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VLOGGING TRUTH TO POWER:
A QUALITATIVE STUDY OF RESILIENCE AS PRACTICED BY TRANSGENDER
YOUTUBE CONTENT CREATORS

By

Corey J Feger
B.S., University of Louisville, 2016.

A Thesis
Submitted to the Faculty of the
College of Arts and Sciences of the University of Louisville
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For the Degree of

Master of Arts
in Women's and Gender Studies

Department of Women's and Gender Studies
University of Louisville
Louisville, Kentucky

May 2019

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A Thesis Approved on

April 17, 2019

by the following Thesis Committee:

Dr. Kaila Adia Story

Dr. Anne Caldwell

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DEDICATION

This thesis is dedicated to those of us who are too rich,
too expansive for the gender binary to contain.

To Drs. Anne Caldwell and Kaila Story:
Without your guidance as mentors and friends,
none of this would be a reality.

To my loving parents, Jim and Elisha:
For showing me unconditional love and support.

To my best friend, M.C. Lampe, their partner S.N. Parks:
For continually inspiring me to better myself.

To Viola, Sebastian, and Eloise:
For your warmth, affection, and for providing continual amusement,
you are three of the most perfect cats in the world.

And finally, I am eternally grateful to all the friends and loved ones
who encouraged me to persist when all seemed lost.

ABSTRACT

VLOGGING TRUTH TO POWER: A QUALITATIVE STUDY OF RESILIENCE AS PRACTICED BY TRANSGENDER YOUTUBE CONTENT CREATORS

Corey J. Feger

April 17, 2019

This thesis presents an exploratory account of ways that transgender people’s personal YouTube channels, or “vlogs,” provide new avenues to cultivate resilience as a collective. To make sense of this unstable, contested model of identity and community, I apply a three-part model of “social resilience,” a theory of resilience that transcends the individual and welcomes incoherency, contradiction, and “messiness” into its analysis. In Chapter One, I provide a snapshot of transgender history and present my research objective and justification. Chapter Two consists of a literature review and argues in favor of a hybrid theory of intersectionality and assemblage. Chapter Three outlines my epistemological frameworks and methods, and the limitations of qualitative social media research. In Chapter Four, I present my findings, and in Chapter Five I evaluate the potential for cultivating three dimensions of resilience through YouTube before offering suggestions for future research.

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CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

Introduction

In 1952, Christine Jorgensen became the first U.S. citizen to publicly announce her successful sex reassignment surgery to the general public. Jorgensen's story spread like wildfire at a time when valorization of the nuclear family in public discourse reached a fever pitch, and stakes between feuding global superpowers, the U.S.A. and the Soviet Bloc, were rising steadily.¹ Though remarkably transgressive in the sense that she questioned the fixity of gender to sex assigned at birth, Jorgensen's tour through the limelight also reinforced problematic ideals of white feminine domesticity. In fact, it was by centering her whiteness and conformity to feminine ideals that she was able to leverage relative public acceptance.² Jorgensen was able to fashion herself as a symbol of transformation, hinting at a future full of radical possibilities, made possible thanks to the triumph of medical science. It seemed at the time that modern medicine had achieved nothing short of a miracle: the complete metamorphosis from Adam to Eve. Compared to transgender women of color who were profiled around the same time, commentators paid significantly more mind to Jorgensen's femininity. Jorgensen had become a "beauty," "very blonde and chic," according to the San Francisco Examiner.³

1. Emily Skidmore, "Constructing the 'Good Transsexual': Christine Jorgensen, Whiteness, and Heteronormativity in the Mid-Twentieth Century Press," *Feminist Studies* 37, no. 2 (2011): 273.

2. Skidmore, 275.

3. Ibid.

In contrast, Tamara Adel Rees's profile in the New York Daily News introduced her by her former name (which I have redacted out of respect), and took care to mention her prior military service. Beneath a before-and-after photo published in 1954, text reads:

[...] Rees shown at left as a decorated paratrooper during World War II, is now Tamara Adel Rees after surgery and hormone treatments for change of sex in the Netherlands. The 30-year-old former husband and father of two children has returned to the U.S. to try to become an accepted member of the female world she has chosen.⁴

By framing Tamara's transition as first and foremost a manhood lost, and not a womanhood gained, pundits quite literally degendered Rees, despite referring to her with "she" pronouns. Laverne Peterson, another "Ex-GI" and a Native Hawaiian transsexual woman, was featured in Honolulu's Sunday Star-Bulletin in 1964, posing in a low-cut tank top, long hair draped over her shoulder, gently leaning against and embracing what appears to be the trunk of a palm tree. The way Laverne's photo was framed silently exoticized her in ways only fully articulable when interpreted in light of a long history of colonization and inscription of sexual deviance upon the Black and Indigenous female body.⁵

Like Christine Jorgensen, Laverne Peterson was afforded recognition as a woman because she was able to conform to a specific narrative of femininity. Unlike Jorgensen, that path was not afforded by adherence to the feminine ideal advanced by white supremacist ideology for generations. Instead, she is elevated as an *exotic* ideal, appealing to the voyeuristic fantasies of a colonizing state that had formally incorporated the Hawaiian nation into its empire only five years prior, after 60 years of occupation.

4. Digital Transgender Archive, "Dual Portrait of Tamara Rees (November 22, 1954)," n.d. <https://www.digitaltransgenderarchive.net/files/xk81jk62b>

5. Skidmore, "Constructing the Good Transsexual," 289-90.

I open with this history in order to foreground the fact that discussions about gender can never be value-neutral, and they are inseparable from the present, the past, and imagined futures. It was the daydreaming of the masses that made Jorgensen's image palatable, and those masses' imaginations were shaped by centuries of precedent establishing what modes of feminine embodiment are acceptable, which are unacceptable, and which are conditionally approved. In many ways Jorgensen and her peers hailed a future, close at hand, in which any person could defy the limitations imposed by flesh, with the aid of a qualified chemist, and a scalpel wielded by a surgeon's steady hand. Unfortunately, the nascent age of the million-dollar man never came to fruition, and interest in transsexuals, no longer novel, retreated to the world of daytime television, gossip rags, and psychiatric and medical case studies.

Over half a century later, we inhabit the age of the network. Information technology is now the keystone to global culture and commerce. Its reach is inescapable, and that fact is most readily evident in the ways that social media has integrated itself seamlessly into the day-to-day life of billions, scaling the pace and volume of information exchange up to a scale beyond comprehension. The types of language available to describe what it is to be human have proliferated accordingly, and with new language comes new horizons for self-understanding. For all of these reasons, it is critical that scholarship attends to the increasingly central roles that virtual communities play in the growth and development of transgender people, as well as others across the LGBTQ spectrum.

Research Question

Objective

My research question is, how are transgender adults making use of social media to build community and foster resilience at the community level? And, secondly, what might “resilience” look like when one is speaking of a decentralized, virtual community? My interest is in YouTube because audiovisual media are uniquely suited to building cultures of transition and information exchange. Voices and bodies take center stage, capturing attention in ways that blocks of text cannot. Meanwhile, secretive algorithms track and record every user’s habits and interests, quietly herding them into discrete groups—targets for the advertising that keeps the platform “free.” Silently, automated protocols are cobbling together communities on users’ behalf.

On YouTube, channel hosts can share regular updates pertaining to their lives or a chosen subject or theme, known as “vlogs,” a portmanteau of “video blog.” There are entire channels and networks dedicated to following a person or persons through gender transition, while others are hosted by users who come out and begin transition mid-career. “Career” should be interpreted loosely in this case, because those who choose to make creating YouTube content their full-time occupation frequently struggle to meet bills, and usually survive on a precarious revenue stream comprised of viewer donations, and, if their audience is large enough to warrant corporate interest, advertising revenue generated through endorsements. Capitulating to advertisers, however, is just as likely to mark a user a sell-out or a shill, disrupting the very element of community that draws users to a video blogging platform to begin with.

The contradicting push-and-pull relationship between transgender YouTube users (“YouTubers”), their obligation to their personal wellbeing, their financial demands, and the hunger for community is in many ways emblematic of the shape that society has adopted in recent years. We have ample opportunities for anonymity, but hardly any privacy. The hyper-connectedness of social networks brings solidarity and support directly to the homes of people who would otherwise have remained isolated from those networks, yet the increasingly virtual nature of interactions seems to also make us lonelier. How are transgender YouTubers fostering community and resilience even in the face of so much contradiction?

Justification

As I discuss in my literature review, academic literature has barely scratched the surface of the roles that social media serves in transgender people’s transition process, and how the experience of transition pursued in a hybrid virtual and physical world is distinct from previous generations’ experience. Accounts of transgender people in academia have a problematic history of hyper-focusing on medical transition, damaged psyches, and social isolation as hallmarks of the prototypical transgender subject. Works pertaining to identity development are also a mainstay, but few concern themselves specifically with the integration of technology into transition, or with how and why digital communities arise and sustain themselves to begin with. The first cohorts of citizens worldwide are coming of age in an environment where technology is no longer a luxury—it is a necessity to be seen, recognized, and included. Considering how many works of scholarship devote themselves to the importance of politics of recognition and

inclusion, it follows that novel scholarship should concern itself with broadening the horizons of past works. This is the project that I have undertaken in my analysis.

Terms and Definitions

The number of relatively novel terms and concepts that have arisen from transgender studies makes a comprehensive list impractical. Here I will concern myself only with the terms that will be used throughout my writing. I ask that readers engage with these words and concepts as tools employed for the sake of communication and critique. Definitions below are informed by the work of Susan Stryker, a prominent scholar of transgender studies⁶ and founder and editor of *Transgender Studies Quarterly* since its 2014 debut. She is widely regarded as an authoritative source, and credited with being among the first scholars to integrate transgender studies as a distinct field.

Key Concepts

Gender: Throughout this work, I use “gender” to refer to the emergent phenomenon that arises from the interaction of biology and culture in the broadest sense. Stryker emphasizes in particular that notions of gender are heavily contingent on their location in time and place⁷, and are subject to change over time. Gender is contradictory; it is a kind of self-expression, but its full realization is ultimately dependent on outside recognition. It is an internal sense of self, and a tool for categorization and meaning-making in conversation with others. I do not distinguish between “gender” as an institution, and “gender identity,” due to the latter’s undertone of concession, as though we may grant an unconventional “gender identity,” so long as gender itself remains uncontested.

6. Susan Stryker, *Transgender History* (Berkeley: Seal Press, 2008).

7. Stryker, *Transgender History*, 11.

Transgender: Stryker⁸ defines transgender as a term used to refer to “*the movement across a socially imposed [gendered] boundary away from an unchosen starting place,*” (emphasis original). In other words, a transgender person is a person who actively rejects the gender assigned to them at birth as accurate or sufficient to describe themselves; by this definition, the presence of a “destination” gender is less salient than a transgender person’s initial urge to disaffiliate from their initial gender assignment, which many trans people feel were issued to them without their input or consent.

Transsexual: GLAAD defines transsexual as “an older term that originated in the medical and psychological communities,” typically applied to those “who have permanently changed – or seek to change – their bodies through medical interventions.”⁹ Transsexuality has, in recent years, waned somewhat in its popularity as the presence or absence of medical transition (especially hormones and surgical body modifications) has lost salience in evaluating the legitimacy of a trans person’s gender. It remains in use, however, and will be included at times in discussion and evaluation of data collected.

*Trans*¹⁰: In its abbreviated form, I use “trans” as an abbreviated catch-all for all of those who engage in the social transition that Stryker describes. This usage is intentionally loose, but for my purposes specifically excludes cisgender people who are comfortable with their birth assignment, but choose to express it differently by some means. I employ it as a descriptive shorthand where issues concern all who would describe themselves as trans, transgender, and/or transsexual.

8. Stryker, *Transgender History*, 1.

9. GLAAD Media Reference Guide, “Glossary of Terms – Transgender,” n.d. <https://www.glaad.org/reference/transgender>

10. Some authors employ “Trans*” with an asterisk.

Cisgender: A term for people who do not engage in trans-categorical “movement” described by Stryker, but instead continue to understand and describe themselves as the gender assigned to them at birth. It is important to note that even among cisgender people, the extent to which a person identifies with their birth assignment varies widely, as do their preferred means of expressing it.

Gender nonconforming: defined by GLAAD¹¹ as “a term used to describe people whose gender expression is different from conventional expectations of masculinity and femininity.” As gendered expectations vary by time and culture, what exactly constitutes “nonconforming” behavior varies. Gender nonconforming individuals may or may not also consider themselves trans, e.g. butch transgender women, or fem transgender men, and may or may not consider “gender nonconforming” an identity in its own right. Gender nonconformity should not, however, be conflated with transgender identity.

Sex: Refers to one’s configuration of biological markers, particularly genitalia and/or sex chromosomes, as well as secondary characteristics associated with those arrangements. Humans are for the most part a sexually dimorphic species, but morphologies that differ from the commonly accepted set of “male” and “female” traits are relatively common. These morphological variants are referred to collectively as *intersex*.

Intersex: A term commonly adopted as an identity by people whose bodies differ from a binary conception of sex. Although medical authorities formally adopted the term “Disorders of Sex Development” (DSD) in 2006, a 2017 survey¹² completed by 202

11. GLAAD *Media Reference Guide*

12. Emilie K. Johnson et. al., “Attitudes towards ‘disorders of sex development’ nomenclature among affected individuals,” *Journal of Pediatric Urology* 13, no. 6 (2017).

members of a support group for intersex individuals, including intersex members age 15 and up and caregivers of any age, found that 69% of respondents had experienced a negative emotional experience resulting from medical practitioners' use of "disorder," while 45% reported such experiences "sometimes," "frequently," or "always." For this reason, I am choosing to employ "intersex" and forego terminology that suggests that morphological variation is inherently pathological.

This is not an exhaustive list by any means, but should help frame conversation moving forward and ensure my intended arguments are clear and specific. Incidental references to other lesser-known identities or relatively novel concepts in transgender studies throughout the following chapters will be defined in a footnote. I now turn my attention to a review of the literature.

CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

Introduction

In the preceding chapter, I offered a brief account of two pivotal moments in transgender history: the emergence of the transsexual into the public eye, and, half a century later, the social media boom. The following literature review does not follow such a chronological arrangement, but is organized according to topic, decreasing in breadth. Overall, literature concerning transgender people is pan-disciplinary, but heavily concentrated in counseling, social work, and medicine, and research conducted within the social sciences tended to be designed with their potential application to these fields in mind. There is, however, emerging scholarship that is directly interrogating the interrelationship between transgender communities and social media, including YouTube specifically. What data is available is drawn from comparatively small sample sizes, and conclusions (including my own, in Chapter 5) are more aptly characterized as observations, or proposals for further investigation. The field is new, its data are fresh, and its methods and ethics are continually under revision.

Because interest in understanding gender nonconformity spans many disciplines, it would be impractical to attempt to capture the totality of all academic works concerning trans people.

Accordingly, I have chosen to limit myself to works published in the social sciences. I have also opted to include medical scholarship, as discourses of pathology and treatment still exert significant influence on the popular understanding of what it is to be transgender.

Review of the Literature

New Beginnings: The Emergence of Transgender Studies

The publication of Sandy Stone's essay, "The 'Empire' Strikes Back: A Posttranssexual Manifesto"¹³ is widely cited as the nucleation point around which the body of scholastic work we now call Transgender Studies first coalesced. Stone opens with a fairytale-like account of surgeons transforming "frogs into princesses" at gender identity clinics, before segueing into more substantial critique. Stone raises concerns regarding the validity of any diagnostic tool dependent on a person's capacity to articulate a narrowly-defined account of themselves.

For Stone, a narrative-centric body of literature required a narrative rebuttal. Thirty years since Stone first published her call to action, narrative remains the primary way that trans people are rendered intelligible, but medical, psychiatric, and social scientific literature have begun to favor statistical and neurobiological lines of inquiry. At the same time, popular culture has become a more viable outlet for people to share accounts of themselves with a wide audience, meaning our cultural notions of what it is to be a trans person are no longer mediated by those who wish to diagnose, or those who wish to sensationalize. No longer confined to Jerry Springer-esque daytime television and passing jokes at heterosexual men's expense (though problematic representations are still

13. Sandy Stone, "The 'Empire' Strikes Back: A Posttranssexual Manifesto," *SandyStone.com*, 1987, <https://sandystone.com/empire-strikes-back.pdf>.

far too common), transgender people are finally being treated with enough dignity that their stories of self-acceptance are met with empathy.

Trans People in Scholarship

The most significant trend in recent scholarship concerning transgender people is the sheer proliferation of works devoted to the topic. Between 2000 and 2019, just over 900 articles were published in sociological journals. Of these, over 600 were published just within the past 5 years. This surge in academic interest runs parallel to increasing visibility of transgender people in public media, as I discuss next. Particularly noteworthy was the May 2014 issue of *TIME* Magazine, which featured Laverne Cox, a transgender actress and activist who rose to fame for her role as Sophia Burset in the series *Orange is the New Black*, on the cover. Boldly, author Katy Steinmetz¹⁴ declared 2014 the “transgender tipping point,” and it seems her claims were not entirely unfounded. Given recent backlash from the far right, however, it appears she may have misjudged the direction of that tip.

Early scholarship is characterized by intensive focus on medical interventions and updating standards of care. Research has devoted much attention to the prevalence of HIV and STIs, especially in trans sex workers. Many articles discussing social media’s role in transgender people’s lives pertained to the use of new technologies in HIV

14. Katy Steinmetz, “The Transgender Tipping Point,” *TIME*, May 29, 2014, <http://time.com/135480/transgender-tipping-point/>

prevention,^{15 16 17 18} suggesting that the place of trans people in scholarship remains that of potential vectors for disease and subjects for public health experimentation. Articles concerned with how social media engagement impacts transgender persons' resilience and identity are far less common than those with a more medicalized lens, but are beginning to appear more frequently.

Works concerning family and individual counseling¹⁹ strategies are also consistently present, and many of the articles reviewed suggest implications for their work in the counseling field. Transgender and questioning youth, and their disproportionate exposure to trauma and violence, are increasingly a topic of concern for social researchers. Topics examined include the presence of gaslighting in parent-child relationships²⁰ and the challenges faced by high school students.^{21 22} There is currently an abundance of works available concerning child homelessness, foster care abuse,²³

15. Anand Tarandeep et al., "A novel Online-to-Offline (O2O) model for pre-exposure prophylaxis and HIV testing scale up," *Journal of the International AIDS Society* 20, (2017): 1.

16. Patel et al., "Social Media Use and HIV-Related Risk Behaviors in Young Black and Latino Gay and Bi Men and Transgender Individuals in New York City: Implications for Online Interventions," *Journal of Public Health* 93, no. 2 (2016): 388.

17. Sebastian Linnemayr et al., "Behavioral economics-based incentives supported by mobile technology on HIV knowledge and testing frequency among Latino/a men who have sex with men and transgender women: Protocol for a randomized pilot study to test intervention feasibility and acceptability," *Trials* 19, no. 1 (2018).

18. Scott D Rhodes et al., "Using Social Media to Increase HIV Testing Among Gay and Bisexual Men Who Have Sex With Men, and Transgender Persons: Outcomes From a Randomized Community Trial," *Clinical Infectious Diseases* 62, no. 11 (2016): 1450.

19. D. Ehrensaft, "From gender identity disorder to gender identity creativity: true gender self child therapy," *Journal of Homosexuality* 59, no. 3 (2012) 337-56.

20. Damien W. Riggs and Clare Bartholomaeus, "Gaslighting in the context of clinical interactions with parents of transgender children," *Sexual Relationship Therapy* 33, no. 4 (2018): 382-94.

21. RD Davies and B Kessel, "Gender Minority Stress, Depression, and Anxiety in a Transgender High School Student," *American Journal of Psychiatry* 174, no. 12 (2017): 1151-2.

22. Russell B. Toomey, Caitlin Ryan, and Rafael M. Diaz, "Gender-Nonconforming Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender Youth: School Victimization and Young Adult Psychosocial Adjustment," *Developmental Psychology* 46, no. 6 (2010): 1580-89.

23. Sarah Mountz, Moshoula Capous-Desyllas, and Elizabeth Pourciau, "'Because We're Fighting to Be Ourselves:' Voices from Former Foster Youth who are Transgender and Gender Expansive," *Child Welfare* 96, no. 1 (2018): 103-25.

bullying in schools, and the ethics of administering puberty-suppressing drugs²⁴ to minors who exhibit signs of gender variant behavior.²⁵ There is also ample information concerning the shifts in familial attachments of transgender people upon transition, and the ways children and intimate partners are impacted family shifts in dynamics.^{26 27 28}

More recently, articles concerning the effects of trans-exclusive bathroom laws²⁹ and the Trump administration's military ban³⁰ have begun to appear in the literature. Youth homelessness is also frequently studied, and social scientists and gender theorists alike have attempted to map the process of transgender identity formation and the effects of gender dysphoria on young people's wellbeing.^{31 32} To that end, researchers have taken up the task of developing various metrics in an effort to quantify and concretize gender differences, continuing a project that began with the emergence of "sexology" as a discipline over a century ago. Tellingly, I could not locate a single article devoted to determining the way that *cisgender* people come to develop their sense of gender as in line with their sex assigned at birth, indicating that the process by which one becomes cisgender, even where the term is named, remains largely unchallenged.

24. Jack Drescher and Jack Pula, "Ethical Issues Raised by the Treatment of Gender-Variant Prepubescent Children," *LGBT Bioethics: Visibility, Disparities, and Dialogue* 44, no. 5 (2014): S17-S22.

25. Some articles have utilized the term "gender expansive" and "gender diverse" as more positive alternatives to "variant."

26. Jory M. Catalpa and Jennifer k. McGuire, "Family Boundary Ambiguity Among Transgender Youth," *Family Relations* 67, (2018): 88-103.

27. Carla A. Pfeffer, "'Women's Work'? Women Partners of Transgender Men Doing Housework and Emotion Work," *Journal of Marriage and Family* 72, (2010): 165-83.

28. Sally Hines, "Intimate Transitions: Transgender Practices of Partnering and Parenting," *Sociology* 40, no. 2 (2006): 553-71.

29. Laura J. Wernick, Alex Kulick, and Matthew Chin, "Gender Identity Disparities in Bathroom Safety and Wellbeing among High School Students," *Journal of Youth Adolescence* 46, (2017): 917-30.

30. Andrew White, "Negating the Chance for Transgender Troops," *Military Technology* 41, no. 9 (2017): 6.

31. Scott Leibowitz and Annelou L.C. de Vries, "Gender dysphoria in adolescence," *International Review of Psychiatry* 28, no. 1 (2016): 21-35.

32. Jiska Ristori and Thomas D. Steensma, "Gender dysphoria in childhood," *International Review of Psychiatry* 28, no. 1 (2016): 13-20.

There is relatively little scholarship available that explores the role that new technologies, including YouTube channels, play in the way that trans people come to understand themselves, and make their experience of themselves intelligible to others. Presumably, the democratizing nature of self-publication via media feeds and video channels should have some kind of impact on the information available to questioning youth and adults alike, and open up spaces for discourse between people who would otherwise be relatively isolated to a local community, if they are able to find one. Work in this area is beginning to appear in the literature, but with the majority of available work dating less than three years old, it is clear that this field of study remains in its infancy, and necessitates further development.

In a 2015 article by Green, Bobrowicz, and Ang, authors conclude that the desire to share personal information and experiences with an anonymous public audience by way of YouTube videos “could indicate a desire to seek friendship, support and provide empathy,”³³ while Ingram et al.³⁴ identify social media more broadly as rife with potential for mass education of the public, and the reduction of microaggressions targeting transgender people. Eckstein³⁵ argues that the advent of the vlog has disrupted teleological accounts of transitioning as movement from birth assignment to a locus of “passability,” defined as the capacity to be consistently, automatically gendered correctly with the same consistency as a cisgender peer, without others becoming aware of their

33. Michael Green, Ania Bobrowicz, and Chee Siang Ang, “The lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender community online: discussions of bullying and self-disclosure in YouTube videos,” *Behaviour and Information Technology* 34, no. 7 (2015): p. 704-12.

34. Mercedes Ingram, Stacy Speedlin, Yuliya Cannon, and Ashley Prado, “A Seat at the Table: Using Social Media as a Platform to Resolve Microaggressions Against Transgender Persons,” *Journal of Creativity in Mental Health* 12, no. 3 (2017): p. 289.

35. Ace J. Eckstein, “Out of Sync: Complex Temporality in Transgender Men’s YouTube Transition Channels,” *QED: A Journal in LGBTQ Worldmaking* 5, no. 1 (2018): 24-47.

trans status. Laura Horak,³⁶ however, presents compelling arguments in opposition to Eckstein's conclusion, arguing that transition timelines align trans people's identity development with narratives of progress with a beginning and end, which oversimplifies the realities of transition as an ongoing process. As I will discuss, my findings supported many elements of both authors' arguments.

Most closely aligned with my own research objective is a 2017 article published by Cannon et al., in which five transgender adults shared their experiences with both benefits and harm of social media engagement. In their article, authors conclude that social media serves two primary roles: as a resource for needs that remain unmet in physical spaces, and to provide a "path to self and authenticity."³⁷ My work expands upon their conclusions by looking in detail at strategies that YouTube vloggers use to cultivate space to achieve the self-actualization that Cannon et al. identify. Rather than in-depth interviews, I am employing a method similar to Green, Bobrowicz, and Ang³⁸ in which a sample of YouTube videos produced by transgender vloggers are analyzed for the presence of common themes. Themes that reiterate consistently between multiple users over time are assigned greater relative saliency to people as a group; more context-specific instances may offer insight into the particulars of each user's experience, and provide useful points of comparison and opportunities for further investigation.

36. Laura Horak, "Trans on YouTube: Intimacy, Visibility, Temporality," *Transgender Studies Quarterly* 1, no. 4 (2014): pp. 578 - 580.

37. Yuliya Cannon et al., "Transition, Connection, Disconnection, and Social Media: Examining the Digital Lived Experiences of Transgender Individuals," *Journal of LGBT Issues in Counseling* 11, no. 2 (2017): pp. 68-87.

38. Michael Green, Ania Bobrowicz, and Chee Siang Ang, "The lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender community online: discussions of bullying and self-disclosure in YouTube videos," *Behaviour and Information Technology* 34, no. 7 (2015): p. 705.

Theoretical Framework

Intersections and Assemblages: the Necessity of a Multifaceted Perspective

Intersectionality

In 1991, Kimberlé Crenshaw³⁹ first proposed a new analytic method of critically engaging with forms of systemic oppression experienced by women of color, and assumes the experience and perspective of Black women as epistemologically valid and reliable. The word has since become a mainstay in the 21st century feminist lexicon, eagerly taken up by scholars, journalists, activists, and laypeople of all identities and social locations. Crenshaw's work has proven invaluable as a means of conceptualizing the different ways that oppressive forces manifest in response to each person's multifaceted social location, but her theory, or more specifically the ways that it has been applied, is not without its limitations, and should be engaged with critically.

Despite the ubiquity of intersectionality as a rhetorical tool in scholarly and popular publications alike, critiques are beginning to emerge in scholarship, many of which raise significant points of concern. Salem⁴⁰ cautions against the "obliteration" of the radical potential of intersectionality, and is wary of the role that an academy built on deeply oppressive foundations might play in pivoting discussions away from systemic critique and toward analyses of individual "diversity."⁴¹ Taking cues from Patricia Hill Collins, Salem takes care not to imply that academy and activism are incompatible projects. Salem aims her critique not at intersectionality per se, but at the ways that

39. Kimberlé Crenshaw, "Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence Against Women of Color," *Stanford Law Review* 43, no. 6 (1991): 1241-99.

40. Sara Salem, "Intersectionality and its discontents: Intersectionality as a traveling theory," *European Journal of Women's Studies* 25, no. 4 (2018): 403-18.

41. *Ibid.*, 406.

neoliberalism shapes conversations concerning intersectionality and its applications, a process she describes as one of “co-optation,”⁴² in which existing social mechanisms gradually subdue threatening paradigms, reshaping them over time into forms more compatible with the current regime. By Salem’s account, intersectionality was not a fractured concept at the start, but has failed to maintain its integrity beneath the weight of an entire culture that has become increasingly fixated on the individual, and hostile to systems-level interventions.

To illustrate her point, Salem points to the ways that “class” is increasingly construed in feminist scholarship as a particular social locus or “intersection” defined by one’s individual wealth and income, rather than a specific context within which social markers are constructed and contested.⁴³ In other words, problems arise when identity-components are cast as the brick and mortar of a static social construct and not as ongoing political projects in their own right. The problem isn’t that the poor are oppressed; it’s that we continue to allow systemic poverty to persist in the first place.

Chandra Mohanty summarizes the predicament that arises from a lack of systems-level, contextually-situated critiques (and meaningful interventions) by posing the question, “What happens to the key feminist construct of ‘the personal is political’ when the political [. . .] is reduced to the personal?”⁴⁴ This is a considerable challenge to what has become an established convention within feminist scholarship, albeit one resting on the assumption that incorporating the shared and distinct experiences of individuals as

42. *Ibid.*, 413.

43. *Ibid.*

44. Chandra Mohanty, “Transnational feminist crossings: On neoliberalism and radical critique,” *Signs* 38, no. 4 (2013): 971.

one facet of the political imagination is to the exclusion of analyses that concern themselves with the collective.

Ferree⁴⁵ alleges that a “theoretical mess” has been left in the wake of the myriad, often wildly differing applications of the concept to research. Rather than suggest scholars discard the term altogether, Ferree cites two collections—*Intersectionality as Theory and Practice*⁴⁶ and *Intersectionality: Origins, Contestations, Horizons*⁴⁷—as two rough schematics for rehabilitating the concept in scholarship. Personally, I empathize with Ferree’s hesitation to leap at the claim that intersectionality has outlived its usefulness. The contributions of Black feminism to scholarship are already too frequently overlooked, and the act of citation is politically charged. Disregarding intersectionality is a choice that borders on erasure, so I present an alternative means of conceptualizing the contributions of Crenshaw and her contemporaries, first presenting the work taken up by Collins and Bilge, and then offering an alternative means of imagining the theory.

In *Intersectionality as Theory and Practice*, Collins and Bilge assert that “intersectionality” is a concept best utilized not as a means of pure theorizing, or critiquing “power” in the abstract, but as “a tool for empowering people.”⁴⁸ Importantly, Collins and Bilge emphasize that conceptions of “intersectionality” as a theoretical lens for analyzing personal identity constitutes an overly-narrow usage, and that “...the mantra of ‘race, class, and gender’ has been so often repeated that it can become meaningless.”⁴⁹ Under Collins and Bilge’s more pragmatic concept of intersectionality-

45. Myra Marx Ferree, “Intersectionality as Theory and Practice,” *Contemporary Sociology* 47, no. 2 (2018): 127-32.

46. Patricia Hill Collins and Sirma Bilge, *Intersectionality* (Malden: Polity Press, 2016).

47. Anna Carastathis, *Intersectionality: Origins, Contestations, Horizons* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2016).

48. Collins and Bilge, *Intersectionality*, p. 36.

49. Collins and Bilge, 200-02.

as-praxis, “meaningless” may be interpreted as the lack of capacity to enact meaningful, systemic change, rather than a synonym for “nonsensical.” To illustrate their point, they cite the declining popularity and acceptance affirmative action as a means of remediating histories of oppression, and concurrent disengagement from employing structural analysis in favor of “diversity initiatives” that foreground “individual and cultural understandings of social problems” in favor of critiques that more broadly challenge the organization of society itself.⁵⁰ To that end, they make similar points as Salem and even Ferree—the issue lies not within the structure of the theory itself, but in the way it has been recast in order to better serve the needs of a culture now entirely organized around mythologies of rugged individualism, a project that runs counter to the aims of Black feminist scholarship.

Crenshaw herself has recently spoken up in an attempt to set the record back on track. In a keynote delivered at the 2016 Women of the World festival, she clarifies that the concept is intended to locate and remediate systems-level failures in scholarship. Put succinctly, “...intersectionality is not primarily about identity. It’s about the way structures make certain identities the consequence of and the vehicle for vulnerability.”⁵¹ Crenshaw’s understanding of the function of intersectionality in scholarship is hardly limited to simply recounting the experience of individuals as such. Its use is as a model for understanding the interplay between the markers we use to assign meaning and value to ourselves and each other, and the systems that produce them.

50. Ibid., 180-81.

51. Kimberlé Crenshaw, “Kimberlé Crenshaw – On Intersectionality – Keynote – WOW 2016,” *Southbank Centre*, March 14, 2016. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-DW4HLgYPIA>

Assemblages

With that taken into account, I offer the concept of assemblage as developed and applied to queer feminist scholarship by Jasbir Puar.⁵² Puar draws upon the assemblage as a means of “taking issue with queer theorizing that, despite (and perhaps because of) a commitment to an intersectional analytic, fails to interrogate the epistemological will to knowledge that invariably reproduces the disciplinary interests of the U.S. nation-state.”⁵³ Puar’s concern lies primarily with the ways that identity-oriented conceptions of queerness developed within Euro-American colonial regimes do not merely exist as a neutral social fact, but actively do work on a transnational level to elevate Euro-American states in opposition to a “third world” that is both repressed and perverse.

It is this transnational perspective that I find informs many critiques of intersectionality as it is applied in scholarship, but here Puar offers an inroad. Rather than envisioning a set of crisscrossing roads which are contiguous, stationary, replicable, and scalable, visions of assemblage conjure a loosely-bound set of cultural artifacts, events, and actors both human and nonhuman, that are not inherently or permanently intertwined, but have, for a time, congealed into something greater than the sum of their parts. There are no cogs in a grand, unified societal machine, only incidental, unstable social configurations that are as likely to arise from convenience or happenstance as overt intent.

The implication that identities are static things one possesses or occupies, and can therefore be interpreted in a formulaic, scalable way in order to explain social phenomena at the individual and societal level alike, is a significant shortcoming of

52. Jasbir Puar, “Queer Times, Queer Assemblages,” *Social Text* 23, nos. 3-4 (2005): 121-39.

53. Puar, “Queer Times,” 122.

“intersectionality” frameworks that concern themselves primarily with the formation of identity. By allowing space for the social categories that we engage with as identities to be unstable, the marriage of Puar’s assemblage with intersectional theory-as-praxis opens opportunities to address identities as events, ongoing happenings composed of an array of revolving elements that can be acted upon moment-by-moment.

More recently, anthropologist Anna Tsing has proposed a vision of late capitalist assemblage as the process by which “gatherings sometimes become ‘happenings,’ that is, greater than the sum of their parts,”⁵⁴ or alternately as “an open-ended entanglement of ways of being” in which “varied trajectories gain a hold on each other, but indeterminacy matters.”⁵⁵ Tsing’s formulation of assemblage is as readily applicable to a digital ecosystem as a tangible one, and is amenable to a social landscape dominated by fleeting interactions between anonymous parties, one-way relationships, and disorderly temporalities, all of which are continually converted to financial capital by way of search and recommendation algorithms that depend on diligently tracking and analyzing usage data.

The loosely entangled web of human and nonhuman participants at work in YouTube’s worldbuilding at every scale is precisely the sort of “patchy”⁵⁶ milieu that Tsing’s theory is intended to describe. Participants’ interests converge at a specific site (in this case, a website) where “wild” resources that cannot be reproduced at a grand scale (users’ time and attention) are not harvested, but *translated* into forms intelligible to capital (“views,” and “clicks”). Users who participate in this system of their own volition

54. Anna Tsing, *The Mushroom at the End of the World*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2015), 23.

55. Tsing, *The Mushroom*, 83.

56 Tsing, *The Mushroom*, 304.

by “monetizing” their channel are effectively completing Tsing’s vision of “salvage accumulation,”⁵⁷ whereby a spontaneous network (an assemblage) forms as diverse interests intersect and become entangled.

A Hybrid Approach

Under this combined framework, it is possible to address the lives and experience of transgender people from perspectives other than those that rely on conventional opposition between “biological” sex and “cultural” gender, or those that presuppose identity is a stable, lifelong object rather than a continual process of “becoming” as an assemblage model would suggest. A static identity model fails to capture the ways that gender is, in fact, enacted and constituted by way of one’s bodily configuration and comportment, and motivated by desire, which is itself always embedded in local and, as I will argue, virtual political entanglements. I find it useful to imagine a set of elements that are deeply intertwined, but still clearly differentiable, as individual plies in a length of braided rope. In their present configuration, each draws its epistemic strength and legitimacy from its interrelationship to the others, giving rise to meaning in ways that are fairly consistent across time and place, always open-ended and subject to change.

The apparent naturalness of each constitutive strand is a product of its close entanglement with the others, but closer examination reveals that entanglements are a messy affair, and they resist neat descriptors and grand unifying theories. To engage meaningfully with intersectionality is to recognize that this messiness signals the potential to disrupt or redirect machinations of power in order to produce more equitable outcomes.

⁵⁷ Ibid., 134.

CHAPTER THREE: METHODOLOGY

Research Objective

The objective of this project is to broaden the scholarship's knowledge base concerning transgender people and digital communities, and to offer an account of both the trends and the particulars that may warrant further inquiry. In accordance with that goal, I adopted a qualitative approach. Initial data gathering and interpretation were conducted following grounded theory methodological guidelines, first proposed by Glaser and Strauss,⁵⁸ though my interpretive frame amends Glaser and Strauss's conception of grounded methodologies slightly, adopting a constructivist stance more in line with the assemblage framework that informs my analysis.

Methodology

Grounded Theory

As the scholarship concerning LGBTQ lives in digital communities is still in its infancy, few robust theories are available for deductive analysis. Therefore, I have adopted grounded theory as my methodology. The object of qualitative research based in grounded theory is to develop potential theoretical insights inductively, beginning with a close textual analysis of a corpus of information.

58. Barney Glaser and Anselm Strauss, *The Discovery of Grounded Theory: Strategies for Qualitative Research* (New Brunswick: Transaction Publishers, 1967).

Originally conceived in the 1960s by Barney Glaser and Anselm Strauss,⁵⁹ grounded theory was developed in an effort concretize social theory by “grounding” it in patterns that recur in a data set. A researcher adopting this stance considers theories “emergent,” originating within data themselves, and the specific implications of this assumption vary depending on one’s approach. It is possible, for example, to ascribe too much authority to a body of “data” as an objective entity.

Joey Sprague⁶⁰ has argued that uncritical adherence to the tenets of grounded theory becomes problematic if the intent of a researcher is to somehow minimize bias; in fact, she alleges that the epistemological assumptions that support claims that theory is more reliable when “grounded” in data “bear a remarkable resemblance to the assumptions of positivism.”⁶¹ Sprague expresses further concern that researchers who assume they are “building up” from “raw” data might actually be *more* at risk of overlooking individual and systemic bias in their work.⁶² The earliest work by Glaser and Strauss is certainly guilty of working under such assumptions. They rebut allegations of “unbounding relativism” by suggesting that a researcher is capable of “correcting” the presence of participant subjectivity and bias.⁶³

Sprague’s concerns regarding the extent to which a methodology informed by grounded theory truly disrupts positivist assumptions are compelling enough to bear addressing. She is entirely correct that there is nothing inherent to a grounded theory methodology that definitively sets it apart from a methodology grounded in the positivist

59. Glaser and Strauss, *Grounded Theory*, 79.

60. Joey Sprague, *Feminist Methodologies for Critical Researchers* (New York: Roman & Littlefield, 2016), 157.

61. Sprague, 157.

62. Sprague, 159.

63. Glaser and Strauss, *Grounded Theory*, 68.

tradition. That being said, there is nothing inherent to the grounded theory approach to preclude differentiation, either. Kathy Charmaz, whose work is, incidentally, the subject of a substantial portion of Sprague’s critique, offers some clarification. Charmaz contrasts an *objectivist* approach to grounded theory, in which researchers assume “data” exist apart from social context, awaiting “discovery,” to a *constructivist* approach, in which knowledge production is considered an interpretive project.⁶⁴ This is the position I have adopted in designing my methodology. Specifically, I have chosen to make use of feminist standpoint theory.

Standpoint Epistemology

Though the use of secretive algorithms to curate search results precludes producing generalizable research findings, it also demonstrates the necessity of acknowledging that researchers are intractably bound up in the machinations of power, and cannot position themselves as impartial knowers by somehow ceasing to be social actors. In recognition of that, the methodology that informs my data analysis was designed in accordance with the primary objectives of standpoint theory as described by Sandra Harding.⁶⁵⁶⁶

First, researchers employing standpoint theory are expected to acknowledge that “what one does both enables and limits what one can know.”⁶⁷ This claim is frequently misunderstood as suggesting it is impossible for one person to empathize with another person’s experience of oppression if they have not also experienced it themselves. In

64. Kathy Charmaz, *Constructing Grounded Theory: A Practical Guide Through Qualitative Analysis* (Thousand Oaks: SAGE Publications Ltd., 2006) pp. 129 – 32.

65. Sandra Harding, *The Feminist Standpoint Theory Reader* (New York: Routledge, 2004).

66. Sandra Harding, “Standpoint Theories: Productively Controversial,” *Hypatia* 24, no. 4 (2009): 193.

67. Harding, “Standpoint Theories,” 194.

scholarship, the mistaken assumption seems to be that feminist researchers are not permitted to pursue research along the same lines. The root of the confusion seems to be the assumption that Harding is speaking to the validity of the end product of a research project. On the contrary, she is arguing that it is during the initial formulation of one's methodological and epistemic choices that researchers are most vulnerable to leaving questions of social power unchallenged.

It was in the initial sampling phase of this project that I encountered the very scenario that Harding cautions against overlooking. Upon reviewing the first set of sources selected for analysis, I noticed a disappointing, but unsurprising trend. The initial batch of user content presented by YouTube's algorithm was overwhelmingly white, which necessitated a more deliberate sampling method to accrue a more robust, racially-diverse sample of user-generated content. Searches for "trans person of color vlog" revealed a vlogging community just as active and engaged as the predominantly-white cohort associate, but who were, for the most part, excluded from search results when queries were racially unmarked. As I continued to review available literature, I found that other authors have also had to grapple with the unmarked dominance of whiteness in YouTube vlogging communities.^{68 69 70} It should be noted that the systemic bias that manifests through Google's search algorithms was *not* addressed or questioned by *any* of the white vloggers included in the sample. Whether white vloggers' conspicuous silence

68. Ace J. Eckstein, "Out of Sync: Complex Temporality in Transgender Men's YouTube Transition Channels," *QED: A Journal in LGBTQ Worldmaking* 5, no. 1 (2018): 29.

69. Laura Horak, "Trans on YouTube: Intimacy, Visibility, Temporality," *Transgender Studies Quarterly* 1, no. 4 (2014): 576.

70. Tobias Raun, "Video Blogging as a Vehicle of Transformation: Exploring the Intersection Between Trans Identity and Information Technology," *International Journal of Cultural Studies* 18, no. 3 (2015): pp. 365 – 378.

on the matter belies ignorance or tacit acceptance is a serious question that warrants further investigation as scholarship continues to develop.

To that end, Harding states that the objective of research informed by standpoint theory is to “explain what oppressed groups need and want to know.”⁷¹ In context, Harding is referring to the need to interrogate unequal distribution of “poverty and misery” as opposed to “pleasure and riches,”⁷² by beginning with the standpoint of groups who are disproportionately subject to the former. In my analysis, I also apply this axiom to the pleasures of belonging to an in-group community with a distinct culture. As I will demonstrate, the concerns of transgender vloggers extend beyond “poverty and misery,” and many of the personalities included in the sample spent considerable time discussing ways of cultivating self-love and resilience within their chosen communities. In this case, starting from the “standpoint of the oppressed” entails accepting that the day-to-day concerns of individual transgender people do not revolve around the behavior of cisgender people, and provide more than insight into oppression alone; there are also always in-group strategies of resistance.

Third, Harding asserts that “a standpoint is an achievement, not an ascription,” and, it is a collective one, not an individual one.”⁷³ In other words, a standpoint is a means of conceptualizing the world that renders invisible social processes visible, and grapples with the inequalities that are brought to light in the process. “Standpoint” is not synonymous with “perspective” as in the lay usage. It is a collage of insights and means

71. Harding, “Standpoint Theories,” 195.

72 Harding, “Standpoint Theories,” 195.

73 Ibid.

of knowledge-production that contests disciplinary boundaries, and emerges as people come together and cultivate a collective political vision.

Methods

Sampling

Aggregating a representative sample of YouTube videos is a challenging task, and because of the nature of search engines and tailored content. (This issue is addressed in depth in the following discussion of sample limitations.) Green et al.⁷⁴ made use of Google’s Application Programming Interface (API), a function available to developers or other third parties who wish to make use of the bulk data logged in YouTube’s databases.⁷⁵ This method allowed researchers to efficiently pull a specific subset of videos relevant to their needs, but this interface was unfortunately inaccessible to a lay researcher.

To approximate sampling methods established in prior work, initial videos were identified from the results of a manual search for videos tagged with keywords “transgender vlog.” The initial search was tailored to recently-active users by limiting results to videos published no more than 1 year prior. Results were further limited to videos less than 10 minutes in length, for practicality’s sake, and to facilitate examination of a wider sample set. A final limitation to eligible videos was the total subscriber count of the channel producing them. The search results were listed by subscriber count in descending order, and sampling began at < 10,000 subscribers, in order to exclude creators who benefit financially from their channel. Because the aim of this analysis is to

74. Green, Bobrowicz, and Ang, “Bullying and self-disclosure,” (2015), 705.

75. “YouTube Data API,” Google Developers, accessed March 2, 2019, <https://developers.google.com/youtube/v3/>.

explore means of building community and not an entertainment career, those who make a living from their videos were unsuitable for this particular line of inquiry.

After collecting an initial set of approximately 30 videos, additional videos were sourced from publishers' channels, drawing no more than 5 videos per user. For creators who were especially prolific or had been publishing consistently for years, selections were made on the basis of view count. In these cases, the top 5 most-viewed videos from each channel were sampled. Ultimately, a total of 50 videos from 19 content creators were transcribed and coded. Audio from each video was fed into a transcription software that generated initial transcripts, which I then manually proofed and edited, correcting errors, and including supplemental information. Supplementation consisted noting visual cues, including title cards, changes in setting, text displayed on-screen, shifts in body language, gesture, and tone, all indicated by enclosure in square brackets, e.g. “[laughs, briefly moving out of frame].”

Limitations

There are several factors that must be considered when taking a sample of content from YouTube. By design, YouTube functions a combination archive, amateur platform, educational resource, social network, and occupation, depending on an individual user's needs and interests. While this versatility is the key to YouTube's success in drawing a large user base, the key to its financial success is advertising revenue. and in an effort to ensure users' individual needs are met, the platform has long made use of “Big Data,” referring to the totality of billions of users' browsing habits, recorded and analyzed by AI software in order to optimize individuals' browsing experience by providing a steady

stream of “recommended” content⁷⁶ with the intention of maximizing users’ time viewing content (and therefore ads).

YouTube employs this technology in order to maximize the time viewers spend clicking through video content, with each page loaded generating a fraction of Google’s annual ad revenue, which totaled \$116 billion in 2018.⁷⁷ YouTube tracks users’ browsing history, the length of time they spend on particular videos,^{78 79} and their tendency to rate particular producers’ and genres’ videos “thumbs up” and “thumbs down” (which are judged as a ratio, visualized just beneath the playback window).

I must also note that because the content of YouTube videos about trans people’s experiences are subject to the same algorithmic prioritization as any others, creators are disincentivized to produce content that fails to retain viewers’ attention for the duration of the video, which does limit the extent to which producers are free to be candid about their lives. Subjects like murder and assault rates against trans people were never raised by vloggers in my sample, though milder offenses including inappropriate questions and family/workplace rejection were commonplace. There are several possible explanations for this; first, that these videos do exist, but were not favored in search results. These might be subjects that users wish to avoid discussing or exposing their followers to, in order to avoid potentially triggering traumatic reactions. Or, it could simply be a sampling coincidence. The only way to explore this question is to conduct more in-depth research with video creators—another likely fruitful avenue for investigation.

76. Paul Covington, Jay Adams, and Emre Sargin, “Deep Neural Networks for YouTube Recommendations,” in *Proceedings of the 10th Annual ACM Conference on Recommender Systems*, (New York: ACM, 2016), 191-198.

77. Alphabet, Inc., “Alphabet Annual Report 2018,” Press Release, (February 1, 2019).

78. “YouTube Now: Why We Focus on Watch Time,” YouTube Creator Blog, August 10, 2012, <https://youtube-creators.googleblog.com/2012/08/youtube-now-why-we-focus-on-watch-time.html>

79. “YouTube Search: Now Optimized for Time Watched,” YouTube Creator Blog, October 12, 2012.

Ethics

Throughout my reporting, I will refer to vloggers by pseudonyms. This choice was actually one of the most difficult I faced in conducting this study. On one hand, the chosen name of a trans person is a serious component of their identity, one that many have fought tooth and nail to achieve recognition of. On the other, potentially exposing small-scale vloggers to a wider audience than they are aware of (especially in material that will ultimately be permanently archived) is also cause for ethical concern. I ultimately opted to make use of pseudonyms, as unwanted exposure carries more potential for direct harm than making use of an alternative name.

Coding

Codes were initially generated as transcripts were reviewed and annotated, and were revised over time, combining closely-related codes as necessary, and further refining other codes as I acquired a more nuanced understanding of emergent patterns. Each section of video was parsed phrase-by-phrase according to the subject at hand; examples of initial codes included “firsthand experience,” “relationships,” “hormone replacement therapy” (HRT), and “dysphoria.” Sections of text were assigned multiple codes where conceptual overlap occurred.

The three most frequently occurring codes were “humor,” “bodies,” and “sharing lived experience,” a categorical triad that aptly sums up the foundations of the “vlog” genre itself, and also encompasses three especially significant dimensions of transgender people’s day-to-day lives. For example, as I discuss in Chapter Four, “humor” was hardly ever employed simply to give users a reason to keep watching. It was put to work toward achieving specific ends: to draw attention to the absurdity of asking another person point-

blank about their genitalia, to diffuse tension surrounding heavier subject matter, and to make intimidating topics like medical transition (HRT, FFS, SRS/GRS/GCS) more approachable.

Clustered under the category “resilience strategies” were the codes for “humor,” “sharing experience,” “community engagement,” “positive self-talk,” “self-acceptance,” and “educating others,” which, between them, accounted for 300 units of code. The information sorted according to these six categories provided fodder for subsequent analysis of trends in videos. I also explored the possibility of coding for affect and emotion, but found that there was not as much affective richness to vlog posts as there is in spontaneous, face-to-face interactions, so these codes were ultimately of limited relevance to my objective.

Interpretation

After repeated coding cycles, I turned my attention to the available literature concerning my research topic. As I have noted previously, scholarship that seeks to understand the ways that YouTube serves as a social hub for transgender people is sparse, and the question of collective resilience has yet to be adequately addressed, which confirmed that this question would be the appropriate avenue for an exploratory, qualitative project. I reviewed quotes clustered under codes, paying close attention to those that frequently overlapped, such as “humor” and “body.” From these observations, I began to formulate tentative conclusions. I focused on the functionality of video content more so than the content itself. Keeping the figure of the assemblage in mind, I took care to remain attuned to embedded mechanisms that facilitate the “becoming of a becoming.”

Here, the “becoming” in question is the continual formation and reformation of community, made possible through collaboration between loosely affiliated, entangled agents. I have addressed YouTube’s communities of vloggers and their viewers as an ecosystem that persists, continually adapts, and presents potential (albeit limited) to transform society. In the following chapter, I will provide an overview of my findings, highlighting a set particularly salient features I identified across the vlog entries sampled. In Chapter Five, I contextualize these findings relative to a three-dimensional model of social resilience⁸⁰ in order to draw tentative conclusions as to how characteristics of YouTube vlogs facilitate and/or undermine work to cultivate more robust resilience at the community-level.

⁸⁰ Markus Keck and Patrick Sakdapolrak, “What is Social Resilience? Lessons Learned and Ways Forward,” *Erdkunde* 67 no. 1 (2013), 5-19.

CHAPTER FOUR: FINDINGS

Standardized format

As I reviewed the entries sampled for this project, I found that, regardless of their actual content, the overwhelming majority of vlogs posted to YouTube share five narrative components that flow roughly in order: (1) Salutation, (2) Stated purpose, (3) Apology (optional), (4) Sign-off, and (5) Self-promotion. Each video followed a rough sequence in which vloggers greeted their viewers, and established their reason for posting their video. At this point, if they have been inactive for some period of time, vloggers would occasionally apologize for or otherwise acknowledge their absence, frequently accompanied by a promise to their viewers to return to regularly posting content. After delivering the bulk of the video's topical material, vloggers concluded videos with a farewell to their viewers until next time, occasionally taking time to express gratitude for their viewership. Farewells typically segue into a standard prompt encouraging viewers to "comment, like, and subscribe," three features of YouTube's interface that allow user input to influence individual videos' and channels' priority in search results.

The highly interpersonal qualities of vlogs distinguish them from more representational genres, and it follows that a video format designed as an analogue to face-to-face connection would parallel a face-to-face conversation in its structure. Vloggers in the sample heavily favored addressing their viewers informally and in the

aggregate. “Hey guys,” was by far the most common greeting, though referring to viewers simply as “YouTube/YouTubers” was also common.

Addressing viewers as “you (guys)” suggests rapport, while the collective designator “YouTube” signals “in-group” membership and fosters a sense of belonging. Extending a personal greeting (and farewell), addressing viewers in the second person, and apologizing for periods of absence/inactivity are all actions that reinforce a sense of togetherness and accountability to one another, even between parties that are not only anonymous, but who in all likelihood will never actually meet. These conventions of form unique to the vlog are integral, not only to maintaining its intelligibility as a genre, but to maintain the possibility for the genre to exist in the first place. The vlog as a phenomenon is therefore both a precondition and a result of its own becoming, a digital assemblage of fleeting, intersecting interests and entanglements.

Humor

Humorous content was the most commonly-coded category at 75 instances, and overlapped with mentions of “body” on 15 instances. This was often in the context of self-deprecation when vloggers share “body reveal” videos. While some research has found that self-deprecation plays a role in cultivating “intergroup relations,”⁸¹ there remains the reality that vloggers included in the sample also shared accounts of how difficult grappling with negative body image and low self-esteem can be for a person coping with gender dysphoria:

One reason why [I hate being transgender] is because you always look for something that, you could like, ‘oh, I’m a man,’ or like you look for like a

81. Morgan Ellithorpe, Sarah, Esralew, and Robert Holbert, “Putting the Self in Self-Deprecation: When Deprecating Humor About Minorities is Acceptable,” *Humor – International Journal of Humor Research* 27, no. 3 (2014), 401-422.

flaw in your body, when there's like nothing to actually look at. Like you will try and clock yourself. — 'Jade'

Another vlogger offered a similar account, acknowledging that transgender people tend to be much harder on themselves and their personal appearance than others:

Um, yeah, I'm still trying to have the FFS process, okay, that surgery done. Umm, now some people tell me that, I don't, they don't think I need it, and I kind of see that differently, you know? [. . .] Like I was having a conversation with one transgender male to female, and I think she doesn't need it. She, she thinks that she does, and she thinks I don't need it. And I think that I do. — 'Mel'

Humor also served as a means of responding to instances of discrimination and inappropriate treatment. Here, a trans man discussing inappropriate questions to ask transgender responds to people who ask for his birth name:

Not gonna tell you, cause 1. It's confidential, and 2. I have to kill you. I'm not going to jail over you, so don't ask. — 'Kamal'

Here, humor provides a viewer-friendly vehicle for Kamal to express his frustration through hyperbole, simultaneously recognizing the gravity of the offense and rhetorically distancing himself from the offender, by dismissing them as not worth the consequences.

Lived Experience

The “vlogger” format is a genre that is, by definition, devoted to sharing personal experiences with a public audience, so it came as no surprise that the second most frequently applied code was “Shared experience.” Vloggers shared a wealth of firsthand experience, especially concerning HRT, surgical procedures and subsequent recovery, as well as their experience of self-discovery, and coming out to friends and family. As a result, transgender vloggers have aggregated a massive archive of collective, experiential knowledge within the span of a single decade. Importantly, no vlogger included in my sample claimed that their experience was more universal or “correct” than others. On the

contrary, vloggers dedicated considerable time and attention to reiterating that everyone experiences their transition differently, and that all people have a right to self-determination. The account of transgender experience that has arisen from aggregated, collective knowledge is a far cry for the state of affairs identified by Sandy Stone, in which medical institutions hold authority in the absolute, and insist that the experience of being transgender must be expressed as a correctible pathology.⁸²

Positive Self-talk

Cultivating a microcosm of positivity and support was a key motivator behind many of the vlog entries studied. One vlogger, ‘Caleb,’ explains the importance of cultivating positivity at the start of a vlog entry devoted to identifying ways to love oneself:

It’s really easy to pretend to be super self-confident and super happy all the time [online]. I’m not always happy. Like I just want to make a space online where I can be positive and happy, and have this influence that doesn’t happen in real life. You know, there’s not always going to be a person in your life who is constantly happy and constantly giving you positive vibes and that’s something that I really want and need. So I decided to create that. — ‘Caleb’

In other instances, the onus for expressing positivity is to cope with misfortune. Comedy vlogger ‘Stella’ shares, in an unusually somber entry discussing a series of recent events that have proven challenging for her:

I know in my heart that I’m a good person. I know that in my heart. I do, I do. I remind myself of that every day. [. . .] And things will get better. Things will get better, for *all of us*. — ‘Stella’

The final gesture to include her viewers in her promise to herself—that all of their circumstances *will* improve—invites audiences to identify with Stella

82. Stone, “The ‘Empire’ Strikes Back,” 3.

The Ubiquity of Whiteness

As discussed previously in Chapter Three, search queries that are racially unmarked consistently return results in which white vloggers are over-represented to a troubling degree, and this phenomenon remained unacknowledged among the white vloggers whose works I examined. Although this topic was not addressed by the trans people of color whose content I sampled either, Diamond, a vlogger and participant in a recent study published by Raun,⁸³ shared a personal account of what happens when racial stereotyping bleeds into digital media landscapes. Referring to a hypothetical white trans woman vlogger: “She gets all the juicy, good, wholesome questions because she is sweet and white la-la-la, I get all the hard-core, hip-hop ‘How big is your cock’ questions because I’m a good old angry Black woman.”

Here, Diamond’s intellectual capacity to address complex, “juicy” questions from viewers goes unrecognized, as viewers (un)consciously assume a white woman is the more authoritative source. This particular scenario is yet another iteration of the same anti-Black propaganda that has been disseminated among the public for centuries, in the interest of preserving white supremacy. According to white supremacist ideology, a person’s sexuality and intellectual capacity are diametrically opposed traits. This allegedly zero-sum relationship between flesh and intellect lays a convenient, quasi-logical foundation for common stereotypes of white and Black people that persist today.

If intelligence and sexuality are negatively correlated, then it follows that those who are intellectually inferior are necessarily hypersexual. As a corollary, higher degrees

83. Tobias Raun, “Video Blogging as a Vehicle of Transformation: Exploring the Intersection Between Trans Identity and Information Technology,” *International Journal of Cultural Studies* 18, no. 3 (2015): 375.

of sexual inhibition (historically coded as a matter of “willpower” for white men, and “modesty” for white women) would reliably indicate superior intellect. Both sides of this racist illogic must be taken into account when considering Diamond’s experience as a popular YouTube vlogger. She is simultaneously discounted as an intellectual authority, and objectified, reduced to an Othered body, and those two processes are inextricable.

Taking this historical legacy into account, it becomes possible to more readily locate the unspoken presence of white normativity in transition vlogging, even in the absence of overt recognition on video producers’ part. Consider the following excerpt from Meghan, who is a white woman:

I had my nose done, because it got broke. Other than that, this [gestures up and down torso] is all natural. I had my boobs done because it was part of the package, and I didn’t go ridiculously large—small D, large C—that’s uh, it.

So that’s for all you guys out there who are gonna start wanking off to this. Yes, I’m saying it now, you’re gonna start masturbating over these [she leans forward slightly, giving a glimpse of cleavage before leaning back again], which I’m not going to show very much of, because I don’t want to hear ‘you have really nice tits,’ or whatever. — ‘Meghan’

Earlier in the same vlog update, Meghan shared her discomfort with trans women who engage in frequent, casual sex, which she interprets as a misguided attempt to validate their womanhood. She concludes by inviting viewers to ask her questions for subsequent videos, at which point she specifies that her sex life is the one topic that is not “fair game.”

Here, the specter of whiteness is present not in Meghan’s aversion to being objectified, fetishized, or subject to crass commentary *per se*, as these *are* common forms of oppression to which both cis and trans women are subjected, and must cope with daily. The workings of whiteness are present in subtext, beneath the thick veneer of plausible

deniability afforded by the reality that she *is* addressing very real, legitimate boundaries that cisgender people often violate. Meghan justifies her breast augmentation by distancing herself from the image of a comically large-breasted woman. And while her comment may not be framed in explicit racial terms, anytime large breasts and/or buttocks are presented to comedic effect (“ridiculous”), it is difficult not to recall the kidnapping, enslavement, and abuse of Sara Baartman,⁸⁴ a South African Khoikhoi woman who was stolen from her home in the early 19th century, at the age of 21, by William Dunlop, an English ship surgeon, and Henrik Cezar, a Dutch colonist.⁸⁵

‘Aaliyah,’ a vlogger who is a Black woman, also engaged with the “perverts” of YouTube who she assumed would eventually find her channel and view her videos for the sake of self-gratification, especially since the video in question was, in Aaliyah’s words, a boob update. Note that she adopts a different stance than Meghan in her rebuttal:

...I just want to throw a disclaimer out there. You guys, this is just a educational video just to show my girls, what my body is doing on hormones, just so you guys can get some education and just see an inspiration from me and my channel. You know, that's why my whole channel was made and based off of anyway. You guys know I love talking about trans topics and changes and things like that.

So again, I know there's going to be perverts and people out there who's gonna like this video, just to see my little titties. But hey, it is what it is and I love them. I love my body. I love the way the 'mones is filling me out, girl.

Aaliyah recognizes that by making herself and her body visible to a faceless public, she may be sexualized without her knowledge or consent. But she makes no move to justify

84. “Sara ‘Saartjie’ Baartman,” South African History Online, last modified June 11, 2018.

<https://www.sahistory.org.za/people/sara-saartjie-baartman>

84. Dunlop and Cezar went on to put Sara on display in freak shows, locking her in a cramped metal cage for hours at a time, forced her to stand on display in the nude and bare her breasts and genitals for onlookers. After enduring five years of abuse, Sara died at only 26 years old, and was not returned home until the French government *finally* agreed to expatriate her remains for proper burial in 2002, 187 years later than her kidnappers allegedly promised.

her decision to share her body candidly with her viewers, nor does she grant the “perverts” in the crowd any say over what she does or does not choose to share. Like Christine Jorgensen, Meghan’s stance happens to appeal to white ideals of feminine modesty, which gives her an “out” that is inaccessible to women of color subject to the same fetishization. In contrast, there is no hegemonic narrative for a woman of color to prove herself chaste, so Aaliyah’s only option is to persist, and take what joy she can in loving her body, and sharing that love with the world.

Temporal Complexity

A plurality of vlog entries documented a vlogger’s transition “milestones” set relative to some initial intervention, most commonly marked by beginning HRT. This lends support to Laura Horak’s claim that transition vlogs are predominantly organized according to “hormone time.”⁸⁶ Put simply, “hormone time” refers to a particular kind of linear temporality, endemic to YouTube transition vlogs. According to Horak, when a vlogger’s accounts of their transition begin with the first dose of hormones, are described as a set of steps progressing toward an undefined future point, and their updates are marked relative to that time (e.g. “Vlog update: [N] months on T”), a vlogger is organizing their transition experience along “hormone time.”

Horak recognizes the benefits of ascribing a *telos* to one’s transition, particularly that the capacity to envision a future that can and will be realized through steady progress is a precondition to hoping, and hoping is what tends to keep an oppressed people alive. At the same time, she problematizes its universality. A progress-oriented conception of transition does raise troubling questions. If a person’s transition has a beginning and an

86. Laura Horak, “Trans on YouTube: Intimacy, Visibility, Temporality,” *Transgender Studies Quarterly* 1, no. 4 (2014): pp. 578 - 580.

end, what constitutes progress along that timeline? Is the progression an inevitability, or could a person become indefinitely “stuck” or regress in their transition if they lost access to healthcare, or were unable to come out for their own safety?

Upon reviewing the sample set for this project, it appeared that signifying one’s transition in terms of hormone time remains par for the course in transgender vlogging circles, as nearly every transition update was titled as she describes, “[N] months on” hormones. ‘Stella,’ a longtime comedy vlogger, indicates some degree of self-awareness of this trope as she subverts conventions in her very first hormone update, ten years and nine months into HRT:

Well, I’ve been on hormones now for ten years and nine months. And this is my very first update. Let’s get this started by talking about some things that *haven’t* changed over the last ten years and nine months.

Stella goes on to identify her odd sense of humor, her love of cooking and wine, and her inability to dance as traits she has retained over time, before acknowledging more conventional changes associated with estrogen therapy, namely softening skin, hip and breast enlargement, and increased confidence. She then agrees to discuss the “bad stuff,” or the “negatives” of her experience thus far. Stella adopts a subdued demeanor as she confides in her audience:

I would say that the biggest disappointment to me, I mean the biggest disappointment to me in the past almost eleven years—and honestly I’m ashamed to admit this—but in the year 2009... I lost the ability to parallel park my car.

Will you please help me out? Please. Please. Just come over here and do this for me. Please. Please.

In both of these passages, Stella affectionately parodies and disrupts the organizing logics of “hormone time.” First, by opting to title this her “very first update,”

after nearly eleven years of therapy, and then by leading with a list of traits that have remained unchanged across a lifetime, and have little to nothing to do with hormone replacement therapy, or, for that matter, any other mode of transition. In the second passage, Stella again destabilizes “hormone time” logic by contrasting narratives of an orderly, progressive transition to her personal brand of nonsense humor. She toys with the expectation her transition should flow as a hero’s journey, rife with conflict, destined for a satisfying resolution, and uses her audience’s presumed anticipation for plot details as the setup for her punchlines. Her deft use of parody lends validity to Horak’s conclusion that hormone time remains *the* organizing logic of transition, but, importantly, suggests that there may be more nuance at work than meets the eye.

CHAPTER FIVE: DISCUSSION

Social Resilience: Definition and Application

In this chapter, I present my initial results in conversation with a working theory of “social resilience” proposed by Markus Keck and Patrick Sakdapolrak.⁸⁷ The authors outline three modes of social resilience, each distinguished by their temporal orientation (*ex post* vs. *ex ante*), scope (short vs. long-term), degree of change (low, medium, or high), and ultimate outcome (Table 1):

Tab. 1: Three capacities of social resilience

	Coping capacities	Adaptive capacities	Transformative capacities
Response to risk	Ex-post	Ex-ante	Ex-ante
Temporal scope	Short-term	Long-term	Long-term
Degree of change	Low, status quo	Medium, incremental change	High, radical change
Outcome	Restoration of present level of well-being	Security of future well-being	Enhancement of present and future well-being

(Source: Keck and Sakdapolrak, "Social Resilience," 10.)

87. Keck and Sakdapolrak, “What is Social Resilience?”, 5-19.

The social resilience model allows the concept of resilience to transcend any one individual's capacity to "bounce back," understood instead as "three dimensions of agency that can be found in principle among all actors at all scales."⁸⁸

This conception of resilience bridges the lived experience of the individual and the collective (without giving primacy to either), and will lend structure to the following assessment of my research findings. In brief, YouTube appears to be rife with opportunity for enhancing users' coping and adaptive capacities, but the potential to cultivate "high, radical change" to improve present and future well-being is less clear due to the nature of the platform, but is locatable nonetheless.

Coping Capacities

The first set of practices I identify are those that work in some capacity to restore a previous state of well-being in the wake of perturbation. The "threats" that are best addressed in this capacity are imminently present, and can be dealt with using resources immediately available. In a virtual social ecosystem, "immediate threats" may encompass hostile anonymous comments, "real life" events that inform a video's content, or, at the grandest scale, instances in which content is censored, demonetized, or otherwise penalized by site moderators. In response to disruptions like these, vloggers countered with positive self-talk, and by reaching out to their community for support.

Not trans enough?

Endemic to any community of trans people is gender dysphoria, and all of its discontents. Uncertainty if one is "trans enough" to warrant inclusion in the wider community was an experience that several vloggers shared:

88. Keck and Sakdapolrak, "Social Resilience," 11.

When you're coming out as trans, you kind of feel like you have to prove to the world that you're trans enough to transition or something. — 'Krista'

Some people look at me and they're like, 'you can't really be trans if you haven't experienced gender dysphoria,' and I kind of have to look back, and be like... yeah you can, I mean, I'm on hormones, I've been on testosterone for over two years, I've had my top surgery. I'm *pretty* sure I'm trans... — 'Kyle'

...my first year of transitioning [. . .] I was really hard on myself. Like, I was really, like really hard. Like I really put a lot of pressure on myself. I was really self-conscious about a lot of things, you know, because your first year you're really trying to figure out a lot. — 'Aaliyah'

The idea that one may not be “trans enough” to deserve to be taken seriously or pursue transition is not exactly new, as the entire point of clinically regulating transition in the first place was to determine precisely that. Genealogically speaking, the notion may be placed in the same clade as other tropes that transgender people are deceitful, delusional, or some volatile combination of the two.

Kyle, Krista, and Aaliyah all present similar concerns, though each manifests slightly differently. In Krista's case, she speaks of having to “prove to the world” that her identity and self-expression are sufficient to justify the choice to transition, particularly because she is a self-described “tomboy.” Aaliyah interprets her self-criticism and doubts as growing pains, the result of “pressure” to transition, in her words, “the right way,” which she describes as a compromise between being true to herself and having realistic expectations, that change will not—and should not—be an overnight process. Kyle is somewhat different, as he personally does not experience dysphoria; in his case, he argues that his reasons for transitioning were not that he hated his body before hormones and top surgery, but enjoyed it *more* after, and this rationale for transitioning is just as legitimate as any other.

Encouragingly, the five videos in my sample that were devoted to addressing the question of whether or not one is “trans enough” expressed unanimous support:

There is no such thing, firstly, as not being trans enough. Because, what is being trans? Like, why—why is there a set criteria? There isn’t one. — ‘Lexi’

I think we get fed this false image of what women should look like. I literally, the worst experience I've ever had was when I went to the gender clinic and one of the head psychiatrists there told me that I wouldn't be taken seriously if I didn't come to London on the train in a dress. And it's that false image that a woman has to wear a crap ton of makeup and a dress to fit in or feel appreciated. And that's not right at all. Funnily enough though, this [her outfit] is a dress, so don't take me too seriously. — ‘Rachel’

As in the previous excerpts, Rachel and Lexi express similar ideas filtered through different perspectives. To Lexi, trying to regulate and gatekeep who is and is not “trans enough” is impossible, as “trans enough” has no legible meaning. Rachel locates her experience in a wider conversation about unrealistic beauty expectations. In doing so, she invokes solidarity with all women who have been subject to unfair scrutiny on the basis of their appearance, and converts a prior instance of marginalization into potential for greater unity.

Responding to Transphobia

“What not to ask a transgender person” is a popular variation of the usual vlog entry in which vloggers share the most common and/or offensive questions they’ve been asked about being transgender. Rather than polemic “rants” (which are incidentally a vlogging genre of their own), the “what not to ask” vlog is essentially a call-and-response, wherein the vlogger presents an offensive or rude question, and then reacts. In addition to serving as a resource to inform cisgender people who are genuinely unaware of what the appropriate conversational boundaries are when speaking to a transgender

person, a “what not to ask” video gives people a chance to respond to discriminatory and offensive remarks authentically, in a safe environment. In response to the question, “so do you have a wiener now?” ‘Luke,’ a trans man, says:

Testosterone does not make you magically grow something that is not there. And to ask if ‘you have a wiener now?’ is like asking, ‘are leaves green?’ I mean yes, in autumn they change color, but, you know, what it is in my pants is none of your fucking business, if I have a wiener, or a... an octopus tentacle, or if I have a fuckin’ udder, it’s none of your fucking business what is in my pants.

In a vlog entry covering the same topic, ‘Kamal,’ also a trans man, adopts a more forthright, less hyperbolic stance:

“Where’d your boobs go?” What? All these questions are mind-blowing, like I don’t know. Where’d my boobs go? Dudes got pecs. I got pecs. I’m comfortable in my transition without top surgery, without my chest. So I take my shirt off, don’t care. So, yeah... yeah. Dudes have pecs, that’s where my boobs went. They’re pecs.

“What not to ask” videos support coping capacities by allowing vloggers to vent their frustrations and set the record straight. Most importantly, after decades of only being talked *about*, there now exists a growing, enduring archive of trans people *talking back*.

Adaptive Capacities

YouTube vlogs are also rich in potential to cultivate marginalized social groups’ adaptive capacity. Characterized by “strategic agency and long-term planning,” as opposed to the more reactive nature of *coping*,⁸⁹ adaptive capacity refers to people’s ability to modify their ways of being to minimize the impact of future adversity. In vlogs, the primary means of bolstering the adaptive capacity of transgender communities is to share personal experiences, offering guidance to viewers undergoing their own transition, so that they may be better-informed than their predecessors.

89. Keck and Sakdapolrak, “Social Resilience,” 10-11.

What to expect

YouTube has provided a space for transgender people to come together and share experiences far beyond the scope of pharmacy consultations and pamphlet literature.

“Hormone updates” and “recovery vlogs” documenting post-surgical recovery did not romanticize medical transition for those who choose to pursue it, but also did not hesitate to highlight the vast improvements that it brought about for vloggers personally:

Basically, um, a lot of things have been changing, but at the same time, very, very slowly. It's not a magical pill. It's not going to change everything in your life. It's not going to improve everything. It's kind of up to you. — ‘Lexi’

It's not the end of the world if it doesn't happen for you. But for me, it made me feel much better and a little bit more complete, more—pushed me towards what I wanted to do, and gave me the confidence to be a little more happy about myself, to make myself more successful and the things that I want to do as far as my career goals. — ‘Janelle’

In both of these videos and others, there are more specific observations shared with the viewer. Changes in skin texture, mood, and appetite were frequent topics of discussion, as were complaints of soreness, headaches, and post-surgical pain.

Taken altogether, the extensive firsthand accounts of medical transition paint a fairly comprehensive and, importantly, candid portrait of the process. As trans people continue to connect with one another by way of social media like YouTube, community knowledge will continue to aggregate, and offer a rich archive of that information for generations to come. By documenting and sharing their transition, vloggers encourage those following in their footsteps to make informed decisions based on the knowledge they’ve passed down.

Transformative Capacities

The potential for YouTube communities to cultivate transformative capacities is less clear than that of their capacity to cope and to adapt. At the systems-level, there are institutional barriers that impede efforts to bring about the broad, sweeping improvements to the present and future well-being of the many that are characterized as “transformative.” As a virtual space owned and regulated by private capital, YouTube’s network architecture is impossible to modify directly, so “structural” alterations in the most direct sense are beyond the reach of the typical user/community member who lacks administrative privileges to alter site content. It is much more practical for creators to play into the preferences of sorting algorithms and to adapt their video content to suit the demands of their host⁹⁰ than to try to leverage their platform to bring about lasting change. So “systems” level change of the platform itself would appear to be out of reach.

Scaling up beyond YouTube as a self-contained system, opportunities for transformative capacity become clearer. In some respects, it functions as a discursive check valve. Because it is now possible for transgender people to rebut unfair characterizations of themselves in a relatively safe environment via YouTube, it is impossible for any institution or individual to monopolize narratives concerning trans people. YouTube might also facilitate transformative resilience by providing virtual spaces for the communities of people who go on to bring about social change to come together.

90. Tim Peterson, “Creators are Making Longer Videos to Cater to the YouTube Algorithm,” *Digiday*, July 3, 2018, <https://digiday.com/media/creators-making-longer-videos-cater-youtube-algorithm/>

Opportunities for Further Research

Investigation into other communities of vloggers in addition to transgender people would no doubt be of interest to researchers outlining the politics of online community formation. More qualitative work based on face-to-face interactions (interviews, participant observation) would serve to enrich and provide evidence in support of or against the tentative conclusions I have drawn based on my observations of the final video product, as an outside party. Research conducted with a smaller set of content creators, but a larger sample of videos from each, could effectively identify change over time in individual users' attitude and perspectives. Further investigation of the ways that YouTube's aggressive push toward long-form content⁹¹ has impacted channel content is also necessary.

Conclusion

As a relatively novel genre/means of interaction, the rise of the vlog no doubt presents opportunities to develop insights into the way communities function in the digital age. My investigation of 50 vlog entries revealed an engaged, supportive community that was also disturbingly segregated by largely automated processes. As our virtual life-worlds continue to integrate into the corporeal, the imperative to question the ways that power and vulnerability are distributed across information networks via social media platforms will continue to gain urgency. What this study has found is that YouTube is saturated with politics of resilience, though some avenues are more immediately apparent and practical than others. Means of fostering and sustaining

91. "Why Instagram Opens Up to Long-Form Video," Felix Richter, Statista, last modified June 21, 2018, <https://www.statista.com/chart/14377/mobile-video-consumption-by-length/>.

resilience are grounded in sharing knowledge as lived experience, and cultivating a real sense of community—even in an abstract, virtual space.

That being said, the potential to do so is not equally distributed between community subsets. The capacity to create and sustain a web presence active enough to meet the need for communal support and belonging is heavily dependent on one's degree of privilege and access. Though anybody can record and upload content, professional quality video is time and labor-intensive to produce and edit, and it is this content that has the most aesthetic appeal to users browsing creators' channels. Constraints of time, labor, and financial capital feed into the algorithmic recommendation process that disadvantages videos that are unpopular or fail to hold viewers' attention through the video's entirety (thereby maximizing the odds of viewing an ad). As a result, many people who turn to YouTube for its supposedly democratic model still find themselves marginalized.

Though the conclusions I have drawn here have yet to be validated empirically, it is my sincere hope that the analysis I offer opens doors to more exhaustive research. If I had to recommend one way forward, I would encourage future researchers to undertake interdisciplinary projects that make use of eclectic sets of participants with a wide range of skill sets. In the age of the assemblage, hyper-specialization in the sciences is no longer a reliable means of constructing valid knowledge (if it ever was). I am grateful that I have been given the opportunity to complete this thesis in time to not only witness the creation of a new subfield of sociology, media, and transgender studies, but also to be an active, albeit minor participant.

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