greater participation in creative endeavors	<i>n</i> =3
Investment in people of color	<i>n</i> =3
Investment in queer and trans youth	<i>n</i> =3
Safety for trans people	<i>n</i> =3
Less pain and suffering	<i>n</i> =3
Less fear-based reactions	<i>n</i> =3
End of sexism	<i>n</i> =3
End of shame and self-judgement	<i>n</i> =3
Address homelessness	<i>n</i> =3
Increase access to mental and trans health services	<i>n</i> =3
Stronger human connection to nature	<i>n</i> =2
Peace	<i>n</i> =2
End of violence	<i>n</i> =2
End of racial fights	<i>n</i> =1
Kindness	<i>n</i> =1
Ending neoliberalism	<i>n</i> =1

End of drone attacks and the prison industrial complex	<i>n</i> =1
Valuation of human life over money and fame	<i>n</i> =1
Living more plastic free	<i>n</i> =1

Notably, thirteen contributors wished for societal norms to shift to better support gender variance and fluid gender expression, as opposed to strict gender norms based on sex assignment at birth. Sixteen vloggers wished more people would divest from external standards and judgements, allowing for individuals to express themselves freely. Many of these societal changes, as some vloggers discussed, can be initiated at the individual level, with the hope of eventual paradigm shifts. Others can be implemented at the community and society level.

4.4.2 Physical Health and Safety

In addition to mental health considerations, vloggers named some physical health considerations of transition. While access to desired medical GAI has been highly correlated with increased mental health and QoL (Jellestad et al. 2018), unwanted and harmful side effects of medical transition can negatively impact trans well-being. Ten vloggers discussed negative side effects of hormone usage; five discussed physical discomfort from binding; and one discussed how electrolysis was very painful.

Trans health research has recently begun documenting negative side effects of prolonged HRT use (Harb et al. 2019). One transfeminine vlogger in this archive discussed how Premarin, a form of conjugated estrogen, caused weight gain and increased crying. Three transmasculine vloggers experienced distress from acne caused by testosterone usage. Binding was named by five transmasculine vloggers as being physically uncomfortable; two vloggers discussed relief from binding after having top surgery. One vlogger discussed how she supported puberty blockers for kids, as they would prevent later pain from electrolysis. As Grace described,

I totally believe and support the kids that are transitioning these days and I think it's freaking awesome that the doctors can stop the unwanted puberty from the wrong gender. I mean, I know that I would have really enjoyed not having to go through all that electrolysis. Zap, ow. Zap, ow.

As more is known about trans medical care, trans people considering binding, HRT, and/or surgeries need to be informed about possible negative side effects. As discussed by Shuster (2019), the informed consent model of medical care has the potential to reinscribe an unequal power dynamic between doctors and patients, even when using the language of informed consent. The informed consent model is not consistently applied in accordance with the principles of informed consent decision-making (Shuster 2019). A thorough assessment of the possible risks and benefits of trans medicine still needs to be made accessible and routinely included in doctor-patient conversations and within trans-specific medical curricula. Additionally, the power given to medical providers to determine who has the capacity to give informed consent needs to be interrogated. In risk-benefit analyses, physical health needs to be considered alongside mental health considerations. Given strong controversy over the ethics of medical GAI for children (see McHugh & Bradley [2021]), it is essential that medical providers are practicing true informed consent decision-making with trans patients and their caregivers.

In addition to factors influencing vloggers' physical health, issues of safety were named as negatively impacting trans well-being. These factors included physical harassment and acts of violence, a lack of access to housing, drone attacks, incarceration, and climate change. My findings regarding physical safety indicate a need for additional research on the somatic experience of comfort and safety.

In response to Richards' prompt, many vloggers named how they are acting to create the changes they desired. Some felt their role in activism functioned mostly at an individual level. For example, many sought to treat others with compassion and seek understanding. Others were heavily involved in community organizing to address issues of safety and well-being. Each of the named influences on mental health and physical health and safety are important to consider in our collective strategies to improve trans well-being. Proposed solutions at the individual, communal, and societal level are possible starting points for further examination when designing trans health interventions and education.

4.5 Misgendering

Misgendering was named by 36 contributors as a factor influencing well-being. As with dysphoria, misgendering was not experienced by vloggers in a monolithic way. Some were highly impacted when misgendered, while some easily brushed it off. Vloggers who had not transitioned or had recently begun medically transitioning more commonly experienced misgendering. Medically transitioning reduced incidents of misgendering for many vloggers.

Four vloggers experienced misgendering differently depending on the intention; malicious misgendering caused more distress than misgendering due to incorrect assumptions from strangers. Generally, misgendering was understood to mean being perceived as different than one's gender identity, though two vloggers understood misgendering as being gendered differently than what one's outward presentation might indicate to others. In his first #TheGenderTag contribution, Max, for example, reflected on their experience of being misgendered as a boy in the grocery store:

I'm going to take this since I was born female, has anyone ever thought I was male? Yes.

And it's the *best thing ever*. I wish it happened all the time, but it doesn't... Like, I get so

excited. I was at a grocery store a long time ago, before I even cut my hair, where I used to, like, get my long hair and shove it up in a beanie. So I have an Instagram post of what I looked like that day, and I was walking down one of the aisles and there's a small child sitting in a cart and a bunch of people in the aisle. This kid looks at me, points, and screams, Mommy, that boy looks like an elf! I was, like, yassss. This child is a soothsayer. This child knows. This child understands me. Their mom was like so embarrassed. [laughs] Like, so sad, because, like, she like she saw tits.

At the time, Max understood misgendering to mean being gendered as a boy, the gender he enjoyed being perceived as. He felt validated being "misgendered" as a boy; later he realized how his understanding of misgendering differed from its common definition. In his later #TheGenderTag video response, he reflected on his previous understanding of misgendering: "I think it's funny because my last gender tag I was talking about how people would misgender me and say I was a boy and how happy I would be because of it. Sweetie, you're trans." Max's experience being "misgendered" as a boy and then gendered as a girl based on his physicality illustrates how individuals are held accountable to biologically determined gender norms (see Dozier 2005).

Vloggers revealed how they were impacted to varying degrees by being misgendered. Some experienced extreme distress from gender dysphoria when misgendered, while nine vloggers expressed experiencing relatively low distress when misgendered. Prior to medical transition, three of these nine vloggers experienced high distress when misgendered. A few ($n=3$) said that, over time, as they were consistently recognized as the gender they identify with, the quantity and degree to which misgendering affected them decreased significantly.

Jackson, a white vlogger who identified on the “male side of the spectrum,” for example, described how after having been on testosterone for a longer amount of time, he passed as a man and did not experience misgendering often. When he was misgendered, it did not affect him to the same degree. Jackson’s video response was filmed with his top off post-top surgery and featured him sitting in front of his TV and stairwell. I perceive his expression as masculine. He is wearing a thin gold necklace with a gold ring hanging from it. He has in medium size plugs and has short blonde hair. Regarding being misgendered, Jackson explained how when he was misgendered it was often by “old people” and children. Whereas prior to transition he would overthink being misgendered, assuming he did something to be misgendered, now he is mostly confused in the rare case when misgendering occurs.

On the far end of the spectrum of debilitating levels of distress due to gender dysphoria was Wyatt, an 18-year-old white trans guy in the U.K. who was also in the Top 10 most viewed #TheGenderTag responses. Wyatt’s video response was recorded with a high-quality camera and featured him in a white, blue, and black tie-dyed t-shirt. The background is blurred, though viewers see his bedroom walls lined with tapestries, posters, and a full-length mirror. I perceive his expression as masculine. His hair is short and brown, and he is wearing a silver loop lip ring on the right side of his lower lip. Titling his video as the “new and improved gender tag,” he added new questions from a fake site he named “Spicytranny.co.uk,” mocking the ways trans bodies are sensationalized in dominant discourse (e.g., “What is your current genital?”). Wyatt had shifted his politics from being a social justice warrior (SJW) to being an anti-SJW and asserted his authority on trans identity by stating his belief that to be trans you must experience gender dysphoria. As a highly visible video, with 809,245 views, 63,000 likes, 593 dislikes, and 7,132 comments, Wyatt highly impacted others’ perception of trans identity. While he intended

to disrupt hegemonic understandings of gender, he simultaneously reinforced transnormativity through his insistence on proper trans identity. Comments on his video, as with priorly discussed videos of high visibility, are largely focused on his voice change on testosterone, though the majority were supportive. Commenters also reveal the support they received by watching his progression over the years.

In response to #TheGenderTag prompt related to being misgendered and experiencing gender dysphoria, Wyatt lamented, “Fuck me!” and edited the video to zoom and emphasize his face as the phrase was stated. Since beginning testosterone and coming out roughly a year prior to his video response, Wyatt was consistently being gendered correctly as a man when alone but was occasionally misgendered when in a group. Wyatt experienced a high level of distress when gendered as anything but he/him/his, including they/them, ze/zir, and she/her, especially. Wyatt expressed his anger at being misgendered, stating with a scoff:

People are just like, what are your preferred pronouns? And I’m like, I don’t have preferred pronouns. They’re just my pronouns. It’s not that I’d prefer you to use these, but you can use other ones, like nice. It’s he, bitch. Bitch.... It just makes me feel like, hey do I like not look like a dude? Do I not act like a dude? Like, am I not a dude?... I’m kind of like they, bitch? They, bitch? That’s not me.

As shown by Wyatt’s anger at being misgendered, he greatly desired others to recognize him as a man. Being misgendered caused him great discomfort. Wyatt’s adamant definition of trans as experiencing gender dysphoria and Oliver’s anxiety about not experiencing *enough* gender dysphoria to identify as trans provide examples of how the boundaries of trans identity are maintained horizontally through digital spaces (Jacobsen et al. 2021). These patterns reveal barriers to resisting transnormativity.

Two vloggers expected medical transition to allow them greater ability to move comfortably through social spaces, because medical transition reduced (or eliminated) misgendering. Cooper, a Black non-binary trans man, described the embodied experience of being misgendered as “she and lady” as a “shock to [his] system,” especially because his pronouns were consistently respected by his friends and partner. He felt relief and greater comfort as he was being correctly gendered as “Sir” or “Mr.” more often by strangers in society. He hoped eventually the misgendering would “come to a standstill” accompanying physical changes on testosterone.

Carson, an early 20s white trans guy, discussed how he was excited for his chest dysphoria to be relieved post-top surgery. As an involved activist in his area and in online spaces, including his blog, he was able to fund his top surgery largely through crowdfunding. He predicted increased motility with his recent top surgery, including inhabiting social spaces that he was currently avoiding due to his gender dysphoria. He recorded the video sitting in a folding chair in his office space. Behind him is a small desk, covered in office supplies and notebooks. Below the desk is his backpack. On the wall by the door hangs two baskets intended for file folders. Above the desk are lists on notebook paper. I perceive his expression as masculine. He has short black hair in a mohawk style that is shorter on the sides and has grown out a thin mustache and beard. He is wearing small black plugs in his ears, a green, blue, and pink tie-dyed shirt, and dark sweatpants. Carson looked forward to decreased dysphoria and was excited by the embodied experiences top surgery would allow him to access, including swimming and exercising comfortably and being correctly perceived as a man. A few years following his video response, Carson was called out on multiple SNS for repeated acts of sexual harassment.

Because the #WeHappyTrans* and #TheGenderTag prompts lacked an explicit focus on the racialized nature of trans lived experience, these data obscure the impact of whiteness in vloggers' ability to move through social spaces (Ahmed 2007; Driskill 2010; Martino et al. 2021; Noble 2012). Racial disparities are revealed through the privileging of white transnormative content within trans YouTube. Aspects of whiteness revealed in the #WeHappyTrans* and #TheGenderTag narratives include the privileging of medical diagnosis, binary identification, beauty standards, and passing. Further, these data reveal class disparities, including unequal access to employment. Some vloggers had access to desired hormones and surgeries through employer-provided insurance; others relied on crowdfunding to attain these financial goals; and some received no financial support from others. Narratives such as Carson's reveal the possible benefits of being correctly gendered following receiving desired medical GAI; however, these narratives also reveal the racialized nature of trans lived experiences and inability of some trans people to meet transnormative expectations.

4.6 Transition Giving Confidence

All vloggers (N=80) named ways they had reduced feelings of gender dysphoria and otherwise increased their QoL. Vloggers experimented with outward expression ($n=72$), including pronouns and names; clothing and accessories; hair length and style; perfumes and toiletries; makeup and nails; hormones ($n=34$) or hormone blockers ($n=1$); surgeries ($n=21$); transition in general ($n=4$); and divesting from external expectations, judgment, and validation ($n=28$). The most named benefit of transition was increased comfort ($n=27$). Contributors also experienced increased QoL with transition through ability to express themselves according to their desires ($n=25$), self-confidence ($n=17$), recognition ($n=17$), authenticity ($n=13$), decreased

gender dysphoria ($n=10$), clarity ($n=9$), alignment ($n=6$), freedom ($n=6$), joy of seeing their own reflection ($n=4$), and normality ($n=3$).

Physical changes were not the primary focus of any video response, though nine vloggers named enjoyment of physical changes from HRT or surgeries. Four vloggers named enjoyment from transitioning in general. Jamie Price, a white genderqueer musician who lived in Canada, felt alignment, even gender euphoria, when perceived as androgynous, rather than as a man or woman. Regarding external validation of their identity, Price explained how, while they did not want to be assumed female, they were no longer aiming for others to see them as male and was experimenting with adding feminine aspects to their expression, including makeup, nail polish, “feminine shoes,” and a flowery hat and shirt.

A primary way in which gender dysphoria affected individuals was decreasing their overall confidence, which served as a distraction from other parts of their lives. Ten contributors noted a reduction of gender dysphoria with transition, and seventeen vloggers experienced increased self-confidence through the process of transition. Four vloggers now enjoyed their reflection in the mirror, and three vloggers credited transition for inspiring spiritual growth. Seventeen vloggers found great benefit in being socially recognized as the gender they identify as, and many vloggers ($n=13$) noted a greater sense of authenticity. With this newfound comfort and confidence, and without the distraction of gender dysphoria being at the forefront of their decision-making, many then experienced greater clarity ($n=9$) and sense of authenticity ($n=13$), allowing them a greater capacity to focus their energy on goals beyond gender-related transition, including pursuing their passions and hobbies (including making educational YouTube videos). Two expressed finding this clarity through identifying a path forward.

Emily, a white queer lesbian-leaning trans women and femme-leaning tomboy, is one contributor to #WeHappyTrans* who described the enjoyment she experienced being comfortable in her identity. Emily's video response featured her sitting in a brown leather office seat with wooden panels lining the wall behind her and a poster for a movie with Nicole Kidman. I perceive her expression as feminine. Her hair is straight, brown, and covers her ears. She is wearing small-rimmed glasses and dangling gold and blue earrings, as well as a salmon-colored zip-up hoodie. She credited her close cisgender sisters, some of whom she met in college, for allowing her to be herself and giving her "the protection and the space [she] needed to develop who [she is] as a woman... and as a human being." With social support, transitioning increased her overall confidence.

Having been disowned by her biological sister when she came out as trans, she expressed being especially thankful for her chosen family. She supported other trans people by offering them free counseling and hoped to decrease feelings of fear among trans people through her thesis on trans positive thought models that focused on reducing internalized trans oppression. In addition to her research, she worked to reduce sexism within gaming. Aspects of her transition that she mentioned included changing her pronouns and name, having surgery, and expressing herself as she sees fit. She discussed experiencing benefit of having a firm identity and fluidity in her expression. For Emily, social interactions shifted significantly with transition, which decreased her dysphoria and allowed her to find comfort within her expression.

Eliana, likewise, felt greater comfort and confidence with transition. Eliana, a white trans woman, struggled for some time to accept her trans identity. Through transition, and with the support of coworkers, she found comfort and confidence in herself. One aspect that helped with these outcomes is decreased harassment having transitioned and consistently perceived as a

woman. She recorded her video response at her home. In the dim light, you see wooden floors, her refrigerator in the room next door with a box of Cheerios on top, and a TV and DVD bookshelf behind her. I read her expression as feminine. She has long straight dark blonde hair and is wearing a dark gray t-shirt, light makeup, and dangling earrings. Eliana explained:

I mean the reality is that it used to be that when I was still living as a boy and everything, like the first thing that I pretty much would think about in the morning was the fact that I'm that. I was just all out of sorts gender-wise emotionally. It was quite painful, and I felt very just oppressed and everything. And just the absence of that is remarkable. Just the feeling of just comfort within myself.... I'm not harassed or accosted much by people on the street, you know, strangers, about my gender identity or presentation or what have you.... There's so many just little life-affirming moments that happen, with just even the littlest things, someone telling me that they like my earrings or my coat or what have you. Just little interactions, little connections with others are so much more real to me now that I feel like I'm being real. It's difficult to articulate kind of just how powerful that is and just how different it is from what my previous experience of the world was where I sort of felt like there was always this bubble around me that things couldn't really pass through or something.

For Eliana, transitioning and beginning her current job as an out trans woman allowed her to feel what she referred to as the “novelty of comfort.” She described her current job as her dream job of writing about video games, particularly related to the portrayal of women and gender. She hoped to one day be recognized as a woman who happens to also be transgender, rather than being understood first as a trans perspective. She credited trans activists of previous

generations for paving the way for employers, like hers, to hire trans people in public-facing jobs.

Cristopher August, a white trans man, singer-songwriter, paranormal investigator, and disability advocate, also found confidence through transition. With an abundance of social support, transition allowed him to find inner strength and wholeness, as well as an appreciation for his physical reflection. He also had learned to embrace his voice as a musician. His video response has background music playing softly throughout and features him sitting in a black office chair in front of a window with closed wooden blinds. I read his expression as masculine. Christopher is wearing a long-sleeved black button-up dress shirt, with the top couple buttons unfastened. His short black hair is styled with some volume on top, and he has a slightly receding hairline. He has long sideburns and a cleanly shaven mustache and beard. With an abundance of social support, transition increased Christopher's QoL, allowing him to feel strong and whole in his identity. This stronger sense of self also allowed greater enjoyment in singing.

Nearly half of vloggers ($n=35$) cited creative outlets, hobbies, and passions in which they engaged; a few indicated directly that pursuing their hobbies and passions was more possible when their attention was not being depleted from anxiety and stress about their gender and transition. Alice, a white trans woman, was only two months into medical transition but was already feeling peace of mind having chosen a path of transition, rather than constantly asking herself questions and being distracted from her passion of music, teaching, and dance. Her video was recorded in medium resolution with light editing and instrumental background music throughout. She is sitting in the corner of her room in front of closed bamboo blinds with blue curtains to either side of the window. There is a blue candle on the side table to her right. I read her expression as feminine. She is wearing a dark blue top with a gray and white cardigan. Her

wig is dark brown, straight, and shoulder-length. She has on medium hoop earrings and a necklace with a silver pendant with a blue stone. She is wearing foundation, blush, thin eye liner, light brown eyeshadow, and light red lipstick.

Her role models were trans women who were unassuming, friendly, willing to give advice, and carried themselves “in a classy fashion,” something she wished to embody once her “initial transition” was over. Alice also gave credit to her two closest female friends for supporting her. She described her friends as being “able to play devil’s advocate to basically throw out my crazy ideas and crazy complicated situations that my life gets in. They do a wonderful job of keeping me grounded and making sure that I’m not going overboard with anything.” Though she does not state this directly, she implied that to “not go overboard” was related to her outward expression of femininity.

Like Emily, Eliana, Christopher, and Alice, Xavier felt more comfortable interacting with others having transitioned, though he credited greater comfort largely to accepting his transness. Xavier, a Black trans man, had transitioned from being read as a butch lesbian to a man, and had utilized many strategies along his path of transition to become more comfortable in his body. His demeanor in his video response reflected his personal comfort and confidence. His video featured him sitting by his computer desk, with light shining through the window behind him to his right. The walls and ceiling are painted light blue. I perceive his expression as masculine. He is wearing a button-up khaki-colored dress shirt, has very short black hair and groomed facial hair, and is wearing brown tortoise rounded glasses.

Some strategies he had used to feel more comfortable with himself were changing his pronouns and name, being on hormones, living “full-time” for about four years, and learning to appreciate his trans identity and his past. While he had taken steps to change his outward

expression and desired top surgery, he credited observing masculinity in other cultures as a primary way in which he found appreciation for his identity as trans and as a man. With this newfound clarity, he did not feel influenced by external expectations and felt a reduction of anxiety and dysphoria, whereas prior to transition, he did not feel present in his life and felt uncomfortable “almost 24/7,” alone or with others. Xavier discussed how he had learned to accept himself and not rely on validation from others. With transition, including being on testosterone for two years and changing his name, Xavier experienced increased comfort in his body and overcame struggles with his trans identity. Rather than attributing hormones for this shift, he felt his happiness was derived from learning to accept himself and appreciate his trans identity.

In addition to expressing a wide range in experiences of gender dysphoria, several contributors ($n=10$) cited a reduction of gender dysphoria with transition, sometimes ($n=2$) experiencing what they named as gender euphoria (the antonym of gender dysphoria). Juliet, a white mostly femme woman, found empowerment by embodying her sense of self as a woman. She is one vlogger who named feelings of gender euphoria that have accompanied her transition. She stated:

Also, you know things like just being able to look in the mirror and be happy with what I see. That's something that cis people, I think, take for granted a great deal, but trans people, we had to fight for that. And so, you know, when you get these little moments of I guess gender euphoria where... you see something looking back at you in the mirror or on the iMovie recording eyesight thing that I'm looking at right now and you know, you feel okay with that. That's something really really powerful. At least it's powerful when contrasted with decades of not being able to ever see that and only seeing something

alienating and wrong looking back at you. So that's something extremely awesome about being trans and I guess being able to explore, I guess, myself.

Juliet explained how transition allowed her access to experiences of femininity that are empowering for her, including “ponies and blush and dolls and all kinds of silly fun things”. For Juliet, appreciating her new reflection increased her confidence to such a level that she was able to explore other parts of herself, parts that seemed unreachable prior to transition.

Kat Blaque, a Black trans woman who achieved her lifelong goal of graduating from an arts college in California, likewise explained how completing her transition allowed her the ability to focus on her art. She explained:

I think because I consider my transition to be complete I can pursue tasks with a little bit more vigor and I'm not distracted by the stressful points of not being who I actually am.... I also enjoy now that I can pursue my art with more focus.... I started my transition while I was in college, and it was really hard for me to focus on my work. Now I have so much more focus because I am not having to deal with all of these other issues that deal with transition.

As with Juliet, having moved through transition allowed Blaque the mental space to be more present with other parts of her life. Similarly, Meredith, a white trans woman and academic, found focus for her work and hobbies after transition. She explained:

The thing I enjoy most is, in fact, waking up in the morning and not having to think about what sex I am.... I know that might seem kind of weird, but to a certain extent the greatest gift I've been given is the gift to live a life in which gender is not at the foreground of everything I do. I mean gender is at the foreground of what I do when I talk about gender or when I write about gender, which I do a lot. But the greatest gift for

me in some ways is being able to not have to be fretting about it all the time, which is what I did back in the day and now I have both the time in my life as well as a kind of clarity and peace of mind that enables me to do things that are more important.

Rather than fixating on transition goals, Meredith was now able to allot her energy to her many hobbies, including singing and being a Deadhead. As demonstrated by vloggers like Christopher, Alice, Blaque, and Meredith, transition increased many vloggers' QoL by increasing comfort and confidence and thus creating space for greater focus on pursuing creative endeavors.

Beyond increased comfort, confidence, and clarity was a greater sense of authenticity with transition ($n=13$). Authenticity, for contributors in this archive, was experienced as realness; as removing a mask; as leaving the "proverbial closet"; as no longer hiding; as greater presence; as freedom; and as releasing shame. With this authenticity came many benefits, including a stronger sense of self, easier time relating to others, and increased ability to communicate honestly. Blaque found that, through transition, she also found self-confidence and authenticity, which allowed her to better relate to others, including in intimate relationships. With this sense of authenticity, Blaque felt she was more honest with partners.

Without much social support other than viewers and vloggers she had connected with on YouTube, Blaque's transition depended on self-reliance and determination. Gaining a greater sense of self through transition, she is now financially compensated for her graphic artwork and educational work through her Patreon and nationwide lectures. She continues to be a visible trans presence on YouTube and other SNS.

Further supporting research suggesting increased QoL with transition, vloggers in this archive articulated ways in which transition allowed them to find comfort, confidence, and

clarity. Many were then able to be more present with other aspects of their lives, including singing, dancing, poetry, art, activism, and connection with others. Transition, for many, allowed for less attention to be directed to their gender identity and presentation, and more attention to their passions. Transition also facilitated introspection for many contributors, which was channeled into spirituality and motivation for goals. For some, feeling comfortable and confident in their identity allowed for fluidity in their expression and the assurance that their choices were self-determined, rather than applied externally. For vloggers like Eliana, transition also provided safety in the form of reduced harassment.

Along with an increased sense of comfort, confidence, clarity, and authenticity, transition allowed for vloggers to express themselves more fully ($n=25$), receive recognition from others ($n=17$), and feel an alignment between their expression and identity ($n=6$). Nine vloggers discussed benefits of “passing” more consistently as cisgender. Some ($n=6$) named transition as enhancing their sense of freedom, three to enjoy the feeling of “normal,” and four to appreciate their reflection. Contrary to this Goffman’s (1959) sociological theory of presentation of self, many contributors ($n=28$) made concerted efforts to divest from external expectations, judgment, and validation. Instead, they shifted their focus toward self-care practices, creating meaningful connections, and pursuing their passions.

Twenty-five vloggers found enjoyment through expressing themselves in accordance with their desires. Arianna, a white woman of transgender history, is one of ten contributors who felt a reduction of dysphoria with transition, which allowed her to be more present and expressive in everyday life. Passing as a cisgender woman was another major benefit of transition for Arianna, as it provided her discretion as to when she shared her trans identity. Being recognized as a woman allowed Arianna to express herself more fully, and therefore enjoy

her life to a greater extent. During her process of transition, she fell in love with her now wife and healed relationships with family members who were from a German Mennonite background.

Experimenting with gender expression was a major way that participants found self-confidence and comfort in their body, though many vloggers ($n=12$) stressed that choices about one's outward expression did not have to correlate with gender roles, expectations, or identity. For those who chose to change their outward expression, a sense of their outward expression of femininity or masculinity "matching" or "aligning" with their gender identity was perceived as a great benefit of transition ($n=6$), whereas prior to transition looking in the mirror resulted in extreme gender dysphoria.

Along with a decrease in gender dysphoria as individuals were consistently recognized as the gender they identify, receiving external validation produced enjoyment for many ($n=17$). This external recognition, including correct pronouns from strangers and those in their life prior to their medical transition, supported self-recognition. Aliyah, an African American trans woman, activist, performer, and entrepreneur, credited herself as the most supportive of her transition, as people in her life who were not trans had very little understanding of her trans lived experience. In addition to internal recognition, Aliyah valued being recognized as a woman. She stated:

What I love most about life after my transition is just being able to be myself. I love being able to look at my body and know why these parts are here.... I love being able to wear what I want to wear. I love walking down the street and having a man acknowledge my womanhood. You know, to a cis woman, that's annoying, but to a trans woman who's had to basically live a masquerade their entire life or for a very long time, that "Hey Mama, sister, how you doing?" That's revolutionary. And it's fulfilling and that's one of

the many things that I love most about my transition, but the most important thing about my transition is just knowing that I had done it.... That I triumphed over all those people who told me I couldn't do it and that's what's beautiful about it.

For many vloggers in this archive, aligning one's gender expression with one's sense of self relieved dysphoria significantly. Six vloggers named the experience of transition as identity and expression coming into alignment, or matching. In this way, these video responses responded to the "classic transsexual trope of the mirror scene, in which the dysphoric trans subject mournfully regards the obdurate surface of the mirror as it delivers an improperly gendered reflection" (Keegan 2018:35; Prosser 1998). Charlotte, for example, joyfully discussed her experience of embodiment with transition. A white trans woman and porn star, Charlotte experienced freedom in being able to express her authentic self. She described:

I have a really cheesy cliché for all of you, but I think what I enjoy the most is when I live my life and I'm being myself and I'm not even thinking about it and then I periodically would go to the bathroom to look in the mirror, or if I go to look in the mirror at any point during the day, I see exactly what I feel. And it *matches up*. [emphasis mine] And that's cliché, and probably not too original, but that is genuinely a really good feeling.... [N]ow I'm not like constantly looking in the mirror, like oh, that's right, that's what I look like.... [I]t feels good, 'cause it's like, oh right. I'm like a chick now, or whatever. That's amazing. Not too profound. I don't want that on my tombstone. I'm a chick, or whatever. But yeah, it feels good to have things *match up like that*. [emphasis mine].... Because what used to happen is, I'd be this person on the inside and I'd be going about my life, and then I'd go to the mirror, and I would see a little chubby boy with a bowl cut who looked alarmingly like DJ from Rosanne, the little boy, which

you might be able to see if I get rid of all this. You can kind of see how I would look like that little boy.

Whereas before beginning medical transition looking in the mirror caused dysphoria, looking in the mirror having transitioned medically brought Charlotte resolution, and even joy. While Charlotte expressed discontent with how standards of femininity were upheld within her trans erotica community, this narrative of alignment reflects trans narratives that include transitioning to desired status (e.g., man or woman) as a rite of passage or the result of an alchemical process and with which comes specific gifts and ways of knowing (Klonkowska & Bonvissuto 2019).

These narratives provide qualitative information that supports a strong relationship between transitioning and QoL. As compared to most trans health literature, vloggers spoke to transition via both medical and social means. Though medical GAI was not accessible or desirable to all vloggers, those who had received desired hormones and/or surgeries expressed a reduction of misgendering and increase in recognition of their identity from themselves and others. Many vloggers ($n=25$) expressed how transition enabled a greater capacity for expression. Others ($n=9$) expressed excitement about the physical changes to their body. Two transmasculine vloggers named physical relief in not wearing a binder after top surgery, and several looked forward to top surgery for this physical relief. Several were planning various surgeries, while others had reached their transition goals, were not sure about medical transition, or did not desire any. In addition to medical GAI reducing feelings of dysphoria for many vloggers, experimenting with one's outward expression through non-medical means also increased QoL for many contributors ($n=25$).

For over a quarter of contributors ($n=26$), their decisions regarding openness about their expression and trans identity were influenced by others' discomfort and preferences, including families, professional codes, partners, and friends. Three named living at home with parents unsupportive of their desired expression. In the case of vloggers living with unsupportive parents, their well-being was tied to their parental support; these vloggers did not feel they could express themselves authentically. Cooper, for example, had recently moved out from living with their mom and was now able to express themselves as they desired. They described cutting their hair a few years after moving out as "like a rebirthing"; having short hair is something they had desired from the outset, but their mother did not allow them to dye or cut their hair.

Two named changing their expression as a professional obligation, and three mentioned that they changed their expression based on their partner's preferences. Nicole is one vlogger who changed their expression for professional obligations. They explained how are expected to be "clean shaven" as someone modeling as a woman, though their preference was to let their armpit hair grow. They also were influenced by their partner's preference regarding shaving their pubic hair.

As trans men interviewed by Abelson (2019) recounted, amplified sites such as gyms, public bathrooms, and doctor's offices were spaces in which many trans vloggers felt intense pressure to meet external expectations and avoid judgement. Sometimes dysphoria resulted in vloggers avoiding public spaces and struggling with communication ($n=6$). Others, like vloggers included in Etengoff's (2019) study, reclaimed their personal agency by divesting from transnormative expectations and other people's comfort. Twenty-eight vloggers discussed divesting from the pressure to meet external expectations. For many, the process of transition inspired introspection that led vloggers to a sense of greater authenticity ($n=13$) and wholeness;

this process toward authenticity sometimes included changing one's outward expression to be in greater alignment with their sense of self. This authenticity was not ascribed to having received legitimacy through medical diagnosis (Johnson 2016), but rather in being able to express themselves in desired ways and receive recognition from others. These narratives depicted vloggers overcoming obstacles and coming to know themselves more fully. By first questioning one's gender, vloggers transformed their understanding of the world and found language that felt most suitable to their experiences of gender.

Prosser (1998) named autobiographical "body narratives" that follow a trajectory toward authenticity as a process of coming back home. These body narratives are demonstrated by vloggers who felt greater comfort, confidence, and alignment with transition. The idealizing of "home" as a place of complete comfort has been complicated by feminist scholars, such as Ahmed (2000) and Vähäpassi (2013), for its lack of a critical examination of how the boundaries of trans communities are created through narratives of who is considered a "stranger" and which bodies can properly embody "home" within a binary gender system. As discussed by Ahmed (2006), Prosser's work also negates the possibilities of "finding home" in trans identities that do not align with transnormative trajectories. As revealed in the transdisruptive diversity narratives included in this archive, trans people have found various paths toward greater confidence, well-being, and authenticity. These narratives do not always hinge upon medical transition but often do involve aligning one's outward expression with authentic desires. Prosser's work neglects to account for the intersectional nature of trans lived experience; extended work on the "politics of the body" would benefit from an analysis of how safety and (dis)comfort interplay to shape trans lives.

4.7 Trans People as Capably Normal and Productive

Reflecting mainstream trans politics, many vloggers in this archive made claims to “normality” as a strategy to improve trans well-being. Three named finding benefit in being able to live “normal” lives following transition, and nine made appeals to being “normal” people. Others discussed how not meeting “normal” expectations was a source of gender dysphoria.

Silas, a white teenage trans boy living at home with his parents, was one vlogger who recognized how social interactions impacted his well-being. He was incredibly uninterested in style and understood that others viewed him as a girl because of his larger chest. In addition to his distress in relation to the thought of childbearing, he had noticed how his chest dysphoria and anxiety fluctuated based on his emotional state. Silas’s somatic experience was highly emotion dependent and included a recognition that his uncomfortable feelings when in a “bad state of emotion” were produced by societal expectations of “normal” bodies.

Several vloggers found their bodies and identities incongruent and sought medical GAI to alleviate this felt incongruency. For example, Jocelyn, a 30-year-old white trans woman, was looking forward to having SRS and feeling comfortable changing clothes in the gym locker room. She experienced some resistance to her pronoun change, especially at work, though she maintained strong connections within her field and was consistently hired for temporary contract positions. Prior to transition, activities like shopping in the women’s section felt inaccessible to her. After beginning her transition, she met friends at a trans support group in her area who took her out to Macy’s and shared advice on navigating conflict with her parents. Shopping in the “right part of the store” provided her great joy, especially because clothing in the women’s section included more of a variety of color; she felt a great sense of relief in not feeling like she was “wearing a costume.”

She appreciated the normalcy of her womanhood and wanted trans people to be “accepted as everyday people.” Jocelyn emphasized that she was “not a drag queen” and not “flamboyant” about her transition. This distancing from drag queens and “flamboyant” trans women represents a form of reinforcing transnormativity through defensive othering (Ezzell 2009; Fabbre et al. 2020) and reflects “oppressive othering” tactics used by religious authorities to uphold moral superiority over gender and sexual minorities (Sumerau & Cragun 2014). These claims to morality are simultaneously raced, classed, and gendered (Sumerau & Cragun 2014). Jocelyn created her video response with a white cisgender man, who she regularly hosted shows with. Though she discusses the benefits she feels passing as a cisgender woman, she does not include any reflection on her privilege as a white binary trans woman who is able to access employment opportunities.

Danielle, a white trans woman, also appealed to the “normality” of trans people as a key activist strategy. She shared that her first role model was Christine Daniels, who started transitioning around the same time as her and with whom she quickly became pen pals. Danielle felt reflected by Daniels, a white trans woman and sportswriter who also experienced depression and suicidal ideation. Danielle’s video was filmed in medium resolution in her home living room; blue throw pillows are on either side of her. She is seated on a tan leather couch, with tall bookshelves behind her. I perceive her expression as feminine. Her hair is straight and red, she has shaped her eyebrows, and she is wearing a moderate amount of makeup. She has on thick eyeliner, glossy lipstick, medium hoop earrings, and a long-sleeved white and blue striped shirt.

Danielle appreciated the goal of #WeHappyTrans* to increase positive trans representation and shared that she was careful to not choose a name that was too “hooker-ish” or “stripper-ish,” which she felt was “a common theme with people choosing their names.” Danielle

distanced herself from trans women who she deemed “flaming.” Christine Daniels, by contrast, she related to and respected. Christine’s suicide served as a catalyst for Danielle to transition, as she did not want to regret not transitioning sooner. Danielle implied that Christine Daniels represented a respectable trans person, in that she was not “flaming” like trans women who “always... knew” they were trans and were “more feminine.” Identifying herself as separate from trans women who have “stripper-ish” names or who are “flaming,” Danielle rejected this stigma and legitimized her own expression and identity as a white trans woman.

Danielle is among the contributors who had been invited to present lectures and train others on trans-inclusion in workplaces. She led one session on trans inclusive employee resource groups with panelists from a variety of corporations, including Goldman Sachs, Kraft Foods, Google, Barclay, and Estee Lauder. She was working on her memoir that discussed being involved with drugs and being the only person, to her knowledge, to transition while in business school. Danielle compared access to educational opportunities as increasingly very limited within the U.S., as compared to more egalitarian countries like Sweden, where “everybody... has these equal opportunities,” including greater access to education. Within an egalitarian system, she sees everyone as “free to do what they want, right?” While she acknowledged her privilege in having financial support from her parents for her education, she does not critically examine how her privileged position influences her political strategies for trans inclusion.

Reflecting mainstream trans discourse, the normalization of trans people was desired by some vloggers ($n=9$). To this end, a rhetoric of “deserving,” “capable,” and “normal” was employed by several vloggers in the archive, mirroring assimilationists politics that have been critiqued within gender studies and sociology (Aizura 2006; Irving 2013). Melissa/David, for example, expressed her/his frustration at the lack of trans rights in the U.S. In her/his narrative,

Melissa/David makes a claim to normality by minimizing difference, as she/he stated: “I would like people to see us as just another part of the human condition and that we really aren’t any different from anybody else because we aren’t.” This activist strategy has been critiqued in intersectionality theory for negating important differences between populations, namely white women and Black women. Melissa/David’s political strategy also included an understanding of trans people having a felt incongruence between their identity and expression.

Nylah, a well-known trans woman of color in the media industry, understood sharing her story as contributing to a larger project of bringing normality to trans people. She recorded her video response in medium resolution and featured her sitting against a white wall. I perceive her expression as feminine. She has long black wavy hair, shaped eyebrows, eyeshadow and eye liner, and lip color, and her top is striped black and white. As to what she is doing to support trans people, Nylah explained:

I think talking about it. I think educating people about transgender issues. That is something that helps because it brings normality of trans people and just help the world to say, we’re regular people. We deserve the same opportunities. We’re capable of doing the same things you’re capable of doing. So, why can’t we have these opportunities? So hopefully by doing that it’ll open some more, it’ll open more eyes and it helps.... I’m just a regular person. And I think that’s what a lot of people don’t understand. I am a regular person.

Like Jocelyn, Danielle, and Melissa/David, Nylah’s advocacy for trans well-being included an appeal to trans people being normal and possessing productive capacity. While acknowledging key structural issues facing trans populations, including homelessness and limited support and ability to access employment opportunities, Nylah does not interrogate her

privilege in being able to succeed as a model, fashion designer, and actress. In particular, she is lauded for her physical appearance. She also discussed the lack of acceptance of trans people as it relates to gender expression in the U.S., as compared to her experience visiting the Philippines for a film.

Nylah wished gender identity to no longer be an issue that inhibits people from “going out there” and “living their lives.” In a world in which trans people are seen as “normal,” her artistic talents would be seen for their own merit, rather than hyperattention being focused on her trans identity. In addition to appealing to trans people’s capability, she discussed the contradiction of U.S. political ideals of “freedom.” As noted by Nylah, within a U.S. context, only certain bodies (i.e., those who are “passable” as cisgender) are able to access “normal” opportunities. She recalled how trans people at the malls in the Philippines are highly visible but do not receive the harassment that visibly trans people experience in the U.S.

While she enjoyed her work environment, Eliana acknowledged that the corporation she works for did not provide adequate trans health care. She hoped that writing letters to the Human Resources Department would help persuade the company to offer more support for its trans employees. She felt strongly about the need for access to trans-related healthcare and the drain on trans people’s energy having dysphoria and seeking access to care. Respectable citizenship was embedded into her political strategy that reinscribed medical criteria for gender dysphoria as the measure for valid trans identity (and justification for insurance access). Eliana highlighted the ways the corporation would financially benefit from trans people’s increased productivity. In doing so, a hegemonic trans narrative is reinforced as trans people appeal demonstrate their suffering and potential for future productivity to access medical services.

Parallel to a rights-based approach to trans equality, several contributors ($n=4$) advocated using a grassroots liberationist approach that included the end of all oppression and understanding shared humanity. Donovan, a Lebanese pansexual queer trans man of Armenian heritage and a PhD student in higher education, understood oppression and liberation to be connected and believed that social change could not truly occur until humanity was restored. His activist approach was heavily informed by Black feminism. Donovan's video featured him in his bedroom in front of a set of dressers and walls lined with certificates and artwork. I perceive his expression as masculine. Donovan is wearing a crew neck t-shirt with the number 55 at the top left, resembling an athletic uniform. He has short black hair with a slightly receding hairline. He also has thick eyebrows and thin sideburns connecting to his shortly trimmed beard and mustache. His personal contribution to this vision of liberation included striving to live an authentic and consistent life. It also included being open to new connections and change, evaluating himself, and contributing his energy in beneficial ways. As an educator, he hoped to give voice to marginalized students, particularly transmasculine students of color, and contribute to "affirming, inclusive, and celebratory" learning environments. His strategy, as compared to claims to normality, focused on a shared humanity.

Aliyah, an African American transgender woman, described the need for a paradigm shift to youth-led movements and more African American trans entrepreneurs. Aliyah's video response was recorded by Richards after a meeting in Chicago they attended together. After a brief introduction from Richards from her office at home, the video cuts to the interview. Aliyah is seated in front of wallpaper at the beach, and a dining table covered with a red and white checkered tablecloth. I perceive her expression as feminine. She has curly black hair and is

wearing glossy lipstick, minimal makeup, shiny dangling earrings with blue and silver rhinestones, and a v-neck fuchsia top.

Contrasting mainstream LGBT Pride celebrations where people often “get drunk and parade around,” she helped coordinate a yearly trans, gender non-conforming, and intersex State of the Union address where activists protest the (cultural and actual) genocide of community and fortify attendants to “take those feelings of Revolution” back home. Her company created the first all African American trans choreopoem, “Beauty is My Revenge.” This choreopoem brought together poetry, dance, music, and song to bring attention to the abuse and neglect of African American trans women, including how lack of opportunities within industries and establishments necessitates work in the sex trade and street economy, which she stressed are also viable industries. She invited viewers to join her in her vision to move beyond the status quo and survival in the “not-for-profit industrial complex” into “rising above the oppression” and thriving. By creating new systems through entrepreneurship, Aliyah worked to provide ways for African American trans women to shift away from oppressive social institutions. Revealing societal changes they desired and the steps they were taking to create these changes, vloggers like Donovan and Aliyah sought to increase trans well-being, in particular for trans communities of color, which, in turn, they believed would bring humanity to a greater state of peace.

This archive reveals a wide diversity of political standpoints, some of which reinforce oppressive systems and others that seek to dismantle them. Some advocated using a rights-based approach that includes an appeal to “normal” citizenship, while others adopted a liberationist perspective that acknowledges shared humanity. Some vloggers argued that trans rights and access to medical services would increase trans people’s productivity within the workplace. While the strategy of appealing to normality resists sensationalized trans media representation,

this approach neglects to address inequities within capitalist systems. Meanwhile, systems that do not rely on productivity within existing social institutions were proposed as an alternative. These strategies did not privilege transnormativity and embodied an understanding of the intersectional nature of trans lived experiences. As discussed in Chapter 1, activism drawing on the foundations of Black feminism incorporate a transversal politics of coalition. While some vloggers were in alignment with coalitional politics, others promoted trans inclusion without any institutional changes.

This snapshot of trans YouTube content, including the wide array of political strategies represented, illustrates the ways in which trans people are seeking recognition within and outside of dominant institutions. This digital archive, with many political strategies to alleviate trans oppression represented, offers a prime illustration of the benefits and limitations of YouTube and other SNS as networked counterpublics. While significant resistance to gender oppression was present within vloggers' narratives, transnormative values were the most visible, limiting the ability of transdisruptive diversity narratives to shift common discourse and understandings of trans identity. The tense landscape of trans politics reveals how the medicalization of trans identity serves as a major barrier to collective trans movements; the tensions within and between trans communities are essential to understand when creating strategies to improve trans health. Next, in Chapter 5, I provide an analysis of how vloggers' support networks served as a protective factor that alleviated pressures of trans lived experience.

5 RESILIENCY AND SUPPORT NETWORKS

Alongside the stated benefits of transition were support networks, which are a documented factor in one's QoL and well-being (Başar et al. 2016; Kaptan et al. 2021; Samrock et al. 2021). Support networks have been shown to mediate the impact of stress from discrimination and gender dysphoria (Başar et al. 2016; Budge et al. 2013, 2014; Kaptan et al. 2021; Reisner et al. 2013; Samrock et al. 2021; Zeluf et al. 2016). Furthermore, scholars have found that social support plays a protective role by fostering higher psychological resilience (Kaptan et al. 2021). Notably, scholars have critiqued a hyper focus on resilience, i.e., positively utilizing internal and external resources while living in adversity, for oversimplifying and sensationalizing trans people who survive under oppressive conditions as “brave” or “inspirational” (Asakura et al. 2019). My intention in this dissertation is not to perpetuate toxic positivity, but rather contextualize how trans people promote their well-being while navigating oppressive systems.

In the context of trans youth, Singh et al. (2012) defined resilience as “the strategies and contexts that assist trans youth to navigate life stressors related to their gender identity and/or gender expression with success” (p. 208) (Hartling 2004; Mizcock & Lewis 2008; Werner 1995). Singh (2018) delineated three forms of resilience: intrapersonal resilience, interpersonal resilience, and community resilience. Intrapersonal resilience includes “the things you feel and do as an individual to take care of yourself when bad things happen,” whereas interpersonal resilience involves using your support networks to strengthen you through times of adversity. Community resilience is derived “from being part of a collective group who share identities, values, or some other commonality” (p. 3). Trans health scholars have documented a wide array of resilience strategies employed by trans people to cope with societal discrimination due to their

gender identity and/or expression (Singh et al. 2012). In this chapter, I discuss the sources from which vloggers fostered their resilience and received support for their well-being and overall QoL (see Table 5).

Table 5: Sources of Support

Friends	<i>n</i> =41
Online and media representation	<i>n</i> =38
Family of origin	<i>n</i> =33
Self	<i>n</i> =28
Coworkers/Workplace	<i>n</i> =24
Significant other (partner or spouse)	<i>n</i> =19
Classmates/Educational environment	<i>n</i> =9
LGBT or trans community	<i>n</i> =5
Spirituality and religious spaces	<i>n</i> =4
Therapist	<i>n</i> =3
Chosen family	<i>n</i> =3
Family by adoption	<i>n</i> =2
Surgeon	<i>n</i> =2
Endocrinologist	<i>n</i> =1

5.1 Intrapersonal Resilience

Four vloggers stressed that they had very little external support; and many vloggers (*n*=26) expressed a lack of social support or losing social support when they came out as trans. In addition to support from others, trans health literature has documented a positive association between self-compassion and lesser depressive symptoms (Samrock et al. 2021). Twelve

vloggers stressed the necessity of feeling secure within themselves. Over a quarter of contributors ($n=28$) had intentionally divested from others' opinions and perceptions of them and invested in developing their sense of self. This self-investment boosted their happiness and well-being and contrasts with an investment in impression management, that is investment in influencing the (real or perceived) judgement of others (Goffman 1959). Having supportive relationships with others assisted many in finding security within themselves.

Alex, a white queer AMAB non-binary queer person and PhD candidate in ecology, had recognized how they had internalized external messaging regarding their gender and expression. They were working actively to break this habit and live authentically. Alex had an expansive social support network, including friends, family, coworkers, and teammates from their recently joined roller derby camp, and they listed numerous trans role models, including scientists, engineers, athletes, and activists. They had no "openly unsupportive" experiences and felt supported by others in the choices they made with their body and expression. As described in Alex's narrative, they recognized how they had internalized external messaging and worked intentionally to challenge these messages. By strengthening their sense of self, their sense of value was not reliant on the validation of others. Simultaneously, Alex's resilience was fostered by their strong sense of community. They did note a lack of AMAB non-binary representation, which may have inhibited Alex benefitting from community resilience and a greater sense of belonging.

As Jahaira, a 34-year-old woman of color and of transsexual experience, embraced and found security in her identity as a woman, she channeled her energy into inspiring other women to prioritize their needs. She started transitioning when she was 16 and had lived her adult life with the privilege of passing as a cisgender woman. Even when experiencing misogyny, she felt

grounded in her identity as a woman, feeling that she was able to address obstacles “with the grace and the fortitude and the sensibility and the strength that comes from knowing that [she is] exactly who [she] was always meant to be.” She was reassured by her visual appearance reflecting who she knew herself to be.

Jahaira managed a YouTube channel, where she made commentary and talked to women about her life. She recorded her video response at her kitchen table with medium resolution and light editing added for transitions between questions. Behind her is her stove, cabinets, refrigerator, and living room. I perceive her expression as feminine. She has many tattoos on her shoulders, in the shape of flowers, and is wearing a black laced tank top with a red bra underneath. Her wig is dark red and straight. Her eyebrows are shaped, and she is wearing makeup, including eyeshadow, blush, and dark maroon lip liner. She is also accessorized with large hoop earrings with dangles hanging from them, long colorful nails, and a shiny ring on her left ring finger.

She found value in being visible on YouTube as a trans person, especially as someone with passing privilege that received little attention and harassment for being trans. She discussed how she experienced psychological benefit in using YouTube as a platform to discuss news, books, hairstyles, PTSD, among other topics, particularly to women. She discussed how, when she was younger, the goal for trans people was to avoid harassment due to being “clocked” as transgender. Because of her passing privilege, she saw an imperative to honor her community and her story visibly online. For some subscribers (fantastic subscribers), she was the only person of trans experience in their life, and through this connection with her, she felt viewers learned that she was “really no different from their next-door neighbor or their sister or their girlfriend or their mother or, you know, any number of things.” Her political strategy, like others previously

discussed, reinforced transnormativity through minimizing difference. Though she empathized with cisgender women and was able to connect across difference, she stressed the normality of trans people.

With the support of her mother and trans community members, she had developed a strong sense of self, allowing her to contribute to positive social change. She supported her communities as a sexual assault and domestic abuse counselor and shared her own stories as an immigrant woman of transgender history, a former survival sex worker, and someone with a disability (see JahairasMission 2020). In a 2020 speech for the Massachusetts Office for Victim Assistance, she advocated for creating a world in which we teach children to value themselves and how to manage their anger such that no one conceptualizes violence as a reasonable response. In May 2021, Jahaira DeAlto of the House of Balenciaga was stabbed to death in her home at the age of 42 (Ravenovah 2021; Roberts 2021). Jahaira had welcomed her home to a long-time friend, Marcus Chavin, and his wife, Fatima Yasin. Chavin was charged with the murder of these two women. His motives are still unknown.

Lexi, a trans woman of color, was one of few vloggers who actively supported transgender women of color. In this effort, she emphasized the importance of learning self-love. Lexi co-recorded her #WeHappyTrans* video response with her close friend Mia. Their video was recorded in medium resolution with slight editing throughout. Lexi and Mia are each sitting in chairs, with Lexi on Mia's right side. Behind them is a bed with striped sheets. Next to the bed is a desktop computer on a small desk. The walls are painted lilac and covered in various artwork, and light is coming in through the blinds in the corner. I perceive both Lexi and Mia's expression as feminine. Mia, also a trans woman of color, has short dark brown hair, with her bangs pinned to the left. She is wearing tortoise shaped thin glasses, and some makeup, including

blush, foundation, and lip color. She has on a black lacy cardigan with a blank spaghetti strap top underneath; part of her tattoo is visible. Lexi has medium length black hair and is wearing a purple and pink shirt scooped neck t-shirt and has a hairband on her right wrist.

Like Alex and Jahaira, Lexi and Mia made intentional effort to work on intrapersonal and interpersonal skills and participated in care work within their communities (Piepzna-Samarasinha 2018). As demonstrated in Lexi's narrative, self-care practices are not a given but rather take intentional effort. Mia likewise discussed how she has invested in herself, as well as served as a resource to others in her community during crisis. These narratives reveal how cultivating intrapersonal resilience supports the development of interpersonal and community resilience.

Kingston, a white trans man in college, described how, even with supportive friends and family, his dysphoria and mental health had "been crappy to say the least," necessitating creative ways to cope, including connecting with friends, playing music and video games, singing, and reading. Kingston was interviewed by a friend, Theodore, with the questions to #TheGenderTag. The video was recorded in medium resolution outside at the college they attended in the U.K. Several large trees are in the background. Kingston and Theodore are sitting cross-legged on the grass. Theodore is to Kingston's left. I perceive both Kingston and Theodore's expression as masculine. Theodore has short brown hair and has in small black plugs; they are wearing thick black framed glasses, a tight necklace with a small silver pendant, black skinny jeans, and a Marvel long-sleeve black shirt featuring six superheroes. Their sleeves are scrunched up to their biceps. They are wearing several arm bracelets, including a rainbow one. Kingston is wearing an army green button-up dress shirt, with the sleeves pulled up to his elbows, and black skinny jeans. His hair is very short on the sides and dyed aquamarine on top. When Kingston started transitioning being misgendered triggered a defensive response; however, as he is being

misgendered rarely having medically transitioned on testosterone, misgendering impacted him very little when it did happen. By recognizing his need for self-care, especially when experiencing gender dysphoria, he fostered intrapersonal resilience, even as he had access to a vast network of social support.

Instead of investing in others' (real or imagined) perceptions and allowing these perceptions to influence their sense of self, vloggers, such as Alex, Jahaira, Lexi, Mia, and Kingston intentionally focused on supporting their own well-being. These testimonies of self-investment suggest that developing intrapersonal resilience through self-care practices possibly reduced the psychological impact of stigma and discrimination. However, as evident with Jahaira's murder, developing intrapersonal resilience does not ensure safety from violence and abuse, particularly for transgender women of color (Halliwell 2020).

Vloggers had access to a wide range of social support. Some reported no support in their day-to-day lives and relied more heavily on online connections and trans media representation. Others had expansive networks of in-person social support from friends, family, classmates, and coworkers. While online connections and trans role models were beneficial to vloggers, in-person support, especially from other trans people, greatly increased vloggers' well-being. Some actively sought therapy to help improve their mental well-being and many sought online and in-person connections with others who they could relate to. Many acknowledged how they were actively working to divest from other people's perceptions of them. Even when having large systems of external support, vloggers necessarily developed intrapersonal resilience in response to discrimination and stigma. While developing intrapersonal resilience may have benefitted mental health and overall QoL, no vlogger did so in isolation. Creating YouTube videos and seeking community with other trans people online were key strategies trans vloggers used to

improve their mental well-being and help support other trans people. These efforts mirror suggested strength-based interventions that increase positive identity, well-being, and resiliency for trans and non-binary people (Amodeo et al. 2018; Clements et al. 2021).

5.2 Interpersonal and Community Resilience

5.2.1 Trans Role Models

In addition to developing intrapersonal resilience, many vloggers ($n=38$) received interpersonal and community support through online spaces and trans representation in media. Vloggers in this archive credited media created by trans people, including YouTube videos, autobiographies, TV shows, movies, and podcasts, for increasing their sense of belonging to a larger trans community. Two vloggers noted how they received psychological benefit through interaction with their viewers and subscribers. Both witnessing trans representation, and creating it, sustained vloggers mental well-being. Comments revealed how online representation supported many viewers' identity development and exploration of gender, allowing them to feel less alone in their experiences.

Academic literature on trans mental health suggests that social support in the form of online communities plays a critical role in buffering against isolation (Cipolletta et al. 2017; McInroy and Craig 2015; Moody et al. 2015; Testa et al. 2014). In an archival survey of connections among trans people, increased awareness and engagement with other trans people were correlated with less fearfulness, less suicidality, and greater comfort (Testa et al. 2014). Trans people build and sustain social support in online spaces; these online communities can be crucial for identity formation of trans people of any age (Haimson et al. 2019). SNS such as YouTube, Tumblr, Instagram, TikTok, Twitter, and Facebook can facilitate identity formation and relationships among trans and gender diverse people (Cavalcante 2016; Dame 2016;

Haimson 2018; O’Neill 2014; Scheuerman et al. 2018). In addition to identity exploration, online spaces enable access to medical and health information; news about organization events, historical events, and national celebrations; ethnographic accounts of transition; in-group language and linguistics; emotional support; and advice on how to navigate oppressive institutions (Dame 2013; Haimson et al. 2019; Miller 2016, 2018; Miller & Capello 2022; Raun 2012, 2015a, 2015b, 2015c, 2016; Selkie et al. 2020).

Trans role models were particularly important for vloggers as they allowed them to know of other trans people who have been successful at accomplishing their goals. Laverne Cox coined the term *possibility models* to describe how trans representation allows trans and gender diverse people to envision possible paths forward (Mock 2014; Pearce 2021; Willis 2017). Some vloggers knew of very few trans people of their identities, while many named established systems of support from online trans communities and media representation. While health outcomes are not totally dependent on positive role models, LGBT health research indicates a correlation between increased psychological distress, including suicidality and depression, and inaccessibility of role models (Bird et al. 2012; Grossman & D’Aguelli 2004). While online representation has been found to promote community belonging, role models and supportive mentors who are proximal to individuals’ day-to-day lives are suggested as playing a protective role by increasing psychosocial benefits (Bird et al. 2012).

Many contributors ($n=10$) named trans vloggers on YouTube as a source of support, especially as they were beginning to process their relationship to gender and contemplating medical transition. Trans YouTubers mentioned included Gigi Gorgeous ($n=3$), Princess Jules ($n=2$), Kat Blaque ($n=2$), Bailey Jay ($n=1$), Nakeda Dragon ($n=1$), Noah Choakin ($n=1$), the Janis Danielle ($n=1$), Chanel Wyn DeCarlo ($n=1$), and Raiden Quinn ($n=1$). Caroline was one vlogger

who primarily received support online and through trans media representation, in lieu of support from supportive people present in her day-to-day life. She was the first person to come out as gay in her school. Without the support of her family, Caroline primarily found support from other trans people on YouTube and trans representation on Netflix. Caroline explained how she was “still in the closet” about being trans at school; her classmates assumed she was a gay man. Her family did not respond well to “finding out” she was gay, going as far to deny her sexual attraction to men. She had received some support from a close friend who she described as “doing the best she can to help.” She described watching YouTube videos as “like the only thing I can do to like escape from this hell here.” Sharing her personal story on YouTube was one way she found community and worked to support others. Through creating YouTube content, Caroline fostered interpersonal and community resilience by seeking out representation she could relate to and promoting belonging through assuring viewers of their intrinsic worth. While clearly intending to support others who may be feeling similarly isolated, Caroline’s videos was among the lowest in popularity with just 359 views, 4 likes, 0 dislikes, and 0 comments.

Two vloggers named Kat Blaque, a Black trans woman, a role model. As discussed in Blaque’s #WeHappyTrans* video response, she received little external support in her everyday life through transition; however, she was supported by her viewers on YouTube. In the absence of in-person support, Blaque developed intrapersonal resilience, while cultivating interpersonal and community resilience from the connections she formed by being a visible trans person on YouTube. While receiving support from her viewers, Blaque also serves as a possibility model for her viewers. As of April 2022, Kat Blaque had 451K subscribers.

Jasmine, a 20-year-old Black trans woman who was just starting to explore her gender and expression, named Kat Blaque, Princess Joules, and Janet Mock as her trans role models.

Her response was filmed in medium resolution and with light editing at the beginning and end of the video. She is sitting in the corner of the room. In the background you see white walls decorated with a couple pieces of artwork. I read her expression as feminine and tomboy-ish. She is wearing a wig with long, wavy black hair, a backwards black baseball cap with a light blue accent where it fastens, and a black tank top. Her eyebrows are penciled in some, and her lipstick is bright red. She is wearing thin eyeliner and a touch of purple and brown eye shadow.

As revealed in her video response, Jasmine looked to prominent trans women of color in her journey of gender exploration. She wished to embody their self-confidence and named their “ladylike manner” as desirable. Though she doesn’t elaborate on what this means to her, she valued authenticity and finding common ground. Jasmine did not mention any plans for medical transition, though she felt confident, with some family support and knowing of others who have reached their transition goals and applied their creative skills, that transition was a plausible path for her. Through support from her family of origin and representation of trans women of color on YouTube and mainstream media, Jasmine felt she had the strength to pursue her goals.

As shown by vloggers such as Caroline, Blaque, and Jasmine, both creating and consuming trans content have the potential to promote well-being. For vloggers in this archive, it did so by providing connection vloggers related to and could aspire to embody. Vloggers also provided representation to others by creating their own YouTube content and online spaces, which allowed them to virtually connect with individuals who could relate to their lived experiences; however, several named not knowing any trans people outside of online connections. These virtual networks of trans communities are part of what makes up trans care networks. While proximity to trans people in their day-to-day life varied, online networks sustained vloggers’ mental well-being and sense of connectedness.

In addition to supporting mental health, vloggers frequently utilize these networks when crowdfunding for trans-related medical services. As discussed by Barcelos & Budge (2019), health disparities are apparent within trans crowdfunding campaigns. In their comprehensive review of trans crowdfunding campaigns, most were created by young, white, binary-identified trans men in the U.S. for chest surgeries, though few reached their fundraising goal. Trans men in their data obtained a higher percentage of their crowdfunding goal than trans women; greater Facebook shares were also highly correlated with percentage of goal met. These findings reveal the monetary benefits of having a larger support system.

Medical crowdfunding among trans vloggers in this archive provides further context as to how trans people have attempted to create mutual aid networks in lieu of insurance coverage for medical GAI. Having a letter from a medical provider affirming gender dysphoria is essential for insurance claims. Though access to medical GAI has been correlated with greater health outcomes (Barcelos & Budge 2019, Colizzi et al. 2014, De Vries et al. 2014; Keuroghlian et al. 2015; Lindqvist et al. 2017; Murad et al. 2010; Papadopoulos et al. 2017; Reisner et al. 2016; Socías et al. 2014; Tucker et al. 2018, White & Reisner 2016; Wilson et al. 2015), medical GAI are often denied by insurance companies due to being deemed cosmetic procedures (Rosh 2017).

In addition to trans YouTubers, trans activists and media icons were commonly named as role models ($n=23$), including Janet Mock ($n=9$), Laverne Cox ($n=2$), Isis King ($n=3$), CeCe McDonald ($n=2$), Angelica Ross ($n=2$), Marsha P Johnson ($n=1$), Sylvia Rivera ($n=1$), Miss Major ($n=1$), Leslie Feinberg ($n=1$), Calpernia Adams ($n=1$), April Ashley ($n=1$), Jazz Jennings ($n=1$), Mana Wachowski ($n=1$), and Caitlyn Jenner ($n=1$). One trans athlete, Keeley Godsey, was named ($n=1$). Trans politicians were also named, including Mara Keisling ($n=4$), Kylar Broadus ($n=1$), Lynn Conway ($n=1$), Vandy Beth Glenn ($n=1$), Mason Davis ($n=1$), and Lois Bates ($n=1$).

Aliyah is another contributor who did not experience much support through her transition and who named several trans politicians and activists as role models in her life, including Kylar Broadus, Lois Bates, Angelica Ross, and Isis King. These trans icons were sources of intrapersonal, interpersonal, and community resilience for her. Having trans mentors, like Lois Bates, who encouraged intrapersonal development, was especially influential as she found her own activist path.

Blaque, Alexis, and Nylah each named Janet Mock as their biggest role model, each for similar reasons. They each saw themselves reflected in Mock, as women of color, and wanted to embody her success, confidence, and authenticity. Other trans role models were admired for challenging individuals to be open and contribute positively to the world they wish to see. Through Mock's representation as a confident and successful Black trans woman, vloggers in this archive envisioned possibilities for their own future. Alexis appreciated Mock's deviation from the stereotypical expectations of transsexual women. She explained how Mock defies these expectations by being smart, enjoying reading, and being a thought leader in community. As compared to historical trans mainstream representation, Mock represents herself as a complex human with her own goals and history.

Donovan, a Lebanese pansexual queer trans man of Armenian heritage, named Leslie Feinberg, CeCe McDonald, and Janet Mock as his role models. He explained how Feinberg's book *Stone Butch Blues* was influential for him as Feinberg embodied his values through his work and activism. He admired CeCe McDonald for her perseverance despite injustice. He also greatly valued Janet Mock for reminding him of the power that comes from voicing "our authentic selves." While Donovan received ample support during his transition from family,

friends, colleagues, and others, he credited these three trans activists for helping him grow as a person, and he strived to embody his values in reflection of these role models.

Juliet, a white transsexual woman, named trans icons known for their intellectual and political work, as well as less well-known trans bloggers and activists. She recorded her video response in low resolution and with a high degree of interference. It featured her in her living room; you see a floor lamp behind her to her right and a printer behind to the left. I perceive her expression as feminine. She is wearing a dark coat with a collar over a white flowery dress, several necklaces and wrist bangles, dangling purple earrings, small-framed glasses. On her shirt you also see an enamel pin with a trans flag. Her hair is red and pulled back, with her long bangs covering her right eye, and she has painted her nails black. Throughout the video, she moves her hair out of her eye. She has on some makeup, including eyeliner, blush, and red lipstick. Regarding which trans people are viewed as icons, she communicated how she was concerned about how external standards of beauty were privileged. Instead, she encouraged a grassroots transfeminist approach that included setting our own standards. While critiquing cisnormative and heteronormative beauty standards, she found a plethora of support from trans writers and activists. Julia Serano's work, for instance, helped to galvanize her to become politically involved.

As noted by scholars of transgender studies (Barker-Piummer 2013; Glover 2016; Horak 2004; Johnson 2016; MacKenzie 1994; Vidal-Ortiz 2009; Zhang 2022), white beauty standards pervade mainstream media coverage of transgender people, particularly transgender women. Due to their high visibility, white trans women like Christine Jorgenson, Renee Richards, and Caitlyn Jenner have come to define transgender experience. Though trans women of color such as Laverne Cox, Janet Mock, and Jazz Jennings are more visible in mainstream media than ever

before, mainstream media still largely depicts trans people through binary, heteronormative, and “respectable” constructs of transness. Simultaneously, “transwomen of color who do not appeal to transnormative respectability politics [are situated] as subhuman and thus unworthy of incorporation into the American social fabric” (Glover 2016:340). As revealed in my analysis of trans activist strategies, many vloggers, while creating representation that deviates from mainstream portrayal of trans people, reinforced transnormativity in their efforts for trans inclusion.

This hyper focus on binary, heteronormative, and “respectable” representation extends to sociological research and gender theories. Critiquing the limitations of West and Zimmerman’s (1987) social constructionist theory of *doing gender*, Vidal-Ortiz (2009) argued that applications of *doing gender* vis-à-vis trans people have oversimplified trans experiences through exaggerating the physical aspects of medical transition to the detriment of nuanced understandings of racialized sexuality, resistance, and agency within an assemblage of nation-building institutions such as sex labor markets, military, migration, and colonization. Adding nuance to discussions of medical transition and gender dysphoria, Zhang (2022) explored how trans YouTubers have engaged in the aesthetic labor of passing and meeting transnormative beauty expectations to increase cultural and material capital. Simultaneously, as Zhang (2022) argued, trans people must emphasize their distress from gender dysphoria to receive legitimacy.

Eliana, a white trans woman, credited trans activists of previous generations for their role in creating more trans-inclusive workplaces. As someone who started her dream job as a video game writer as an out trans woman, she has felt a great amount of support from her coworkers. She credited Julia Serano’s *Whipping Girl* for galvanizing her, and she admired Janet Mock for

her powerful sense of self. She wished for supportive work environments for trans people to be the norm and saw the gains made for trans people in the workplace to be progress.

Very few transmasculine role models were named, reflecting research on non-dominant masculinities in screen culture (Banks 2021; Capuzza & Spencer 2017). Mason, a white trans man, did not have trans role models, finding that he was his own best role model. Besides friends and acquaintances, Buck Angel was the only trans person he knew of, and he did not consider him a role model, *per se*. Mason's video was filmed in low resolution with him standing in his kitchen. You see a ceiling fan above him and a door behind him to his right, next to a kitchen wall clock and window with flowered curtains. Behind him to his left is a dish cabinet painted white and with windows, and a large kitchen table is directly behind him. I perceive his expression as masculine. He is wearing a blue t-shirt, with gray lining, has bleached hair with brown growing in, has in small ear plugs, and has a lip ring on his lower right lip.

He credited his mom as his role model for showing him what it means to care and not be influenced by other's people's feelings about you. In the absence of external support from trans people, Mason created two websites that provided resources for trans people with mental illness and tendency to self-harm. In this way, Mason intended to foster interpersonal resilience for other trans people through his mental health advocacy; however, audience reception revealed little engagement with his video response, with just 16 views.

Prompted by Wylde's questions on family planning, two vloggers discussed representation of transmasculine pregnancy. One discussed how they were excited by the recent increase in representation of transmasculine pregnancy, though the other vlogger felt less able to envision possible family structures for himself because he knew of very few transmasculine parents. A variety of personal goals related to family building were discussed (particularly in

response to the prompt included in #TheGenderTag). Fifteen vloggers were open to the possibility of raising children, while ten had no desire to raise children. Twenty-four vloggers adamantly did not want to be pregnant. The thought of childbearing produced significant dysphoria for many of these vloggers. Only two of the twenty-four (8.33%) were open to being pregnant. One vlogger, who identified as a cisgender female, had birthed three children. One other vlogger had birthed a child and was open to getting pregnant again. Sixteen vloggers were open to the idea of adoption. Two were considering getting their eggs frozen, one of which was considering a surrogate. Eighteen vloggers held a strong value in providing for their future family. These findings signify the impact of attitudes toward pregnancy with shifting media representation.

Reyes, an Armenian transgender man, is one contributor who spoke to a lack of representation of trans people building families. With limited representation of what raising a family might look like as a trans man, Reyes found it difficult to visualize possibilities for his own future. A feeling of community resilience, therefore, was less accessible to them.

Cooper, a Black non-binary trans man, however, spoke to recently emerging transmasculine representation of pregnancy and the positive impact it had on their mental well-being. Their video response to #TheGenderTag was recorded in high resolution with soft background music. It featured them standing against a white wall. I perceive their expression as masculine-leaning. They are wearing a blue tank top over a black binder. Their hair is short on top, black, and curly, with the sides shaved. They have a thin mustache line. They have on a necklace with a padlock and diamond earrings in. They were interested in either biologically having a child, or adoption. While the thought of carrying a child caused them dysphoria in the past, they had recently reconsidered the possibility. They found media representation of

transmasculine people giving birth inspiring. With these emerging images of transmasculine parents, Cooper could more clearly see possible futures for themselves. Jae's sense of belonging, likewise, was increased with transmasculine representation.

Bradley, a white trans man, named three trans men he connected with through online spaces as role models. They were especially helpful when he started transitioning and needed support processing manhood. As demonstrated in his narrative, Bradley had access to interpersonal resilience by having friends of his identity who supported him through his process of transition, helping him to develop a stronger sense of self rather than live according to assumed expectations of manhood. Noah Alvarez, who collaborated with Richards on the #WeHappyTrans* project, was someone whom Bradley could rely on for support, and with whom he had a reciprocal relationship. Through his own transition, he was greatly supported by his mother, wife, and grandmother. With a strong sense of self, he sought to provide support for others through compassion, listening, and education. He offered to answer questions and assist viewers and provided his contact information on Facebook, his webpage, Twitter, and Tumblr.

In addition to prominent trans activists and media icons, trans writers were named by several vloggers ($n=12$) -- most commonly Kate Bornstein ($n=6$) and Julia Serano ($n=5$). Arianna, a white woman of transgender history, is one contributor who named trans writers as role models. Arianna had attempted transition in the late 70's/early 80's but due to a lack of financial resources was not able to accomplish her goal of transition at the time. She repressed her emotions as her career was progressing, which led her to a nervous breakdown. Referencing Bornstein's book, Arianna reflected, "I saw this book just sitting in the bookstore in the queer and gender studies section and I read it and I felt she was talking to me. It was. She knew what was going on in my head and I thought that was incredible because no one else did. [laughs].... It

was crazy.” Arianna saw her experiences reflected through Bornstein’s work, providing her support and a sense of belonging.

Arianna also praised Jennifer Finney Boylan’s book *She’s Not There*: “Well-written -- and it told the story how someone can be happy and reasonably normal life through all of this.” Boylan’s book further provided Arianna with a sense of possibility for her own transition. In addition to these two white trans woman authors, Arianna was inspired by a trans individual she knew who had transitioned, found happiness, and accomplished many of her goals in life. Now, having accomplished her goals of transition, Arianna found support from her partner who she met through Facebook and felt acceptance from her family. She dedicated time to providing positive representation for others through interfaith and trans programming.

Charlotte, a white transfeminine contributor, discussed how Kate Bornstein’s book *101 Alternatives to Suicide for Teens, Freaks, and Other Outlaws* helped her develop a stronger sense of self, even when experiencing pushback from other trans people. She explained:

I don’t feel bad about not knowing if I feel like a woman, or I know I don’t feel like a man. But, when I feel like gender is such a blurry subject, and I wonder, do I feel like a woman? Or, you know, what do I feel like? Or what do I identify as?.... I don’t know what gender I am.... I think I might just be transgendered.... And that’s not saying all transgendered women are not women. That is saying that Charlotte doesn’t know what Charlotte’s gender is. [nods] And Charlotte likes using third person to describe herself. [laughs] But yeah, it felt good. I don’t feel guilty for not knowing what gender I am. And Kate Bornstein has helped me realize that that’s okay. And that I don’t have to prove to anybody in the trans community that I’m anything, whether or not I keep my penis, or whether or not I don’t feel like any particular gender all the time.

Teaching her to have acceptance for her process, Kate Bornstein's work provided substantial support for Charlotte. As she received hostility from trans women within her trans erotica community, the support she desired was reassurance of her gender exploration from other trans people. Bornstein's work prepared her to make authentic choices regarding surgeries and terminology, despite potential backlash from trans people who disagreed with her profession. Charlotte did not mention any support received in-person, only tension within her community. Bornstein's work, therefore, served as a key source of support for her identity development.

For similar reasons, Evelyn, a white transgender woman, named Kate Bornstein's book *Gender Outlaws* and the film *Hedwig and the Angry Inch* as contributing to her consciousness around gender and acceptance of herself and her expression. For Evelyn, gender diverse media representation allowed her to have a more open understanding of gender expression and identity. Without strict expectations of how she would embody her womanhood, she was able to develop a stronger sense of self and well-being.

Trans musicians named included Laura Jane Grace ($n=2$), Antony from Antony and the Johnsons ($n=1$), and Rae Spoon ($n=1$). Like trans media icons and activists, these musicians were admired by vloggers for the trans representation they provide. Jamie Price, for example, appreciated seeing diverse representation of gender expression. They explained how viewing trans representation via a #WeHappyTrans* video of Stephen Ira supported their process of transition, as Ira embodied the femme expression Price desired without being assumed female. Price was also inspired by Rae Spoon, an openly non-binary musician in Canada. Spoon's visibility, openness, and insistence on they/them pronouns allowed Price to better envision their career as a non-binary musician and enabled them to advocate for their needs.

As demonstrated in these narratives, media representation served a vital role in vloggers' support networks. Trans representation allowed vloggers to feel a greater sense of belonging, having known others who reflected aspects of themselves and had accomplished their goals as openly trans people. Trans role models often allowed vloggers to envision possibilities for their future, inspiring confidence in their own ability to accomplish their goals, including those that were transition related.

5.2.2 Support from Family

As support from family has been associated with higher resilience and less symptoms of anxiety and depression (Puckett et al. 2019), understanding how families provide support for their trans family members can help inform strategies for trans health advocacy. Almost half of the subsample ($n=33$) mentioned receiving at least some support from their family of origin, and two had been adopted by parents they felt were supportive. Three named chosen family as sources of support. However, seventeen contributors expressed strained relationships with their family. For example, while vloggers appreciated the support they received from their family, a sense of understanding regarding trans identity from family members was not commonly cited. Further, some vloggers cited financial support from family that covered housing, education, and medical care. These findings support the need for more qualitative research regarding the type of support received from family and how various types of support correlate with QoL.

While many were out as trans to their family, a fear of not being understood prevented several vloggers from sharing their trans identity with family members. Three vloggers shared that they were not out as trans to family members, and two were not out to their partner's family. In their #TheGenderTag contribution, James and Will discussed how they were both early in their gender journey and neither were out as trans to their family, and only "sort of" out to

friends. Their video response features the couple from the waist up sitting on the floor against a light blue wall next to a white door to Will's left and a white cupboard to James's right. James is drinking an Arizona tea and sitting to the left of Will, who is eating noodles in a blue bowl. They are both white and in their late teens/early 20s.

Though both are disinvested in labels, James identified "somewhere in between demiboy and gender fluid," and toward the masculine side, while Will chose agender as the closest label, meaning they felt they did not have a gender. They identified "between the masculine and not-gender spectrum," leaned toward the masculine side, and preferred to be perceived as male than as female. I perceive James and Will's expression as androgynous and masculine-leaning. James's outfit consisted of a burgundy and black button-up flannel shirt with pockets on both sides and rolled up to just below the elbows. They are wearing translucent rimmed glasses, small plugs in their ears, and a bull horn nose ring. Their hair is styled short, bleached, and dyed silver. They are wearing light makeup and have shaped their eyebrows. Will also has on light makeup and has shaped their eyebrows. They have straight and short hair, barely visible under their maroon beanie. They are wearing a purple velour zip-up jacket.

James began their video by explaining how the couple was motivated to create the video response after watching Hannah Hart's #TheGenderTag contribution and how they wanted to correct others' misinformation about them being girls. In response to the prompt on misgendering, Will expressed frustration at how they were both "misgendered every fucking day." They continued, "We don't correct it because I know what they're gonna say, so it's like... It doesn't really matter." They both experienced dysphoria related to their bodies. Will explained how from grade 5 from 8 they wore a lot of makeup because it was required of them in dance class. Since then, they continued wearing some makeup and concealer but had more of a

tolerance for things they did not like about their body. Neither named social support outside of their partnership.

In addition to a fear of not being understood preventing vloggers from sharing their trans identity with family members, families responded to vloggers' coming out as trans with varied support. Tygh, a white transgender man, was out to his family and described how it "really sucks" to still be misgendered by his family, including on Christmas cards addressed to "daughter." Charlie Spadone, a white non-binary genderfluid vlogger, also discussed how even though they were out to their friends and family, few but their sister gendered them correctly or used the right name; they credited the misgendering to their parents and brother not understanding "the whole they/them thing." While Rachael expressed gratitude for her mother and their continued relationship, including an appreciation of her mother buying her clothing and accessories that she enjoyed and helping her maintain a connection with her sister, Rachael did not feel supported. As she stated, "I wouldn't say she's been supportive, but she's definitely still talking to me." As shown in this content analysis, a baseline of support included family using the correct name and pronouns.

Mothers were most named as sources of support ($n=16$), and two named their grandmother as a source of support. Grace, a white trans woman, was one vlogger who named her mother as a source of emotional and financial support. She described how her mother supported her as she came out in a small town that was not affirming of her trans identity. Her brother's wife even "forbid [her] to be around her kids because, I guess, transsexual equals pervert." While Grace experienced a loss of social support coming out to friends and family, her mother continued to provide her with steadfast support and coming out to her deepened their

relationship. In addition to supporting her emotionally through family trauma, Grace's mother supported her financially by paying for her medical transition.

Jahaira and her mother maintained a compassionate dynamic. Despite her traditional Roman Catholic Italian American background, Jahaira's mother immediately sought to understand Jahaira's transgender identity. She did this through leaning into educating herself through research and discussions with others. Jahaira's mother, as compared to Rachael's mother, sought to actively understand Jahaira's trans lived experience despite having no context for her daughter's transgender identity. As Jahaira described, her mother used the knowledge she gained through the process of learning about transgender experience to better support her daughter. This type of support was more substantial than simply using correct name and pronouns.

Melissa/David, a white bigender contributor to #WeHappyTrans*, was very worried about being disowned by her/his family if she/he shared with them that she/he is bigender. After coming out to her/his family, she/he felt supported by them and "pleasantly surprised" that she was not being kicked out of the family. Melissa/David continued to be invited to and attend family gatherings and felt "fully accepted" by her/his family. Though her/his family did not speak much about her/his gender identity and did not "get into high level discussions about what gender identity and expression and theory is," she/he did not feel unwelcome and still felt "part of the family." She/He believed the assumption of rejection was internally motivated. Her/His narrative speaks to the power of positive trans representation. With representation that does not assume disastrous outcomes, trans individuals may not internalize negative outcomes of sharing their identity. While negative reactions do occur, the assumption of backlash is not always grounded in reality.

Danielle, a white trans woman, received support from many sources, including previous roommates, her family, her siblings, and her classmates. Her younger brother, who was acquainted with queer community prior to her coming out, was “probably one of the most supportive people right off the bat” and was more supportive of her than her older brother, who “would like tease [her] a little bit about being a girl now.” Her younger brother immediately respected her pronouns and served as a resource for her parents. In addition to emotional support from her younger brother, Danielle received financial support from her parents to pay for her undergraduate educational expenses to the extent that she was “not allowed to work during the school year” so she could focus on her schoolwork. She acknowledged her privilege in having parents able and willing to provide financial support in this way.

Other vloggers, like Elisabeth, a white 16-year-old trans girl, also received financial support from their parents. In addition to providing housing and other essential needs, her parents financially supported her in her transition, including by buying her new clothes and obtaining hormone blockers, and then hormones. In her #WeHappyTrans* video response, Elisabeth shared that she was creating her first album and expressed her desire to pursue a career in music. She expressed gratitude towards her family for supporting her to pursue her goals. In addition to support from her family, she was inspired by trans YouTubers like Princess Joules and Gigi Gorgeous sharing their stories of transition.

Receiving support from family, including using gendered terms that vloggers identified with and using chosen names, relived stress. However, a fear of not being understood prevented some from sharing their relationship to gender with their families. Vloggers experienced a wide range of support from family. Some vloggers received little emotional or financial support from family, while others received a plethora of support from their family, including emotional

support, housing, and transition-related costs. Others were still connected to their families, but did not all feel understood by them.

As shown by Meredith, James, Will, Tygh, Grace, Rachael, Jahaira, Melissa/David, Danielle, and Elisabeth, social support from one's family had a strong impact on vloggers' well-being and sense of belonging. Vloggers focused on emotional support from others, though many also received financial support, ranging from gifts to full dependence. Some families were willing and able to fully finance their child's education and transition goals, while other vloggers no longer maintained connection with family members. Only two vloggers stated that their transition was financially supported by family. These data provide a deeper qualitative analysis to existing research supporting a relationship between perceived social support and mental health (Samrock et al. 2021). Further research is needed to capture how financial support influences QoL.

5.2.3 Support from Friends and Trans Communities

As relationships with family of origin are often limited for trans people, many trans people rely more heavily on connections with friends and trans communities, some of whom they name chosen family (Miller & Capello 2022). In addition to, or sometimes in replace of, support from one's family of origin, contributors named receiving support from friends ($n=41$) or trans community ($n=5$). Two contributors, however, discussed losing at least one friend during transition. The quality of support from trans friends and community was greater than from cisgender family members who did not understand their trans identity, though family was commonly cited as a source of support.

Lexi's chosen family played an important role in the development of her sense of self as a transgender woman. As she explained, living within a college environment allowed her to make

connections with friends who supported her in exploring her gender expression. In their video response, Mia credited Lexi as the most supportive person of her gender transition. She continued: “No big surprise, because she was the one I was like, how did you come into like your gender and I asked you all those like baby trans questions and like was totally like freaking out and stuff.... So, of course, Lexi, Mama over here is just a Mama Queen for a reason.” Mia found much guidance and support from Lexi as she was first exploring LGBT community, particularly in instilling in her a critical lens of historical events.

Nine vloggers named LGBT or trans community as important ways they have made connections. Support from friends in these groups included attending support groups together, going out shopping together for clothing and makeup, and receiving advice on transition and support for navigating the world as a trans person. For example, through the LGBT community center in her city, Mel, a white trans woman, felt less isolated and was connected to volunteer and writing opportunities. Mel was the oldest contributor in the archive. Her video was filmed using Mel’s Logitech webcam, as revealed in the video’s description. She recorded her video in front of a white wall and a desk behind her to her left. I perceive her expression as feminine. She is wearing a tightly fitting white and red striped hoodie over a red and burgundy turtleneck, with a steel and stone necklace over the turtleneck. Her hair is chin-length and dark brown, and she is wearing silver dangling earrings. Her eyebrows are shaped and colored with dark burgundy, and she is wearing heavy eyeliner and eye shadow. She is also wearing foundation and a red glossy lip color. She transitioned less than two years before her retirement and no longer feels the pressure of transitioning at work. She acknowledged how younger people have more access to resources and community through the Internet.

Likewise, Carson, a white trans guy, discussed feeling empowered by his trans friend and other friends he met through activism and organizing. Because of these connections, he met his adopted parents and was connected to trans and queer communities. He remarked on how these connections gave him a sense of belonging, as “it was just really wonderful to not feel alone.”

Kaylie, a transgender woman of color, received a great amount of support from her mother, as well as her friend group. She cites living in a large West coast city within the U.S. as one reason this support system existed for her. With a strong support system, Kaylie felt safe to explore her outward expression and start hormones.

Evelyn, likewise, named a friend who had provided her with emotional support and acceptance. With the help of her friend, “big sister” types at her local trans support group, and trans media that focused on allowing for fluidity in her expression, Evelyn felt appreciative of life. With the support of friends, she had found coping mechanisms for her anxiety, worked through feelings of shame about her identity, and started HRT. She lived her life as a visible trans person and sought to create meaningful art as a touring singer-songwriter.

Donovan, a Lebanese transgender man, named several sources of support, including friends, family, classmates, and strangers. He specifically credited a trans friend in college for providing mutual support and accountability as they were processing questions about their gender and developing a feminist masculinity. Since coming out as trans, he has a wide support network of trans, queer, and progressive activists, including Jen Richards. Alex, likewise, felt appreciative of how “beautifully awesome and supportive” their networks were for their “gender stuff,” including friends, family, and coworkers. They named the roller derby league they are training with as being a major source of support in helping them connect to sport again. For both Donovan and Alex, educational environments provided valuable support and connection.

These findings reveal how various means of support sustained vloggers' well-being. As shown by these testimonies, friendship and trans community were major sources of support for vloggers. Trans friends, as compared to families of origin, often possessed greater understanding of their trans lived experiences and provided a deeper level of support than family members. Vloggers described what Malatino (2020) named trans care networks, or densely connected social support networks. Many of these networks described were online networks, such as the server created by Melissa/David to connect bigender people. Other networks were created through in-person support groups in major U.S. cities. Most contributors ($n=63$) discussed organizing, education, and support they provided to benefit trans people at large, two of which offered one-on-one support to their viewers; providing support to others was one strategy used by vloggers to sustain their sense of community. In addition to emotional support, some vloggers were supported financially by friends and trans communities through crowdfunding efforts.

5.2.4 Support from Religious Communities

No vlogger in the archive mentioned being connected to a religious community they grew up in, though four vloggers mentioned positive experiences with spirituality or in religious spaces and found religious communities an important part of reducing shame. For these four individuals, reclaiming religion and spirituality was a powerful source of healing. Their spiritual and religious connections were also connected to their role in creating justice. Three mentioned that they saw room for growth within religious communities. One contributor was considering becoming a minister with the Unitarian Universalist Church, which had welcomed her to speak. The dearth of support from religious communities is particularly notable, as sociology of religion literature has documented many barriers for trans and non-binary people to participation in religious communities (Darwin 2020; Sumerau et al. 2018; Sumerau & Cragun 2014).

Melvin, a Black pansexual transgender man, discussed how he experienced a spiritual journey through transition that led him to reconnect with religious community. With the help of a past partner who supported him through transition, he developed a stronger sense of self and sense of belonging through his faith. Melvin recalled his experience of racism as he was transitioning and how support from his partner alleviated the impact of this incident:

There was this one time in particular after an interaction with an Amtrak employee that I just sort of broke down.... I said that I hated who I was. During the first year of my transition, there were several times when I was forced to sort of adapt to how people would treat me or react to me differently based on perceiving me as a Black female and then as a Black male. And that meant dealing with increased stares, nervous glances, people locking their doors as I walked by on the street. I was often angry and pent it up inside because I didn't know how to deal with it.... But having a partner there who didn't necessarily share my racial background but understood the source of a lot of my frustrations and intervened when I needed her to helped a lot. Although I don't remember what she said beyond affirming that I was a child of God and nothing to be hated, I do remember the effect of her words, the tenderness she exuded towards me, her unadulterated anger at what happened, her thoughtfulness of following up with Amtrak about the incident, the not letting me get on that train in the state that I was in.... I came to realize that holding on to that conviction that I am a child of God and not a freak, and that there will always be someone to love and support me, whether it's God, friends or whoever, means I don't need to be validated or accepted by anyone else, and there's tremendous strength in knowing that.

While Melvin was no longer with this partner, she encouraged him to be strong in his faith and believe in himself. Demonstrating his access to interpersonal resilience, she acted on his behalf as he experienced racist discrimination. With support from his partner, Melvin developed his intrapersonal resilience. Melvin is one of few vloggers who reflected on the intersectional nature of his experiences of gender; increased harassment now that he was perceived as a Black man negatively impacted his mental health and forced him to find avenues to channel his anger. Having reconnected to his spirituality as he had just moved away from home for graduate school, Melvin expressed how religious communities can play a role in teaching unconditional self-love. Melvin's partner at the time aided in his process of releasing shame. Reconnecting with his spirituality was restorative.

Findings regarding support from religious communities reveal the depth of negative experiences in religion for trans people, as well as potential for growth in religious communities (Moon & Tobin 2018; Sumerau et al. 2018). Religious communities have commonly been experienced by trans people as sources of judgement, abuse, shame, and erasure; however, many religious spaces have been experienced as affirming, healing, and positive (Moon & Tobin 2018; Sumerau et al. 2018). These narratives suggest strategies for trans health advocacy within religious and spiritual spaces, as well as the potential for affirming self-exploration of religion and spirituality to be beneficial for one's QoL.

5.2.5 Support from a Significant Other

Nineteen vloggers named receiving support from a significant other. As perceived support from a significant other has been associated with higher psychological and physical QoL (Başar et al. 2016), vloggers' partnerships are important for understanding social support networks. For example, Melissa/David named his/her girlfriend as his/her primary source of

support. Among the praises for his/her girlfriend, he/she always had felt supported in his/her gender identity and expression, without it feeling like a burden or controversy. Melissa/David felt loved in his/her entirety as a bigender person, which he/she did not know could exist in partnership. Though Melissa/David found support in his/her relationship, online, and from his/her family of origin, he/she was not out to his/her partner's family and neither he/she or his/her wife were out at work. Bradley, similarly, discussed how his wife was a major source of support for him during his transition, when coworkers at work continued to misgender him as female and he had not yet changed his legal name. He described how his wife supported him by quickly shifting to use his pronouns and name without question. Alexis, a Black trans woman, also named a previous partner who provided support in the form of helping her grow, move past fear and insecurity, and take responsibility for her life.

The narratives included in this content analysis further support a relationship between support from significant others and increased QoL (Başar et al. 2016) and provide further evidence to justify additional qualitative research on the type of support received from various sources. Aspects of physical QoL were not discussed in relation to their partnerships. Vloggers described support from a partner or spouse largely in terms of emotional support, though financial support was sometimes implied. Monogamous partnerships were implied in all but one vloggers' discussion of current and future family planning, suggesting the need for additional research on polyamorous and other family arrangements.

5.2.6 Support at Work or School

While several vloggers ($n=7$) mentioned negative experiences at work, especially when individuals were first beginning their transition, many contributors ($n=24$) mentioned coworkers and their workplaces as sites of support. Many found joy in their careers as musicians,

technologists, educators, and community organizers. In addition to finding support within workplaces, nine contributors named support from classmates and in educational environments. Though several received support from classmates, three found school environments to be stressful. Eliana is one vlogger who named her coworkers as supporting her during transition by not changing their treatment of her.

Henry, a white trans man, was employed by the U.S. Army and named his unit and leadership as a source of support. The primary way in which they showed support was by allowing him to go to his doctor's appointments and "letting" him have his "hormone freak outs," which I understand as meaning potentially reactive bursts of anger. He had been on testosterone for six months. He started testosterone without the guidance of a medical provider but had recently seen an endocrinologist to measure his blood levels. He felt his gender was validated by his leadership instructing him to go shave his face. Like priorly discussed transnormative political strategies, Henry employed an assimilationist approach to trans activism. He sought to embody binary trans male subjectivity, and found support for this goal within his workplace environment. In addition to his unit, he met several trans men in an online military forum. One of these men had "been caught" with testosterone. After investigation, he was allowed back at work. Henry appreciated this response.

Zuri, a Black trans woman, is a blogger and non-profit organizer with a trans organization. She described the area where she lived as "not exactly a hot bed of liberal ideas" and where policies had "generally made life more difficult for trans people." She and her coworkers collaborated to improve trans lives through programming and other efforts, which she discussed on her blog. She named 20 trans role models, including trans activists and organizers.

With this extensive network of trans activists, she supported her well-being within an otherwise unsupportive environment.

Though many found support in their workplaces, one vlogger described her lack of employment opportunities necessitating survival sex work, despite a preference to make money pursuing creative endeavors. Charlotte hosted two radio shows: a biweekly transgender advice radio and a show she described as “the most obnoxious like butt rock,” where her and two guys yell, drink, and carouse. She had twice hosted Richards. She was a fan of horror movies, specifically *Elvira and The Munsters*, and she was the producer of a web series called She-Maleya’s Film Fiasco, a parody of “old schlocky B movies and stuff like that.” She discussed how she would rather put more energy into creative endeavors like radio shows and web series creation than porn, “but that stuff doesn’t pay the bills, yet.” She continued, “So, I kind of like have to take my top off and then I get to do the things I want to do, which has been working out for me pretty well so far.” Though she was able to do sex work for income, her work environment within trans erotica negatively impacted her mental health.

As shown by these narratives, workplaces and educational environments can be both a source of support, as well as places of increased anxiety. As shown by narratives in this archive, vloggers were held accountable to external expectations that consisted of meeting strict norms for femininity and masculinity based on assumed gender. These findings reveal ways in which workplaces and school environments can better support trans employees and students, including ensuring educational resources, accessible all-gender restrooms, and reliable means of reporting discrimination in restrooms.

5.2.7 Support from Health Providers

Though 35 vloggers named being on HRT and 10 vloggers had received at least one desired trans-related surgery, only six vloggers named medical providers as sources of support – three therapists, two surgeons, and one endocrinologist. This finding suggests limited support from medical providers approving trans-related medical services, mirroring trans health literature on doctor-patient relationships (Sevelius et al. 2013; Spade 2006). Unlike previously named sources of support, health providers received financial compensation for their services. Health providers as sources of support are especially relevant for trans people, as these are the providers who approve insurance coverage of HRT and other medical GAI. Within a U.S. context, trans people also have varying access to health services depending on their employment and ability to obtain insurance.

For Ryan Cassata, receiving desired medical services occurred simultaneously with emotional support from his therapist. Though he did not state that his therapist wrote a letter in support of him receiving HRT or top surgery, such letters are frequently required for insurance coverage. While gender dysphoria was experienced by many contributors ($n=42$), many expressed discontentment with the need to articulate criteria for gender dysphoria to access care. Some internalized this medical diagnostic such that they were gatekeeping themselves from trans identity. That so few vloggers mentioned medical providers, even though over half were currently on HRT, had received desired surgeries, or were planning to receive surgeries, suggests limited support from medical providers beyond approval for medical GAI. More qualitative research is needed on how health providers support their trans clientele.

Providing additional nuance to trans health literature, these different sources of support, together, supported vloggers' well-being by foster greater psychological resilience at the

intrapersonal, interpersonal, and community levels. Some forms of support were financial, others were emotional in nature, and some were an entanglement of both. Vloggers learned to provide themselves validation, while also seeking external sources of recognition and understanding through media and from their family of origin, adopted family, friends, chosen family, trans communities, significant others, employers, coworkers, classmates, and health providers. These data strongly support a connection between social support and well-being. Further research is needed regarding how various types of support, including emotional and financial, impact trans well-being.

6 CONCLUSIONS

As has been debated by critical scholars within sociology and gender studies, the heightened visibility of trans people in the past decade does not call for unequivocal celebration. In fact, increased trans visibility has been attributed to heightened violence against trans people, particularly trans people of color (Calcavente 2017; Fischer 2020; Gossett et al. 2017). While there has been backlash in response to increased trans visibility, representation of trans lived experiences that counter transnormativity are necessary to replace controlling images of transgender people in mainstream media. Much like Collins's (1991, 2000) analysis of controlling images of Black women, controlling images of trans people are sensationalizing and depict trans people as inherently deceptive and unworthy of social inclusion (Asakura et al. 2019; Bell-Metereau 2019; Clayman 2015; Disclosure 2020; Glover 2016; Ryan 2009; Serano 2007; Stone 2019).

Negative controlling images of trans people overrepresent Black trans women, especially, as confined to the role of sex workers and do not represent trans people as whole people. Instead, trans characters are historically used as "humorous" plot devices who must endure physical and emotional violence. #WeHappyTrans* and #TheGenderTag are two digital activism projects that aimed to provide diverse media representation of trans lived experiences without supporting the norm that it is reasonable to respond to trans people with fear and disgust. In creating alternative representation, these projects serve as valuable networked counterpublics; however, they do not escape the limitations of YouTube algorithms that privilege transnormative content and content that produces profit (Rodriguez 2022).

Intersectionality and transnormativity were exceptionally useful theoretical frameworks guiding my analysis in this dissertation. As discussed by Martino et al. (2021), activists must

employ explicitly intersectional strategies in their efforts if the goal is for individuals to think critically about their relationship to gender. Holistic trans health advocacy must include a critical understanding of trans health disparities and thus must be understood through an intersectional lens.

While Richards and Wylde were incredibly effective at using their social networks to increase visibility of their digital activism projects, these projects, like many similar digital activism campaigns, are lacking in a critical examination of whiteness, cisgenderism, and class (Ahmed 2007; Kim 2010; Martino et al. 2021; Puar 2010). While both desired participants to reflect on their embodied experience as trans and gender diverse people, Richards and Wylde neglected to directly prompt introspection on the intersectional nature of participants' lives. Instead, prompts were focused on trans/gender alone, putting the onus on contributors to offer reflection on their intersectional experience of gender identity and expression; only a few, for example, critically reflected on how their experience of gender was impacted by their other identities. While these projects were effective in meeting their stated goal of increased visibility and representation, the projects' capacity to inspire off-screen social change was limited due to a lack of explicit application of intersectionality theory in the framing of prompts.

Based on my assessment of the effectiveness of these projects to meet their stated goals and positively impact society, future digital activism efforts would be improved with an explicit emphasis on how experiences of gender vary by nationality, sexuality, race, dis(ability), and other identities. As an example of applied intersectionality, I have provided a revised set of Gender Tag prompts in Appendix C that can be utilized in the classroom setting. I assigned these revised Gender Tag prompts to my Fall 2020 Gender and Media classes at Wofford College. Using this set of prompts greatly enhanced my students' understanding of intersectionality and

gender and provided generative moments of discomfort in discussion. These prompts, as compared to the original Gender Tag, explicitly explore ableism and white privilege.

While trans people who deviate from transnormativity are attempting to dispel stereotypes about what it means to be trans to the public, transnormative ideals are the most visible. These transnormative patterns are apparent within trans YouTube content. Further, YouTube gatekeeps its content based on its ability to generate profit. The mechanisms used to calculate algorithms and appropriate YouTube content also contribute to the privileging of transnormative messages and LGBTQ discrimination (Rodriguez 2022).

Using an intersectional lens that acknowledges the privileging of transnormative values allows trans health advocates to best address the structural causes of trans oppression. Though the creators of these two projects did not explicitly employ an intersectional lens, when considered as a collective archive, narratives revealed the privileges afforded to whiteness, medical diagnosis, and class. Access to support systems and financial resources, for example, were found as major contributors to vloggers' well-being and ability to achieve desired transition goals. The increased popularity of narratives from white and medically transitioning vloggers over others further illustrated the privileging of transnormativity within trans YouTube content.

In addition to increased popularity of transnormative content, comments on video responses revealed hegemonic beauty ideals and an overemphasis on physical appearance (see Miller 2016, 2018 and Zhang 2022). Some trans vloggers internalized medicalized understandings of trans and exerted their authority by creating boundaries around authentic trans identity. Patterns revealed in this content analysis suggest areas of focus for trans health advocates. Instead of reinforcing the notion that to be transgender is to have extreme distress from gender dysphoria that requires medical intervention, a more holistic understanding of what

it means to provide care for trans people is needed. In their resistance to sensationalized media representation, trans role models and online trans representation serve as valuable sources of support for trans and gender diverse people, particularly for those deficient in proximal support; however, to create a true subaltern counterpublic hegemonic and oppressive gender systems must be critically examined and actively resisted.

6.1 Transfeminist Standpoint

Though without an explicitly intersectional lens, Richards and Wylde were aligned with a transfeminist methodology that centers self-definition and self-determination, rather than privileging medical diagnostics (Johnson 2015; Martino et al. 2021). The primary mechanism by which Richards and Wylde employed a transfeminist methodology was by creating prompts that asked contributors to use their own words to describe their gender identity, expression, and experiences. Employing a transfeminist methodology shifts authority of trans experience toward trans people and away from medical providers who have the power to prescribe pharmaceuticals.

As medical school curricula typically do not train medical providers in trans competent care, the insights offered through narratives in this archive indicate a need for robust trans competence training that represents the diverse ways in which trans people understand their identities, lives, and experiences. Employing transfeminist methodologies in medical practice and trans health advocacy incorporates an understanding that each trans person has their own intersectional experiences of gender that cannot be captured by generalizations about what it means to be trans. Rather than medicalizing trans identity, individualized care is needed for each person seeking support related to their experiences of gender.

Fostering intrapersonal, interpersonal, and community resilience is one underutilized strategy to improve trans well-being indicated by vloggers. Scholars such as Singh (2018) offer

several strategies for nurturing resilience, many of which were utilized by vloggers. Some of these include identifying negative messages about one's identities, learning to value yourself and build self-esteem, learning assertive communication skills, exploring and affirming your physical body, building relationships and community, and learning about available resources. These strategies are especially useful for youth-serving organizations and initiatives seeking to develop agency and positive identity.

Responses to prompts revealed a wide the range of experiences with transition and gender dysphoria. The experiences expressed in this archive provide greater nuance of trans lived experiences than trans health literature currently captures; these data support QoL literature related to trans populations that shows decreased anxiety and depression and increased QoL for trans people who receive desired HRT, surgeries, and other trans-related medical care (Ainsworth & Spiegel 2010; Başar et al. 2016; Gorin-Lazard et al. 2012; Jellestad et al. 2018; Meier et al. 2011; Newfield et al. 2006; Rotondi et al. 2011; Wierckx et al. 2011). Such studies reveal improvement in QoL with medical transition, particularly in the realms of social functioning and mental health.

Vloggers also reported increased QoL with social transition, which is rarely represented in trans health literature (see Campo-Engelstein [2019] for one argument supporting social interventions). Nearly all contributors discussed experimenting with their outward expression, and many had enacted strategies to reduce the impact of their gender dysphoria, including intentionally working to divest from external expectations and judgement. Benefits of transition included greater comfort, greater self-confidence, a felt sense of congruence between their expression and identity, external recognition, decreased gender dysphoria, increased clarity, greater ability to express themselves, a sense of authenticity, enjoyment from physical changes,

physical relief for those who were previously binding, and increased safety. These benefits of transition support an approach to trans-related medical services that does not rely on strict adherence to medical diagnostics for access to care (Spanos et al. 2021) and holistically supports trans people's well-being. As social transition also increased QoL for vloggers, healthcare providers would greatly benefit from an incorporation of social interventions in addition to medical approaches. As benefits of transition were more apparent when coinciding with social support, these data suggest enhancing systems of support as a key social intervention strategy.

These findings indicate a need for further development of a transfeminist standpoint theory that accounts for the intersectional nature of trans lived experiences and the privileging of transnormativity. To formulate a more holistic transfeminist standpoint, a diverse representation of trans experiences need to be accounted for and intersectional methods need to be explicit. In this dissertation, I applied a transfeminist methodology that incorporated intersectional analysis. By applying intersectionality and transnormativity theory and continuing to center trans self-definition and self-determination, this dissertation contributes one example of critical transfeminist methodologies being applied in the content of digital media.

6.2 Sociological Implications

This content analysis project is one example of how rigorous sociological methods can be used to better understand trans health needs. Transdisruptive diversity narratives, such as those analyzed in this archive, provide great nuance to trans lived experiences and can be used to inform healthcare practices, policy making, public health efforts, and community organizing. Though more data is needed to holistically capture trans lived experiences, vloggers revealed more nuanced understandings of trans identity than typically represented. With a greater

understanding of how trans people understand their identities, more robust trans health efforts are made possible.

To foster trust between trans and gender diverse populations and healthcare providers, healthcare providers would benefit from enacting patient-centered strategies that honor trans self-definition, continuing education on trans populations, partnering with local trans organizers, and increasing accessibility of health information. Informed consent processes depend on cultural competence and a holistic understanding of the benefits and risks involved in medical and social approaches. Narratives in this archive offer a more nuanced understanding of the possible benefits and risks to medical GAI and suggest additional strategies to increase trans well-being. Medical school curricula would likewise benefit from an incorporation of a more thorough risk-benefit analysis when making recommendations to trans patients. To improve doctor-patient trust among trans populations, healthcare providers can initiate community advisory boards and other community initiatives to increase trans competence among employees. Additional steps to foster community for trans patients seeking support could be taken, such as trans mentorship programs and connecting trans patients with local trans organizations and resources.

At the level of policy, decisions affecting trans and gender diverse populations overwhelming do not consider trans input, support the medicalization of trans identity, and reflect dominant heteronormative and cis-centric values. Biological essentialist claims that are discriminatory against transgender people have a long history within racist institutions. These sentiments are commonly embedded in bills aiming to exclude trans people from curricula, healthcare, appropriate documentation, restrooms, sport, and other public services. The findings

of this dissertation offer substantial resistance to hegemonic structures of oppression; however, they also reveal how transnormativity is reinforced within trans community.

Findings in this content analysis have strong implications for current policy regarding the participation of trans and intersex athletes. Trans vloggers expressed trans identity in its multiplicity, rather than solely as a monolithic medicalized experience. Current sport policy, however, is based solely on biological factors and does not have culturally competent processes for trans and intersex inclusion. Vloggers also revealed detailed information regarding possible mental health benefits and physical health risks of medical GAI; these possible benefits and risks should be considered when assessing sport policy regarding trans athletes.

Within the realm of women's sport, one of the most highly contested sites of trans inclusion debate, policies regarding trans participation have relied on biological essentialist claims that exclude women, trans people, and intersex people whose genetic and hormonal makeup does not fit into accepted criteria for female composition and hormonal ranges (Elsas et al. 2000; Flores et al. 2020; Pieper 2016; see also Love 2014; Reeser 2005). Supporting the medicalization of trans and intersex bodies, current IOC regulations require ongoing medical transition and testing to maintain eligibility (Pieper 2016; World Athletics 2019). Trans and intersex athletes, particularly those of color, are highly impacted by sex-testing policies (Dickinson et al. 2002; Flores et al. 2020; Pieper 2016).

South African runner Caster Semenya is one example of an intersex athlete who has experienced violence in sport due to not fitting within white Western ideas of proper femininity. Due to her body not fitting within accepted criteria for females, Semenya was required to reduce her testosterone production through HRT to continue her eligibility, and her performance suffered following these invasive regulations (Pieper 2016). As data in this dissertation reveal,

categories of proper masculinity and femininity are socially constructed categories informed by societal norms and marketing. Inclusive sport policy considers a critical understanding of the social construction of gender norms and accounts for how these constructions negatively impact the well-being of all athletes.

Many such as Malagrino (2020) argue for transgender athletes' inclusion in sport based on gender identity alone regardless of sex characteristics, which has incited much backlash regarding Title IX protections (Burt 2020). As shown in this content analysis, exclusion from institutions such as sport negatively impacts trans well-being. Rather than insisting on trans women's exclusion from women's sport due to assumed unfairness (as argued for by Burt [2020]), a critical restructuring of sport is needed to address the harm of institutionalizing a binary and biologically based system of gender. Mental health factors, alongside considerations of fairness, should guide sport policy decisions. Rather than maintain the necessity of binary and biologically based gender categories, many factors beyond testosterone production need to be acknowledged for their impact on athletic ability and should be considered when establishing inclusive sport policy. To move beyond biological essentialism in sport policy would require trans and intersex cultural competence training for administration, coaches, and athletes and administrative teams working closely with all athletes to determine fair inclusion practices.

Within work environments, trans employees have increasingly been hired in public-facing positions and insurance coverage has included trans-related medical services. As shown in narratives regarding trans inclusion in the workplace, these gains have often relied on trans people's ability to appeal to increased productive capacity if given insurance coverage of medical GAI. While decreased gender dysphoria was highly reported among vloggers receiving desired medical GAI, appeals to productive capacity were present in vloggers' activist strategies

to promote trans well-being. This pattern reveals the embeddedness of capitalistic influences on trans inclusion practices. Employee resource groups were one avenue mentioned to increase trans cultural competence in the workplace. The findings in this dissertation regarding the impact of employment and financial opportunities on trans well-being are useful to consider when creating workplace policies regarding trans inclusion.

As discussed by Harb et al. (2019), there is much potential in leveraging social media to provide health education. This content analysis demonstrates how social media is being used by trans people as an accessible source of health information and community building. As increased and diverse trans representation does not ensure safety for gender diverse people, trans public health efforts are necessary to combat political backlash. Information gathered through these YouTube videos provides extensive information about what needs to be included in cultural competence training in public health settings.

Public health efforts may include harm reduction to heal trauma and reduce incidents of violence and harassment, as well as intentional initiatives to build intrapersonal, interpersonal, and community resilience. Public health initiatives would benefit from using YouTube and other means to disseminate findings outside of academic contexts. Additionally, this content analysis provides nuanced trans health information to inform grant funding priorities and public health policy. Suggested avenues for further assessment implied in these data include addressing the harm of binary spaces, fostering community, and creating accessible spaces.

Finally, these data suggest several areas of focus for trans health advocacy within and between trans communities. Even while medical and/or social transition increased QoL for most of the contributors within this archive, the mechanisms by which transnormativity maintains its hold within trans communities reveal negative impacts of medicalization. One key area of focus

for community organizers could be dispelling stigma around who is “trans enough” to identify as trans. As shown by vloggers, trans people do not all desire or have equal access to transition. Gatekeeping trans identity based on these criteria was revealed by vloggers as harmful to trans well-being. Some vloggers chose to defensively other individuals who do not align with transnormative values, thereby strengthening their sense of a cohesive trans identity. This process of determining “authentic” trans identity contributed to discrimination of “other” trans and gender diverse people and occurs in many contexts, including in online discussion forums and political strategies for trans inclusion. An understanding of tensions within and between trans communities, including how trans identity is understood, is important for community organizing. Findings in this dissertation suggest that trans activism would benefit from utilizing social media to build upon mutual aid systems (Malatino 2020; Spade 2020), rather than fixating on visibility.

As comparison to others and in-fighting was named as a negative influence on trans well-being, another area of growth within trans communities is in divestment from hegemonic beauty standards. These standards manifested in gender dysphoria when vloggers compared their body to the “ideal” bodies and as judgment toward other trans people. While medical steps were taken to relieve gender dysphoria, the root cause of much distress was internalized messaging and lack of external validation. The patterns revealed through this content analysis regarding beauty standards have implications beyond trans communities. Idealization of particular body types, skin colors, and other physical attributes negatively impacts the well-being of many populations (see Doiron 2020).

In addition to working to create structural change, vloggers mentioned many strategies they utilized to increase their well-being, including medical GAI, social transition, divestment

from external expectations, self-care, exercise, self-esteem work, and therapy. Part of community work needs to focus on preventing burnout and increasing positive identity. Mentor programs could also be implemented within community to build trusting relationships, including through participatory art research projects (Asakura et al. 2019). Without the limitations of profit-seeking mediums, trans community initiatives have the potential to serve as substantial sources of resistance to gender oppression. Cultural competence trainings and support for families who want to better understand and support trans family members are another avenue for trans health advocacy at the community level. Local PFLAG chapters are one way families are engaging in this type of support work. Data in this dissertation support investment in building care networks that include family. Identified patterns regarding attitudes toward body and identity can greatly inform family support.

6.3 Limitations and Future Directions

This content analysis represents only the trans people included in the subsample and thus the patterns revealed in this content analysis cannot be generalized to represent trans people's attitudes and behaviors. A thorough analysis of the many digital activism projects that have proliferated on YouTube and other SNS would be beneficial to capture trans health information and measure digital activism effectiveness more accurately. How trans YouTubers of color, YouTubers not located in the United States, and YouTubers presenting in languages other than English are utilizing the medium would greatly enhance trans YouTube research. If given adequate support, I intend to build upon this content analysis with interviews with vloggers who participated in these projects to further explore the utility of digital media for trans health advocacy. As a supplement to my dissertation, I am planning to create zines in collaboration with

trans folks to share the knowledge gained from this archival work. I am also interested in creating YouTube videos to make the findings of this study more accessible.

In this dissertation I have highlighted the usefulness of studying trans media for trans health advocacy. Collected data reveal strong patterns regarding digital activism effectiveness and trans well-being. One avenue trans health researchers could pursue is how transition and passing, while often increasing trans mental health, also serve to increase material and cultural capital (see Zhang, 2022). These data demonstrate some material and cultural incentives to produce YouTube content, though more research on how SNS are utilized by trans people is needed to understand the mechanisms of transnormativity and holistically capture trans health data.

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APPENDICES

Appendix A: 7Questions for #WeHappyTrans*

1. What's your name? Chosen or otherwise.
2. Who has been most supportive of your transition or gender expression?
3. What do most enjoy about your life since beginning transition? If you're not there yet, what about the possibility of transition excites you the most? What do you look forward to? Alternatively, what about your current gender expression is most satisfying?
4. Who are your trans role models? or Who have you looked up to in the trans community? Who inspires you?
5. What change(s) would you most like to see in the world? This can be trans related, or not, but we'd love to know where your passion lies.
6. What are you doing to make those changes happen? That's right all, no getting off the hook! We're all in this big ol' mess together, and we each need to do our part. Share with us how you're the change you want to see.
7. Tell us something, anything, special and unique about you, your interests, your story. Never forget, gender is just one part of the larger project of becoming a fully authentic human being.

Appendix B: #TheGenderTag Prompts

1. How do you self-identify your gender, and what does that definition mean to you?
2. What pronouns honor you?
3. Describe the style of clothing that you most often wear.
4. Talk about your choices with body hair. How do you style your hair? Do you have facial hair? What do you choose to shave, or choose not to shave?
5. Talk about cosmetics. Do you choose to wear makeup? Do you paint your nails? What types of soaps and perfumes do you use if any?
6. Have you experienced being misgendered? If so, how often?
7. Do you experience dysphoria? How does that affect you?
8. Talk about children. Are you interested in having children? Would you want to carry a child if that were an option for you? Do you want to be the primary caretaker for any children you may have?
9. Talk about money. Is it important to you to provide for a family financially if you choose to have one? Is it important to you that you earn more than any partner you may have? Do you prefer to pay for things like dates? Are you uncomfortable when others pay for you or offer to pay for you?
10. Anything else you want to share about your experience with gender?

Appendix C: Gender Tag Introduction Assignment Example

The Gender Tag was a digital activism project created by a white, non-binary YouTuber named A. Wylde. One critique of this project by scholars of gender and media is that these questions, while generative in regard to gender representation, should include prompts that ask specifically about how other factors, such as race, inform one's experience of gender.

To introduce yourself to the class, create your own Gender Tag video response or written response that answers the following questions about yourself:

1. What is your name?
2. How do you self-identify your gender, and what does that definition mean to you?
3. What pronouns do you use?
4. What kind of clothing do you like to wear?
5. Talk about your choices with body hair. How do you style your hair? Do you have facial hair? What do you choose to shave, or choose not to shave?
6. Talk about cosmetics. Do you choose to wear makeup? Do you paint your nails? What types of soaps and perfumes do you use?
7. Have you experienced being misgendered? If so, how did it make you feel?
8. Have you experienced other forms of discrimination, disrespect or lack of acceptance apart from being misgendered or because of your gender expression?
9. Do you experience dysphoria? How does that affect you?
10. Talk about children. Are you interested in having children? Would you want to carry a child if that were an option for you? Do you want to be the primary caretaker for any children you may have?

11. Talk about money. Is it important to you to provide for a family financially if you choose to have one? Is it important to you that you earn more than any partner you may have? Do you prefer to pay for things like dates? Are you uncomfortable when others pay for you or offer to pay for you?
12. How does race and specifically white privilege or anti-blackness impact your experiences of gender and how you self-identify?
13. How does able-bodied privilege impact on your life? Or, what are your experiences as a person living with a disability?
14. What do you do for fun?
15. Anything else you want to share with the class about your experience with gender?