

COMPARING MEDIA USAGE OF BINARY AND NON-BINARY
TRANSGENDER INDIVIDUALS WHEN DISCOVERING AND
DESCRIBING GENDER IDENTITY

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This study was conducted through in-depth interviews to examine potential differences between binary-aligned transgender individuals and non-binary individuals in regards to media usage when learning about, articulating, and explaining their gender identity. Results showed numerous differences between transgender people with binary-aligned and non-binary gender identifications in regards to social media preferences and differences in perceived media importance and effects. Additional information was found in regards to the age at which gender identity is articulated and the importance of individuality in comparison to one’s gender identity.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

This study was constructed with the primary goal of examining potential differences in media influence between transgender individuals who identify with a binary-aligned gender identification (e.g. someone born physically female who identifies as male) and transgender individuals who identify with a non-binary gender identification (e.g. someone born physically female who identifies as neither male nor female) while they are discovering their gender identity and describing that gender identity to others. I will be using an interpretive, qualitative approach and will use semi-structured interviews as modeled by Hesse-Biber and Leavy (2011).

In defining the term “transgender,” I will use Sally Hine’s umbrella definition of “a range of gender experiences, subjectivities, and presentations that fall across, between, and beyond the stable categories of ‘man’ and ‘woman’” (Hines, 2010, p. 1). Within this definition, there will also be an adjustment for the nuances of binary-aligned and non-binary gender identifications. Binary-aligned gender will be defined as an experience of gender that consistently and strongly relates to a cultural or psychosocial understanding of male or female; examples within this category would be transmen, transwomen, men/males, and women/females. The definition of non-binary gender for this study will indicate an experience of gender which falls outside the above definition for binary gender. While listing all possible non-binary genders would be nearly impossible due to the currently expanding number of terms, examples would include a-gendered (being without a gender), Two Spirit (having both strongly male and strongly female qualities), genderqueer (which can indicate an experience between genders or an experience outside the understanding of male and female genders as a “third gender”) and gender fluid (having a gender that varies over time) (Giang, 2015; Scelfo, 2015; Sheppard & Mayo, 2013).

Research and news on transgender individuals and groups has been on the rise in recent years, particularly with figures such as *Orange is the New Black*'s Laverne Cox, Olympic athlete Caitlyn Jenner and other public figures coming out as transgender (Tennenbaum, 2013). During certain events, such as the campaign opposing the Houston Equal Rights Ordinance in 2015, stereotypes regarding transgender individuals were also used as a tool by opponents to sway voters against particular legislation (Fernandez & Blinder, 2015; Floyd, 2015). However, research has shown that examples of transgender imagery in media tend to focus on individuals with binary-aligned gender identifications, and that individuals with non-binary or genderqueer identities are more likely to be negated or "othered" (Capuzza, 2014; Siebler, 2012).

These differences between media's presentation of binary-aligned and non-binary gender may lead to larger differences in an individual's development, as may be seen in a study performed by Yerke & Mitchell (2011). In the study, researched groups were divided into natal females who had sex reassignment surgery (SRS) between 1969 and 1987 (early transitions), and between 2000 and 2006 (recent transitions). While the groups varied in greatly in age, they also varied in aspects such as words chosen to define their gender, sexual orientation, and the importance of "bottom surgery" SRS in being "man enough" to be comfortable with their body. The researchers suspected that the difference in results came from the previous, binary view of gender causing the early male-to-female transsexuals to distance themselves from their natal sex and not consider non-binary gender identifications when defining their own gender.

Yerke & Mitchell (2011) described non-binary terminology in gender identifications primarily as more nuanced and open-minded terms addressing roughly the same kind of gender experience as binary-aligned identifications. Other studies have grouped non-binary and binary-aligned individuals together in a similar manner (Bockting et al., 2014; Boza & Perry, 2014).

Whether this generalization of experience is accurate enough for research is uncertain. However, that uncertainty highlights a potential consideration that is often lacking in research and media: are there distinct differences in the experiences or development of transgender individuals who identify with a binary-aligned gender identification and individuals who identify with a non-binary identification such as genderqueer and gender fluid?

In examining and comparing the media usage of binary-aligned and non-binary transgender individuals, I will attempt to address that concern. Additionally, focus will be placed on the steps they went through and the media they used while becoming aware of their own gender identification and learning related terminology. Influences from factors such as personal, interpersonal, and sociocultural interactions will also be examined as they relate to gender as a cultural understanding (Ringo, 2002).

CHAPTER 2

LITERATURE REVIEW

The literature reviewed for this study was chosen primarily to articulate the current understanding of transgender identity and experience. Published research was selected in regard to significant inclusion or focus upon experiences and potential factors which affect the lives of transgender individuals. Some research on LGBT as a whole was also included, as academic literature specific to transgender individuals or topics was not always available (Fox & Warber, 2015). However, the distinctions will be addressed when such material is presented in this review. Other media, such as movies with trans or trans-like characters and news of significant events related to transgender individuals in society, were included with the consideration that such media could potentially affect a transgender individual's self-image either directly, by the individuals viewing the material, or indirectly, by setting or reinforcing the standards by which other members of society understand transgender individuals (Capuzza, 2014; Siebler, 2012).

As already noted, much of the research related to transgender topics does not include variables for non-binary individuals. Some of the selected research used the term transgender more generally and include non-binary transgender definitions with binary-aligned in their research groups (Bockting, et al., 2013; Boza & Perry, 2014), while other research has selected narrow definitions such as using only FtM (Female to Male) transgender individuals (Nuttbrock, et al., 2011). The differences in definitions and grouping practices will be inevitable, and no research was excluded based on the researchers' selection of definitions, but these methodological differences may affect the results of this study and others.

History of the Term Transgender

In specifying the term transgender, it may be helpful to note the contemporary nature of the subject. The distinction between *sex* as indicating physical aspects and *gender* indicating psychosocial aspects arose as recently as the 1960s; before this time, there was no apparent distinction between the two words in the English language (Pfäfflin, 2011). Money (1955, 1985, 1994 as cited in Pfäfflin, 2011) introduced the concept of a *gender role* existing for all people within a society in the mid-1950s, and he introduced the term *gender identity* in 1966. The term *transsexual* became common later, after Harry Benjamin's *The Transsexual Phenomenon* (1966). The term *transgenderist* was likely first used by Virginia Prince to describe herself starting in 1978 and presented transgenderism as gender-based motivation rather than a sexual motivation (Ekins & King, 2006, 2010; Pfäfflin, 2011). Virginia Prince was a part of an early self-help movement in the United States for natal males wishing to live in the female role without seeking the medical treatment associated with transsexuality. The term *transgender* later arose from the British *Trans-gender Archive*, founded in 1986, after the archive's name had the hyphen removed in American reprints (Pfäfflin, 2011). The term *gender dysphoria* only recently became common in preparation for the fifth edition of the *Diagnostics and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (DSM-5), which was released in May 2013. This rapid change in terminology has likely influenced how transgender individuals in media have been presented and understood, as movies such as *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* gained popularity before the term transgender was coined (Sharman, 1975; Siebler, 2012).

While on the topic of terminology, an article released by the American Psychiatric Association which elaborated the considerations behind the change in terminology from *gender identity disorder* to current term, *gender dysphoria*, in the DSM-5 ("Gender Dysphoria," 2013).

In the article, it was stated that the change was made in order to clarify that gender nonconformity is not, by itself, a mental disorder. Much like homosexuality, there was great debate on whether the potentially stigmatizing term *Gender Identity Disorder* should be removed entirely from the DSM (Kamens, 2011; Lawrence, 2014). Unlike homosexuality, however, individuals who are transgender may want seek medical treatment via Sex Reassignment Surgery and hormone therapy and could potentially incur associated medical costs (“Gender Dysphoria,” 2013). It was noted in the American Psychiatric Association article that removing the diagnosis entirely from the DSM could potentially limit one’s ability to seek such treatment. As such, the term *Gender Dysphoria* was selected for those have “clinically significant distress” (DSM, 2013) present in relation to their gender. It noted in the article that it is the distress in relation to one’s feeling of their own gender that is one of the core elements of the diagnosis, and that solely being transgender is not grounds for any diagnosis in the DSM-5.

The Understanding of Transgenderism

Older research into understanding transgenderism had distinctly varied theories and, in many cases, these findings differ strongly from modern works. However, noting the older understandings may give background to the media portrayals that often reflected those theories. Some older research has tied being transgender to misdirected sexual feelings or an extension of fetishism in a way that was defined as Autogynephilia, or a feeling exclusive to natal males that includes the “love of oneself as a woman” (Blanchard, 2005, 1992; Ekins & King, 2010). It has also been tied to having an absent or abusive father, overindulgent or abusive mother, or other kinds of parental conflict in early development (Stroller, 1968, as cited in Nuttbrock, 2002). Other research suggested that gender dysphoria is only one facet of a “narcissistic pathology” or

other personality disorder (Hartmann, et al., 1997). Some more modern research, such as a model suggested by Veale, et al. (2010), maintains several of the above notions and builds upon the idea of Autogynephilia with cross-gender eroticism. They suggest that homosexuality, crossdressing, and transsexuality are all different degrees of gender variance filtered through defense mechanisms, environmental factors, and personality factors. However, while these broadly minded works reflect many of the traits to be touched upon in media representation, they appear to remain limited in their use in other modern research.

Other researchers have come to work with non-pathological definitions of transgenderism and have suggested that that psychosocial determinants of health and the distress related to gender dysphoria have not been examined in with enough depth (Graham, et al., 2014; Skagerberg, et al., 2013) and have begun examining the effects of interpersonal relationships (Graham, et al., 2014; Mullen & Moane, 2013) and social support (Boza & Perry, 2014). Further effort has also been placed on defining nuances, differences, and areas of overlap between the terms transgender, transsexual (typically indicating a person who has or is currently in the process of transitioning sex through SRS), intersex (a person who is born with sexual or reproductive anatomy that does not fit traditional definitions of male or female), and gender presentation (which can include the dressing or performing of one's gender) in research (Hines, 2006).

Relevant to media and social media usage is research into internalizing and externalizing behaviors, which found that children (ages 12-18) with gender dysphoria tended to show more internalizing behavior (e.g., depression and anxiety) rather than externalizing (e.g. disruptive behavior) in a way similar to cisgender girls (Skagerberg, et al., 2013); this particular research also noted that internalizing and externalizing behaviors partially reflected perceived gender,

rather than biological sex, even when both natal males and natal females tended to show more internalizing behaviors. Skagerberg, et al. suggested that this may be due to children internalizing habits and presentations which they perceived in the gender that they more closely associated themselves with. Other research has backed the findings of internalized behavior, measuring and examining the intensity of depression and rates of depression among transgender individuals to find factors correlated to the higher rates of depression; these rates are now perceived to be fluctuate in relation to factors such as social support, incidents of victimization, and identity conflict/affirmation (Boza & Perry, 2014; Graham, et al., 2014; Mullen & Moane, 2013; Nuttbrock, et al., 2011).

In regard to modern explanations of transgender as a concept or, more appropriately, gender as a concept, the works of feminist philosopher Judith Butler may be considered central to the understanding (Butler, 2006). In her book *Gender Trouble*, originally published 1990, she suggested that gender should be examined as something performative. Additionally, she suggests that any significant study of gender would inherently need to be examined in relation to the culture and history of the society that gender exists within, rather than being examined as something which exists a priori. This relation to culture and history has allowed researchers to adapt for cultures that have an historical acceptance of genders outside “male” and “female,” such as the common example of the “Two Spirit” non-binary gender in some Native American tribes (Sheppard & Mayo, 2013).

Stereotypes

In order to set a baseline of characteristics commonly associated with being transgender, findings from the work of Gazzola & Morrison (2014) was used. The eight themes of the

transgender stereotype listed in their study do not always appear together in media imagery or representation, and the traits are rarely presented as equally significant in any medium. However, they were common enough in other sources to warrant using Gazzola & Morrison's findings as a baseline in examining media and preparing for what imagery may be part of the history of actual transgender individuals.

The first theme was that a person's personality and behaviors that reflected the gender which the person identified as (Gazzola & Morrison, 2014). This did include transwomen seeking more traditionally feminine jobs, such as nurses or secretaries. However, there appeared to be a double standard resulting from this theme, as participants of the study considered transmen to have traits of both male and female genders while transwomen were described as more strongly female. The second theme in the study suggested that transgender individuals have body shapes that still distinctly coincide with their natal sex. Third was that transgender individuals were likely to be appear "abnormal" in dress and appearance and stand out because of the differences. This abnormality may be the origin of the "men in dresses" stereotype that was brought up during the 2015 Houston Equal Rights Ordinance (Fernandez & Blinder, 2015).

The fourth theme suggested that trans-people are rejected by society and are likely to be outcasts (Gazzola & Morrison, 2014). The remaining stereotype themes include the presence of mental illness, the seeking of SRS as a core part of being transgender, and the supposed link between gender identity and sexual preference towards one's birth sex. The last theme, which involved primacy of birth sex, had less clear results and there was a division based on whether a transgender individual should be seen for their birth sex or their identification. These stereotypes tend to be reflected more in fictional media such as *Silence of the Lambs* (Demme, 1990) and *CSI: Crime Scene Investigation* (2004, 2007).

Representation in Media

In regards to transgender representation in news media, researcher Jaime Capuzza noted in his study that, “though trans studies scholars and media watchdog groups claimed there has been an increased representation of transgenderism in media, the increase in news coverage can be seen as minimal” (2014, p. 120-121). Capuzza’s study examined all articles related to transgenderism from 2009 to 2013 from four news sources: *Wall Street Journal* and *USA Today* for print newspapers, *Time* for consumer news magazine, and *nytimes.com* for online news. Capuzza examined each of the resulting 144 articles and found that 60% were soft news and that transgender individuals only accounted for 18% (149) of the total number of sources. Of those, 74% were male-to-female, the majority were Caucasian, and most were in a presented generally one dimensional definition of gender-diversity. Capuzza further noted that “[n]ews stories were framed in a manner that depicted transgender people who support the gender binary as deserving of sympathy because they were trying to be like ‘us’ (‘gender normals’), while genderqueer people who did not support the gender binary were positioned as ‘other’” (2014, p. 125). Capuzza’s analysis took place before several celebrities, such as Laverne Cox and Caitlyn Jenner, came to the attention of news media, so the frequency of appearances may have increased since this study. Capuzza also noted that while members of the transgender community have expressed concern that media frames transgender stories in terms of hormones and surgery, that “[w]hile such stereotypes may certainly be present within other forms of media, within this sample, the majority of stories did not resort to this form of sensationalism” (2014, p.122).

The other media representations, such as television and movies, tended to remain stereotypical or sensational in their portrayal of transgender people. In classic examples, such as *Silence of the Lambs* and *Psycho*, the main antagonists are presented to be trans or trans-like

people who are abnormal and mentally ill (Demme, 1990; Hitchcock, 1960). Other movies, such as *Boys Don't Cry* (Peirce, 1999), show the transgender protagonist as an outcast. Unfortunately, while *Boys Don't Cry* does give more nuance to the transman main character played by Hilary Swank, it also shows the character being constantly victimized and eventually murdered for being transgender. It should also be noted that *Boys Don't Cry* is a rare case of a transman being given the spotlight, and has remained one of the only movies with a female-to-male lead character since its release.

More recent examples include a number of episodes from *CSI: Crime Scene Investigation* othering transgender people and showing them as “freaks,” sex workers or drug addicts (2004, 2007). The characters tended to reflect the “outcast” and “mentally ill” themes found by Gazzola & Morrison (2014) and often lacked nuance of any meaningful character development or explanation of what being transgender can mean for an individual.

There are a growing number of exceptions to this trend towards stereotypes. *Orange is the New Black* gives history and depth to the transgender character Sophia Burset, played by Laverne Cox, and the series *Transparent* emphasizes the personal challenges related to being transgender (Hsu, 2014; Tannenbaum, 2013). *Orange is the New Black* has also gained some distinction as being one of the rare instances of a non-white transgender person being given a significant role in a story. However, as these are more recent positive appearances in media, little research has been able to address the extent of their effect on the transgender community. It should be noted that even the newer examples with generally positive portrayals of transwomen, such as *Transparent* (2014), have been critiqued for their portrayal of female-to-male characters being trivialized and over-emphasizing the importance of their genitals in defining their gender (Keegan, 2014).

Binary Representation

As Capuzza noted for news articles, the representations of transgender individuals tended to exclude those with non-binary identifications or treat those with such identifications as the “other” or in a negative manner (2014). This lack of representation or less favorable representation of non-binary identifications can be found throughout fictional media (Siebler, 2012).

An article written by Kay Siebler (2012) examined this trend towards binary representation. The article notes that before terms and concepts such as transgender or genderqueer gained traction, there were still representations such as *The Rocky Horror Picture Show*’s (Sharman, 1975) character Dr. Frank-n-Furter who identified as a transvestite. Yet despite what being what could now be considered as falling under the transgender umbrella, Siebler noted that the character “was not trying to perform his femaleness” (Siebler, 2012, p. 75). She noted that as transgender characters became more common in media, they became more binary-aligned in gender portrayal and it became more common for their dominant objective to be a full transition with SRS.

In describing the possible reason and importance of this lack of non-binary imagery, there are the works of both Judith Butler and Michel Foucault’s *Politics of Truth* (2007). Butler, in particular, had focused on the concept of intelligibility in relation to gender in her work *Doing Justice to Someone*:

When we ask what the conditions of intelligibility are by which the human emerges, by which the human is recognized, by which some subject becomes the subject of human love, we are asking about conditions of intelligibility composed of norms, of practices, that have become presuppositional, without which we cannot think the human at all. (Butler, 2001, p. 621)

The western conceptualization of gender tends to reduce the concept to a binary understanding (Sheppard & Mayo, 2013). If a transgender person still associates with male or female, they can refer to commonly used paradigms when explaining their gender. Currently, there is little research into what difficulties may rise for someone who is non-binary and attempting to explain their gender to someone uninformed on such concepts, but it can be theorized that a problem would come from the lack of common language detailed enough to easily articulate the nuances of many non-binary identifications.

This lack of common language or ability to articulate oneself and make oneself intelligible may prove important, as Butler suggests that “[t]his relationship, between intelligibility and the human, is an urgent one; it carries a certain theoretical urgency, precisely at those points where the human is encountered at the limits of intelligibility itself,” (Butler, 2001, p. 622). She goes on to mention that honoring and expressing certain social norms, such as gender, may be a point of judgment for someone who is determining if someone else is to be recognized as a person.

If Butler’s considerations are correct and the condition of having a coherent gender is needed for the recognition of personhood (Butler, 2001), then someone who has a gender outside the binary may be less easily understood and appear less of a person. This could explain the less favorable treatment of genderqueer people in relation to binary transgender people found in news media (Capuzza, 2014), as those with less easily explained genders would have a higher chance of being unintelligible to the journalists and the general public. Butler’s cultural basis for the understanding gender as a binary may also explain why other cultures, such as several Native American cultures, have had relatively favorable treatment towards those who had the non-binary gender identification of “Two Spirit” (Sheppard, 2013). Such cultures have a vocabulary

available to explain an option of social norms and practices outside “male” and “female,” so the members of the society that fell outside those two options have a larger common vocabulary with which to explain themselves and make themselves intelligible.

Social Media and the Spiral of Silence

Many social media sites, such as Facebook, now present complications when used by LGBT individuals as a means to communicate with LGBT peers, as they can be areas where an individual’s social groups can potentially mix to problematic results (Fox & Warber, 2014). Fox & Warber’s study was on LGBT individuals in general and did not specify traits particular to those who are transgender, but the importance of behavior related to “closeting” and the spiral of silence should be similar. The spiral of silence refers to the tendency that a group, such as LGBT youth, to refuse to speak up over a fear of social or other kind of repercussion; the lack of communication may cause those who would sympathize with their needs, such as allies or other LGBT individuals, to also remain silent and continue the spiral (Noelle-Neumann, 1974).

The Fox & Warber (2014) study found a number of factors influencing an individual’s willingness to refer to their sexuality or gender identification on social media. The main factors affecting if one spoke of openly on social media were: having religious family or friends, fearing discrimination from potential employers while seeking a career, and, in particular, their ‘outness’ in regards to their sexuality or gender identification.

Because individuals are often expected to “friend” family members and others who they know offline, problems can arise when those connections are not aware of the person’s LGBT status. In some cases, Fox & Warber (2014) noted that people who were “mostly in the closet” reported a fear of the medium “outing” them. In many cases, this fear seemed to come from the

youth's assumption that most of the individuals in their Facebook friend list were unsympathetic to LGBT. As may be expected, those who were "mostly in the closet" were more likely to censor themselves than stand up for LGBT rights. In accordance with Noelle-Neumann's (1974) predictions, it was noted that "[a]lthough there are likely others in the network who are also queer or allies, closeted LGBT+ individuals or allies may feel compelled to stay silent because supportive voices are not apparent" (Fox & Warber, 2014, p. 92).

However, this silencing is not entirely one way, as individuals who were "out" were noted to gradually confront or cut out the less accepting voices in their friend list (Fox & Warber, 2014). It was noted that while this may benefit the individual over time, it often involves separation practices and does not dramatically increase visibility of LGBT outside the individual's environment (Orbe, 1998). As social media sites are often used as a way for people to find news, this act of separating may have broader implications regarding LGBT visibility (Fox & Warber, 2014).

Also, the use of secondary social media sites, such as Twitter or Tumblr, were not used by anyone aside from young adults in Fox's study, which was attributed to likely being caused by demographic differences related to internet use (Pew Internet, 2013).

CHAPTER 3

METHODOLOGY

This study was conducted using a semi-structured in-depth interview as defined by Hesse-Biber and Leavy (2011). The interviews will be structured to gather information relevant to four research questions:

RQ 1: “How do various media (e.g. news, social media, movies) affect a transgender individual as they are discovering and articulating their gender identity?”

RQ2: “How does the effect of media differ between those with a binary-aligned gender identification and those with a non-binary gender identification as they are discovering and articulating their gender identity?”

RQ 3: “How are media, media imagery, or media trends used by transgender individuals as they articulate their gender experience to friends and family?”

RQ 4: “How does media usage differ between binary-aligned and non-binary transgender individuals when they are articulating their gender experience?”

For research questions one and two, the primary goal was to examine whether there is a difference in the kind of media used as a basis for one’s gender. As it was noted, representation of non-binary gender is lacking or presented as “other” in media (Capuzza, 2014; Siebler, 2012). It is possible that this difference in representation may potentially cause media to be less appealing or less useful for those of non-binary gender during the time which they are discovering their identity. However, it was suspected that those who identify as non-binary gender may have also first learned of their gender identity through binary transgender representation. As suggested with the results of Yerke & Mitchell’s (2011) study, the presence of fewer available gender definitions may cause an individual to identify with and accept one of the

terms available to them rather than try to invent a more nuanced term. To address the limitations present for individuals who are lacking the vocabulary to articulate their identity, participants were also asked if they had ever used another gender identification before the one they use now. Also, almost no data was found regarding the use of social media for specifically transgender individuals; as such, while social media can be assumed to be a factor in identity development for trans individuals, as it can be for LGB individuals, little can be assumed regarding what kind of factor that will be or how binary-aligned and non-binary individuals may differ.

Research questions three and four were decided upon in response to the notion of intelligibility as suggested by Judith Butler. There has been a relatively large increase in the general representation of binary transgender individuals in media in relation to non-binary transgender representation (Capuzza, 2014; Siebler, 2012). This research, in part, meant to examine if that imagery affects what terms or examples transgender individuals may use while ‘coming out’ with their identity and informing others about their gender. This consideration was also taken to see if non-binary transgender individuals might use the same binary imagery or wording while explaining their gender to others, if they use such concepts initially before changing to more specific terms, or if they use another methodology in describing their experience.

For the study, volunteers were sought at three branches of a transgender support and social group that had meetings throughout Dallas, Fort Worth, and Denton, Texas. The group as a whole is currently comprised of roughly 130-140 members, and there are semi-monthly meetings for members. Each branch was of a different size, but the number attending these group meetings ranged from 10 to 50 people. The groups included both binary and non-binary individuals and had individuals of a large range of ages attending. Relatives of transgender

people were also welcomed at the events, though they attended a separate group for allies for most of each meeting.

I made contact with each branch's respective leader and explained my research. After receiving their consent, I submitted my proposal to the University of North Texas Institutional Review Board and received approval. One modification was submitted and accepted, as the original submission requested only two groups and a third was needed to find enough volunteers who were non-binary. Some snowball sampling was also done in order to find enough non-binary volunteers. Two volunteers, one of binary-aligned gender and the other of non-binary gender, contacted me after having been in contact with members of the groups.

I attended these branch groups and introduced myself at the beginning of each group's meeting. I informed them that I am a student researcher working on my thesis and I noted that I am also of non-binary gender. The reason I disclosed my transgender status is the expectation that it would help me gain rapport with the interviewees. This decision was also made with respect to a conversation with one of the group's organizers; the leader stated that there could be a potential concern in the group that a non-LGBT researcher could be unfamiliar with transgender experiences or biased against transgender individuals. With those concerns in mind, I had decided that it would be more productive than detrimental to the study to disclose that single piece of my personal information. I did not knowingly divulge any further information about my personal history before the interviews, as providing too much information could potentially affect the results of the research.

After introducing myself, I informed each group about the purpose of the research, potential risks and benefits, and listed the main questions to be asked during the interviews. After giving the speech, answering questions, and asking for both binary-aligned transgender and non-

binary transgender volunteers, I remained in the room. I did not participate with the group discussions, kept myself available to answer questions regarding my research and had a sheet prepared for volunteers to provide their contact information and sign up for interviews at a later date. During the less structured ‘social’ parts of the evenings, I walked around, introducing myself again and asking if anyone would be interested. Interviews were conducted in two main ways; either on the University of North Texas campus in Denton, Texas or over a call. Both phones and Skype were used for the calls. One interview was conducted over Skype’s ‘chatroom,’ as it was requested as an accommodation.

An incentive was also made: each participant who began an interview was entered into a raffle for one of three \$50 VISA gift cards.

Informed consent was obtained before each interview. Before the interview began, I explained the procedures, risks, purpose of the study, confidentiality, and note of the incentive. I also informed each interviewee that they could withdraw consent and stop the interview at any time without being questioned about their reason and without losing their entry in the gift card raffle. I also give each interviewee time to read through the informed consent form and answer any questions the interviewee may have. The interview only began after each respective interviewee had agreed and signed the form. A copy of the form was given to the interviewee to keep. For calls, the procedure remained identical with the exception of an informed consent notice being emailed to the participant in place of a physical copy of the informed consent form.

As should be stated, I am of non-binary gender. As such, while I have attempted to approach this study with the neutrality of a researcher, I also approached this topic from the perspective of a member of the LGBT community.

Sample

A total of 13 participants were interviewed. All the volunteers that began the interview also finished the interview. Of the participants, nine identified with binary-aligned gender and four identified with non-binary gender. Two of the participants were slightly confused on the definitions, but stated they were binary-aligned after I defined and explained the two groups. For purposes of anonymity in this thesis, the participants who are of binary gender will be labeled as B1 through B9, while those of non-binary gender will be labeled as N1 through N4.

The volunteers of binary-aligned gender were more varied in ages, though not with natal sex or ethnicity. Eight were born physically male, one was born intersexed and raised male. All binary-aligned volunteers identified as either trans-woman or woman. In regards to age, three were below the age of 25, two were in their 40s, three were in their 50s, and one was in her 60s. Seven were Caucasian, and one noted that she was half Caucasian and half Latina, one stated unknown due to lack of knowledge of her parents, but appeared Caucasian.

The participants of non-binary gender were closer together in age, as two were 19, one was 20, and one was 28. Two were natal female, two were natal male. One identified as neutrois (a neutral or null gender), one identified as a-gendered/nonbinary, one identified as genderless (which they noted as something they felt was different from a-gendered), and one identified as gender fluid, though wasn't entirely set on the exact definition. All participants of non-binary gender were Caucasian.

Questions

The questions that were asked to the interviewees were partially based on the work of Mullen and Moane (2013) and emphasized the process of learning about one's gender more than their current view of their self.

Interviewees were asked to describe their exact gender identity. From previous experience and information gathered during the literature review, identifications were expected to range from simple one-word identifications such as "man" to more elaborate phrasing such as "genderqueer, leaning more towards male than female but with a touch of both," (Laljer, 2014; Yerke and Mitchell, 2011). While grouping for this study will be "binary-aligned" and "non-binary," this consideration was included to add some more definition to the individual cases and the interpretation of experiences.

A number of follow up questions were asked to ensure that certain points were touched upon during the interview. The potential follow-up questions included asking if they had any kind of role-model which helped them define their initial view of their gender identity, whether there was anything which may have disrupted them in defining or accepting their gender identity, whether they used a different gender identification before their current identification, and if social media had played a part in the development or articulation of their gender identity. The questions related to factors helping them define their gender and inhibiting their definition of gender were included for the possibility that they were related to media in either a primary (through direct imagery) or secondary fashion (through constructing the expectations of what transgenderism is). Asking the interviewee about possible previous gender identifications, while not being directly based in the research covered in the literature review, may be particularly relevant when considering the history of an individual who identifies with a non-binary

identification, as such gender identifications may exist outside the “realm of intelligibility” for the general public and may not typically be presented in news or other media (Butler, 2001). The main questions will be presented to all interviewees to ensure consistency. The consideration of social media was made knowing that it may be problematic for this study, as the group being asked for volunteers has a large Facebook group; however, the topics covered included many other social media habits outside the Facebook group.

The remaining questions were an attempt to cover a notable dearth in current research in relation to the articulating of gender identity to family. There is a significant amount of research regarding the presence of a social support heavily affecting the levels of clinical depression, feelings of gender affirmation/conflict (Boza and Perry, 2014; Graham, 2014; Mullen and Moane, 2013; Nuttbrock, et al., 2011) and resilience (Bockting, et al., 2013). However, it is rarely examined in depth as to how that social support is obtained and what factors may assist or work against gaining that support on an individual level. This question was also considered to address the potential of stigma in interpersonal social networks being influenced by stigma or stereotypes portrayed in fictional media and news media, a factor which has been considered for transgender individuals in a more general sense (Gazzola & Morrison, 2014).

CHAPTER 4

RESULTS

A number of themes and interesting findings did appear during the interviews, including some differences in social media preferences and media used by the interviewees when learning about their gender. However, there were also notable demographic differences between the those with binary-aligned gender and those who were non-binary, so some notes will be made regarding how the trends that rose also may have varied when viewed through other demographic lenses. Pronoun preferences will be respected when discussing each individual's responses.

Age Difference in Realizing Gender

One of the most distinct differences between the groups considered in this study is when each group tended to first realize their gender identity. Binary-aligned individuals tended to be able to articulate their gender much earlier in life. Of the nine binary-aligned individuals, five had realized that they identified with their preferred gender by the time they had finished kindergarten. That number increased to seven by the time the interviewees had finished third grade. One more had discovered their gender during puberty, and the last interviewee had realized their gender during adulthood.

Some participants further noted that they had realized their gender as far back as they could remember.

[The kindergarten teachers] separated the males and the females. And they separated me into the males. And, at first, I thought they were joking, and they weren't joking. And then I just spent the rest of the time crying. – B1

I knew I was transgender when I was little kid. [...] I knew from the very earliest days - of my life that I didn't [match the] quote-unquote traditional male because I identified with girls growing up. – B7

The results were different for non-binary individuals who had, on average, realized their gender much later. Of the four interviewees, the earliest noted realization of gender was in middle school, with one noting late middle school/early high school, one mentioning early college, and the last noting that they had realized their gender in their mid-twenties. However, some results seemed to confuse this finding. Two of the non-binary interviewees also noted that they had behavior that closely matched their gender during their very early childhood.

I always knew I was had something different. I didn't feel male or female, for that matter. Um, I was called a bit of, I was called a bit of a tomboy growing up and because I was always playing with the guy's things but whenever we played house I could never play mom, dad, children, I always felt I had to play the dog. – N1

I remember being a very little kid and fluctuating between [boy and girl]. Did I feel comfortable in dresses? Did I want to wear them? Some days it was ok and I wanted to and it was appealing. And some days I was like, 'no, why would I do this? This makes absolutely no sense.' – N4

Part of this difference may have stemmed from differences in responding to the question used for the interview. Binary-aligned interviewees appeared to have been reporting their first experiences with gender dysphoria or feeling 'out of place.' Non-binary interviewees, when asked regarding their first experiences, appeared to report their first 'exploration of self,' rather than their first feelings of gender dysphoria. One unusual case was N2, who noted that it feels that its gender dysphoria was incongruous with its gender identity, and explained that it has a physical sensation towards preferring a female body, but considers its gender to be separate from the sensation and considered itself "genderless."

Initial Encounter with Means to Articulate Gender

There were notable differences in specific media used to articulate gender. However, all the instances appeared to fall into four categories, with age and type of gender seeming to create the differences. These four categories were not mutually exclusive, as there were cases of multiple steps being taken to learn an articulation. These categories are meant to indicate the initial indicators that gave the interviewees a starting word or concept that allowed them to begin to understand their gender.

The first category was for those who were able to, in some way, understand and state their gender identity without reference to other media or known example, even if the precise word ‘transgender’ was unknown to them. Of the individuals interviewed, B1 and B7 seemed to fit this category. This group was the smallest of the categories, and it should be noted that the two individuals who matched this category were of binary-aligned gender.

The second category included those who initially learned about their gender through chance encounter with some form of non-social media, whether that media be intended as educational or not. This category applies to three of the interviewees, B2, B3, and B8, who had learned their initial articulation of their gender through coming across a piece of media by chance. There did not seem to be any specific source shared among these individuals; B2’s initial view of any articulation came from a magazine depicting “she-males” in a pornography store in the 1980s, though he noted that a therapist discussed the term transgender much later in life. Also in the early 1980s, B8 noted coming across articles and media sources that included men in drag, which led B8 to initially considered herself ‘transvestite’ as, she noted, that was only articulation available to her until learning the term transgender during a party at the age of 35. B3 had initially come across an articulation much later in her life, noting that her first realization that

others may be like her was when she come across a website featuring fantasy digital comics with transgender characters. Of note, in addition to these three individuals being of binary-aligned gender, they were also all over the age of 45.

The third category could be defined as intentional research. Both N1 and N3 had discovered the terminology through searching for answers for the feelings they had regarding their gender, and noted that they had searched Google with the phrases “I feel not male or female, what am I?” and searches akin to “why do I feel this way” respectively until they found their preferred terms on websites such as Tumblr.

The fourth category was the most common in this sample, and could be defined as discovering one’s gender identity through interaction with other people. While all interviewees had, to varying extents, developed their gender identity through social interaction, B4, B5, B9, N2, and N4 had discovered their initial articulations of their identities through this means. The means through which they interacted with others seemed to vary. B4, B9, N2, and N4 had initially learned from face-to-face relationships with co-workers, friends, or romantic partners. B5 found her definition through online forums, having noted that she had “kind of stumbled upon that [online board] and I started reading. And it sounded like me. [...] Then I was like ‘this is right up my alley’ and I just started from that.” As a note, B9 and N2 had used the internet check the term and, for N2, to also branch out socially after learning the term from friends, so while the initial note came from face-to-face social interaction, the internet and social media were not absent from learning.

Social Media preferences

Preferences in regards to, and views of, social media did seem to have some basis in one's gender identification, though there was an expected variety within the groups analyzed for this study. Not all participants used social media often, but there were some differences, in particular, with Facebook. Tumblr was often referred to by the younger participants (B9, N1, N2, N3), though only one participant over 40 noted the website (B7). Individuals who were younger in age and identified with binary-aligned genders tended to avoid Facebook. Interviewee B1 noted that she disliked Facebook and other central social media, primarily due to online harassment that she had experienced.

I used YouTube, but I didn't really use social media as a means of communication unless I was getting bombarded by hate things. And the people that hated my lifestyle on Facebook did just really hammer down on. – B1

B5 noted that she generally preferred to stick with online forums over social media platforms like Facebook, as they had fewer consequences.

Before I was out with a lot of people, I was completely out online...I'm not a huge fan of Facebook or anything like that, but I do use a lot of forums...I found a lot of people who are like me. And it was very helpful, being able to experiment with myself online. Cause, you know, it's little consequences if you changed something like that. – B5

Interviewees who were older and of binary-aligned gender either did not use social media, or noted more positive experiences. B7 noted that she was "all over Facebook," Instagram and Tumblr, and that she had used Facebook, in part, as "Proof of my self-evaluation" in addition to using it as a tool to contact friends and assist transgender support groups. B6 had noted using the social media website Geocities around 1985, noting that people were using the website to reveal their "feminine side" around that time.

YouTube was a medium noted by four of the binary-aligned interviewees, though for differing reasons. Two interviewees noted that they used the website for videos for information

on voice feminization. One interviewee noted she watched several video blogs of transgender individuals explaining their own experiences, and found that she had sympathized with their experiences. One interviewee noted that she referred others to specific videos when trying to educate others on what transgender individuals may go through. None of the non-binary aligned individuals noted using YouTube for any means connected to their gender.

Interviewees of non-binary gender identifications appeared to favor social media or note such websites in a more positive light. N1 had used Facebook and received support from friends and family over the site, but tended to refer to Tumblr with more favor.

So when I see [transgender] people being treated as a positive thing [on social media and Tumblr] not a negative thing, it just makes me happy and it makes me accept it, makes me more accepting of myself, because that's something I have a problem with; accepting myself sometimes. – N1

I think that a lot of social media has been a lot more open. Like Facebook now allows you to put other identities and use gender-neutral pronouns. I think that that's like making it more comfortable for people who do identify as non-binary. To, to be open about themselves. Like, in my, in my example, I use a Facebook that has they/them pronouns on it. -N3

I could actually express my feelings to a person [over social media] and have them express in return. I think I'd still be lost had I not reached out like that. It's mostly been over Skype or Tumblr from friends. -N2

Importance of Individuality

One of the most apparent differences between the binary-aligned interviewees and the non-binary interviewees was the importance that the interviewees seemed to place on being recognized for the gender they identified as versus being recognized as an individual first and without regard to their gender. Those with a binary-aligned gender seemed to want to be recognized as their identified gender, and noted frustrations with having been expected to conform to role of their natal sex despite their wishes.

It's society that doesn't recognize me as a female but, inside, that [is] how I relate to them. You know, I stood in a group of men and related to every man in that group like a woman would relate to that group and they didn't even know it. – B2

I never felt comfortable the guys riding bikes, playing cowboys and Indians and the traditional things you do with a male back [when I was a child.] – B7

However, the wording did not seem to match media-driven or culture-driven stereotypes of genders. While some binary-aligned interviewees noted a preference for feminine-gendered clothing, B2 noted his view that while she did prefer some types of she thought:

The worst enemy of the trans genders are the fashion magazines or the magazines that tell us who we should be, you know, wear this clothes...it's like all [transgender individuals] care about is fashion and what we look like. – B2

Similarly, B4 noted that she had to come to terms with her own gender while looking back on how women were portrayed on television during her youth.

Women were getting away from being housewives, and they were getting to college and getting their degrees and proving they could be firefighters or police officers and stuff, so I didn't want to use an inspiration that was going to be confined to cleaning houses and taking care of children all the time. – B4

All four interviewees who identified with a non-binary gender appeared to have a different outlook on gender stereotypes, and showed a strong intention to separate themselves from understandings of 'male' or 'female.' In some cases, interviewees appeared note gender as a 'limiting factor' on how their individuality could be defined or understood.

I've grown up with [stereotypes]. With them not in my family, because my family wasn't really like that, but more so in the world, outside world around me. That's why I don't like going outside, because there [are] gender stereotypes and I think I'm partially afraid of going to face them. – N1

I became more comfortable reaching out and finding things that defined me better than whether I felt more like a boy or a girl. – N2

I like to get in touch with my feminine and masculine side. And, I don't want my gender to define what other people think about me. I felt, I think, a huge part of my gender identity is that, as a woman I think there were a lot of...stimuli, like, things that people

were ‘oh, you’re a boy, so you have to be like this and this and this.’ And, being agender, there aren’t those kind of...regulations. -N3

Even my older sister, who I speak with most. She says, ‘um, I’m ok with this. one day [I’m] just going to have a brother,’ and like, *No!* No, I’m me! Quit calling me boy or girl! (laughs) – N4

While this emphasis on individuality was prevalent in all non-binary interviewees, the only interviewee of binary-aligned gender who noted any individuality of their gender was B8:

I started taking hormones and the nice thing about hormones [and in] transition in general is there is no ‘yes’ or ‘no.’ There is no binary yes or no...there is [a] whole spectrum of positions where you can be, and where in today’s society, thank God, is totally legitimate to be. – B8

While B8 made that statement in relation to her own transition, she also noted that she felt there were positions on a gender spectrum that could allow behaviors, socialization, genetic makeup, and phenotypes.

Role Models in Media

The sample of interviewees did limit the possibility of finding trends consistent enough to mark as significant, as not all interviewees used or came to understand themselves more deeply through a role model. Of those who did note having a role model, gender identity or sexuality of the character did not appear need to match the interviewee that held them up as a role model. Interviewees of binary-aligned gender noted Sabrina from *Bewitched* (played by Elizabeth Montgomery), the *Tomb Raider* movie’s Lara Croft (played by Angelina Jolie and noted by the interviewee as a kind of female Indiana Jones), unnamed video game characters, Coraline of the movie *Coraline*, David Bowie, and one individual noted several sources that included Laverne Cox and Connie Terrell. There was an expected variety in the characters noted, and there did not seem to be any characters who were submissive or fell into stereotypical roles of femininity.

The interviewees who identified with non-binary genders appeared to be more likely to include characters who did not completely fit gender roles, though the role models noted never matched the gender identification of the interviewees who noted them. N1 noted Sutan Amrull, also known as Raja, of *Rupaul's Drag Race* as someone who wasn't exactly a role model, but as someone N1 could connect to by seeing Amrull's willingness to step outside regular gender boundaries. N4 noted his role models to be personal in nature, particularly his romantic partner, who is a transgender woman. N3 noted Ruby Rose, an Australian model, actress, and television presenter, as someone who gave N3 an eye-opening moment:

That was sort of fascinating to me, and it was sort of like 'wow, people, and there is someone who people know in media that identifies as this, and it more than just people on Tumblr' – N3

Problems with Explaining Gender to Others

When asked about their experiences with explaining their gender to friends and family, the binary-aligned interviewees were distinctly different from the non-binary interviewees in the type and scope of concern and problematic experiences.

The most common hindrances noted by binary aligned individuals in regards to coming out with their gender identification was religion and others' perception that transgenderism was a defiance of social norms.

I was raised Mormon at the time, so, the religious family values were interesting. (laughs) First because they're very opposed to [transgenderism], so that's probably the main reason why it took so long for me to say anything about it just because. You know, there was so much to talk about and I have this religious element telling me, 'no this is wrong, you can't do that.' – B9

They [B4's parents] were both conservative. They were both, you know, if it didn't happen in their community, it wasn't any of their business. They didn't think about it. They weren't even sure what I meant when I called them and came out in 2000 and told them that I was identifying then as gay [her original articulation], they weren't sure what that meant. I had to explain it to them. So I think one of the things that held me

back...and this sounds really rude and really mean, but I was probably just waiting for them to die. – B4

B1 further noted that her father was physically abusive during any times that she backed away from participating in sports, or otherwise did not match her father's expectations of a boy. B7 noted that she feared being beaten when she did come out.

Media was not referred to as a direct source of antipathy. However, B1 noted that people consistently attempted to compare her progress with transitioning to the progress of Caitlyn Jenner.

Everyone was saying 'well Caitlyn Jenner had all this plastic surgery. Well Caitlyn Jenner did this. Well Caitlyn Jenner did this.' And everyone was trying to say that since I didn't have all the money that Caitlyn Jenner had, that I couldn't transition.' – B1

Of the binary-aligned interviewees, only B2, B5 and B8 noted circumstances where, when they were ready to explain their gender identity, they could explain it with relatively little concern about their physical or social well-being. B8, from Germany, noted a reason for that circumstance.

I think, [when I was] 14, [grandma] caught me in my mother's clothes. And she also liked these drag shows on TV, and thought it was all quite funny and nice and, well, in her words, 'better than that the boy takes drugs.' – B8

B8 further noted that she would often watch drag shows with her grandmother, and felt accepted by her grandmother; a feeling that B8 carried with her as she later explained her gender identity to others.

The non-binary gender interviewees appeared to be in circumstances that left them markedly less worried about their physical or social well-being. N1 noted that they felt they had no notable problems and felt well supported. N3 noted that their parents accepted them, though they suggested that N3 not push for much recognition of it in professional life, which N3 seemed to accept without much concern.

N2 noted that it was concerning that friends might think N2 was ‘copying’ them by having the same gender identification. In regards to family, N2 noted:

I'm still having trouble trying to get [father] to understand the implications of an identity. He's constantly trying to negotiate things, as if being trans is a business exchange. – N2

However, all non-binary interviewees noted that they continue to have significant difficulties with explaining their gender to their family and others.

For the most part, I just tell others I'm a girl since it's the easiest to get across. I'm sure if I tried to explain genderless to someone like my dad, especially after I've said I was a girl, they would get confused or frustrated about ‘how it works.’ – N2

A lot of people don't get what it means to be a-gender. They don't understand that gender is a social construct and it's not just a binary and that we've kind of normalized the idea of being a binary. And so I think just a lot of people are like, ‘okay’ but they don't actually get what it means. – N3

The difficulty in understanding non-binary genders was also noted by the interviewees with binary-aligned genders. Several binary-aligned interviewees noted that they could not understand what non-binary genders were.

I'm sure what non-binary is...[my friend is] very firmly in between [genders], again I don't understand that. I wish I did. – B3

I am kind of glad that I not non-binary. I know the study of all those people who are not binary and I don't know any of those people, [but] I do know [about] being transgender, being a minority and that deal. Also having that on top of you and having to explain like ‘yeah I'm transgender, but I don't have another gender.’ It's a really difficult thing and I sympathize with those people. – B9

Similarities with Consistency of Feeling of Gender

Between the binary-aligned interviewees and the non-binary interviewees, there appeared to be a consistency with the feeling of their gender identity. Some interviewees of both binary and non-binary gender noted that they had originally thought that their gender matched their natal sex or a sexuality, but that their feelings had not matched that thought.

I thought I was gay for years, but I always had trouble with how why I thought I was gay. I mean I felt very feminine, but I didn't have that pure attraction to men like...my gay friends do. – B2

I was born and raised thinking that I was a girl. That that was supposed to be natural, that was what it was... When I got a little bit older, I thought maybe I was a trans-, like maybe I was a transman, but that didn't fit either, and I don't think that stuck for very long. – N3

Non-binary interviewees often noted more steps than binary-aligned interviewees, but noted that their feeling of their gender did not change, only their articulation of their gender.

My [gender] identity changed several times, yes, but it had a consistent trend. After exposure to what agender was, I'd slowly come to more and more identify with it, though I still felt the exact term didn't quite match my feelings as a whole. I felt that 'agender' connotated an identity in the lack thereof, rather where 'genderless' was simply the lacking, no exact embrace of being without it but still having it be important enough as part of who I was. Once I'd found 'genderless' as a more or less separate term, I resonated with it much more. It, sort of, completed my feelings. – N2

N4 noted that he is roughly gender fluid and, by that nature, does have gender preferences that shift from day to day. However, he noted that while his presentation and preferences do change, he does not feel that his gender has ever changed. His gender has always had fluidity to it, but the long-term or overarching nature of his gender has not changed.

CHAPTER 5

DISCUSSION

The results of the interviews brought up a number of areas where binary-aligned interviewees differed from non-binary interviewees. Some of these areas were in the field that was intentionally part of the interviews, while some differences noted were unrelated to the specific questions asked during the interviews.

My first question was “How do various media (e.g. news, social media, movies) affect a transgender individual as they are discovering and articulating their gender identity?” In answering this, there were a few categories. Stereotypes presented in movies and television shows appeared to rarely directly affect an individual’s development. However, the presence of any imagery, whether it was movies, news, or non-professional fiction, did appear to provide guiding posts or starting points for some individuals, particularly for binary-aligned individuals.

Social media appeared to provide a mixed bag of experiences, with some individuals embracing Facebook, Twitter, or other sites, and others feeling uncomfortable with Facebook. Tumblr appeared to carry heavier importance for some in regard to discovering or articulating gender identity, though only for individuals who were younger. It did appear that younger individuals found their identity primarily through social interaction, then followed up that social interaction with seeking information on gender identity through social media sites such as Tumblr. It appeared that the spiral of silence seemed to only affect some interviewees. The non-binary interviewees did not appear to feel threatened by those in their social network groups. There did seem to be greater hesitancy from the younger, binary-aligned interviewees, which may be indicative of the spiral of silence. However, it seemed that the younger individuals appeared to be willing to shift social networks if Facebook proved less than ideal for their social

needs. This appeared to create a dynamic as reminiscent of social bubbling as much as spiral of silence, as most interviewees did not note any strong tendencies to defend transgenderism within their social networks and most noted either Tumblr or other online methods as means to communicate with peers and those who could sympathize with them.

Question two considered “How does the effect of media differ between those a with binary-aligned gender identification and those with a non-binary gender identification as they are discovering and articulating their gender identity?” While the availability of terminology appeared to be important for all non-binary interviewees and most binary-aligned interviewees, traditional media, such as magazines, movies, newspapers, were more beneficial to binary-aligned interviewees than non-binary interviewees when learning to articulate and understand their identity. This result matches previous findings of Capuzza (2014) and Siebler (2012), which noted significantly more coverage of binary transgendered individuals than non-binary or gender non-conforming individuals. The increased coverage appears to have given more points of reference for binary-aligned interviewees. However, it does not appear that any particular type of media was more common in providing the point of reference. More standardized or professional sources, such as newspaper articles and documentaries, and non-professional sources, such as digital comics or YouTube videos, were all noted by binary-aligned interviewees, but these were not noted as significant by the non-binary interviewees. Non-binary interviewees interviewed appeared to primarily discover their gender identity through either social interaction with others who knew the terminology, or through independent research using Google, a relatively new means of finding information. Notably, Google and casual conversations about gender identities would not have been available often, if at all, until recently. If this trend in discovering one’s gender identity is consistent for a large part of the non-binary transgender community, then it

may explain part why researchers have noted a lack of individuals over 40 years of age who identify with non-binary genders, as individuals over 40 may have not been presented with opportunities to converse about gender identity with peers and may not be in the habit of using Google to explain a feeling. Additionally, while role models and ‘guiding posts’ noted by the interviewees did not appear to always match their exact gender identification (e.g. B5 noted Coraline, a non-transgender character), noted role models and guiding posts tended to remain within the gender binary for binary-aligned individuals, and tended to break gender norms for non-binary individuals (e.g. N1 noted Raja of Rupaul’s drag race). Transgender characters in media have tended to stay within the gender binary (Siebler, 2012), so this difference may have also affected the role models or guiding posts available to those with non-binary gender identities.

Research question three asked “How are media, media imagery, or media trends used by transgender individuals as they articulated their gender experience to friends and family?” and Research question four asked “how does media usage differ between binary-aligned and non-binary transgender individuals when they are articulating their gender experience?” For these, media and social media did not appear to be significant tools used by either non-binary or binary-aligned individuals. B9 noted linking to educational Youtube videos when explaining transgender identities to individuals over the internet, but there were not enough instances in this study to accurately note any preferences or tendencies specific to binary-aligned or non-binary gender. However, there were other trends with media that appear to be of note.

Social media appeared to present different benefits and challenges for binary-aligned and non-binary interviewees. Non-binary interviewees noted more positive experiences and more accepting environments in online communities, which most often included Facebook and

Tumblr. Binary-aligned interviewees were more likely to stay away from Facebook due to negative experiences with harassment. Notably, non-binary interviewees noted significantly fewer instances of harassment or negative experiences stemming from their gender identification overall. Similarly, they noted that people they told their gender to tended to react with apathy, rather than antagonism. People in their personal lives and on social media did not know what non-binary gender was, therefore, they stayed away from the topic. For binary-aligned individuals, it appeared that, in social media and in their personal lives, people were more likely to have an opinion of their transgenderism. This is slightly contradicting the article by Capuzza (2014) noting that journal articles tended to ‘other’ individuals of non-binary gender, but Capuzza noted that articles also did not note people of non-binary gender nearly as often. It is possible that the apathy caused by lack of knowledge of non-binary gender may also be related to the lack of antipathy towards people of non-binary gender.

Difficulties encountered by binary and non-binary interviewees did not appear to directly stem from media often. Religion or political leaning of family tended to be noted as the strongest source of concern or problem for binary-aligned interviewees. Only one individual (B1) noted a distinct problem coming from media, which was that B1 noted having her transition being compared unfavorably to that of Caitlyn Jenner. Several binary-aligned interviewees spoke of transgenderism being viewed as something inherently wrong by family members due to religious or political beliefs, without specific reason or origin being given for those beliefs. As such, it appears that, if media portrayals of transgender individuals in television and movies affects the view of actual transgender individuals, then it may act as a means of reinforcing already established negative perceptions of transgender identity rather than being an initial source of those perceptions. For non-binary individuals, there appeared to be an entirely different set of

problems. Religion was noted once, by N4, as his mother noted she wasn't concerned for N4 in a religious sense, though N4 noted the rest of the family was less favorable towards him. Stigma was also noted in passing by N2, but the primarily problem noted by the non-binary interviewees appeared to be the lack of understanding. At times, this appeared to result in their gender being misinterpreted by family, as N4 noted, or the interviewee explaining their gender as binary-aligned to others only because it was easier to understand, as it was N2's case. This appears to not reflect the consequences of falling outside the 'realm of intelligibility' noted by Foucault (2007) and Butler (2001), as the non-binary interviewees did not note being treated as inhuman or being overtly 'othered' because of their gender identification. However, as the non-binary individuals tended to already know those who they explained their gender to, it is possible that the individuals had already established their personhood in the minds of their family and would not have to face the chance of being seen as outside the realm of intelligibility. However, this suggestion would likely need to be examined at larger scale to be accurately tested.

There were some trends that arose during this study that were unexpected and not part of the initial questions of the study, but were trends that appear to have importance. First, the age during which a transgender individual discovers their gender identity has, to my knowledge, not be studied in depth. From this sample, however, there appears to be a large difference, with binary-aligned interviewees having discovered their gender far earlier than those of non-binary gender. As this is a qualitative study and the sample size is small, no conclusions may be confidently drawn from the finding. However, the consistency through which this trend appeared should be noted, with seven of nine binary aligned individuals learning their gender by third grade, and all four non-binary individuals learning their gender during or after middle-school.

More notable was the importance of individuality for those of non-binary gender. While this study was not structured to test this variable, it remained consistent across all non-binary interviewees and, in some cases, was stated with great emphasis by interviewees. The wording used by non-binary interviewees suggested that they sought to find and express themselves as individuals, rather than try to conform to any definition of gender.

I propose that this tendency be called *Personal Gender*, as the importance of individuality appeared to be emphasized to the exclusion of wanting to fit into any established gender definition. N2 noted that it was afraid of being perceived as “copying” the gender of a friend when taking a non-binary identity, a minor indication that such a gender was something perceived as more personal than pre-established. Two factors appeared to be discernable as a source of this tendency. The first trend appeared to be a fear of some facet of their individuality being assumed because of a gender identity.

I don't like going outside because there are gender stereotypes and [I'm] partially afraid of going to face them. – N1

[My wife thought] if I was fully male, I needed to have a male name, and, if I was thinking female, I should play it up and I continuously told her no, it's not exactly that, I'm still me. – N4

The other trait that may contribute to this is that “gender” as a concept is of little importance relative to their own individuality.

I became more comfortable reaching out and finding things that defined me better than whether I felt more like a boy or a girl – N2

From the rhetoric used, it is possible that the interviewees saw “gender” as a factor that limited their choices and their individuality, rather than as a word that defined a part of them. In reference to Judith Butler's (2006) concept that gender is performative. Personal Gender may be the wish to not confine oneself to, or the feeling of distaste for, that performance. If one took a

male identity, then it is felt that such an identity came with the expectation of acting “male” and at the cost of facets of life specific to “female.” If both genders are denied, then the goal may be to remove the limiters and expectations associated with those genders.

If this concept of Personal Gender carries weight, then there may be some deeper differences that separate binary-aligned and non-binary genders, as those with binary-aligned gender identifications still embrace understandings of “male” and “female” as descriptors of their personhood and those with non-binary gender may perceive “male” and “female” to be limiters to their personhood.

Future Research

Much of this study had results that were unexpected and were not considered during the construction of the study. As such, further research may emphasize testing the hypothesized concept of “Personal Gender.” My suggestion for pursuing this concept is to use a qualitative method to test how important each participant feels their individuality in reference to their gender identity. A more diverse sample should be sought, as there were numerous limitations in this study.

The age-based differences between individuals with binary and people non-binary gender identities might also prove fruitful for further research. A quantitative study of a large sample of binary-aligned and non-binary individuals would likely provide a stronger understanding of what stage of life people tend to be at when discovering their gender identity. As a note for this style of study; while gathering the sample for this study, I had found that non-binary individuals were often more closely connected with online communities than with the in-person communities or support groups that I had interacted with. It is suggested that researchers seeking to work with

individuals of non-binary gender, particularly for quantitative studies, emphasize seeking a sample from websites or online groups with non-binary members.

Limitations

There are a number to consider in regards to the sample interviewed. The volunteers were not ethnically or racially diverse. For the binary-aligned gender, all interviewees were natal males who identified as, or near, female. The groups contacted for volunteers had far more transwomen than transmen, and no transmen ended up being interviewed.

There is also the note that not all transgender individuals seek to attend transgender meetings, so the sample is not likely representative of transgender people as a whole. However, this may be an inevitability of current research methods, as being able to design studies with transgender people with a truly random sampling is currently unfeasible in any practical sense. Similar limitations have been noted by other researchers (Boza & Perry, 2014; Yerke & Mitchell, 2011).

As also noted above, this particular group has a large social media presence, which could have potentially influenced any results related to social media. This factor did not appear to affect many of the interviewees, as it was only mentioned by two interviewees.

Age is also a concern. Interviewees with binary-aligned gender varied greatly in age, but interviewees with non-binary gender were all under the age of 30. Non-binary gender has been noted as more common among those who are younger (Yerke & Mitchell, 2011), so this age difference was expected.

The size of the group did affect the number of non-binary individuals being available for interview. This caused snowball sampling to be necessary to gain half of the non-binary interviewees. Roughly even numbers of binary and non-binary were sought, but the balance

ended with four non-binary interviewees and nine binary-aligned. It was noted by the non-binary interviewees that there are several thriving online communities for individuals of non-binary gender, so it is possible that there is a difference in how individuals with binary-gender and individuals with non-binary gender currently seek peers.

Because I did inform the interviewees of my gender identification as a means of gaining rapport and easing concerns, the answers from the interviewees could have potentially been affect in unforeseen ways.

APPENDIX A
INTERVIEW SCRIPT

Audio recording device: Samsung Galaxy 4S mobile phone with spare battery. The phone will be left in airplane mode for the entirety of each interview. Additionally, Skype may be used at request if interview subjects are unable to make the trip to UNT.

Semi-structured interview, with the following questions being asked:

“Before we start, I’d like to get some demographic information. Would you mind telling me your age?”

“And what should I put for ethnicity?”

“Alright, would you mind telling me what your exact gender identification is?” Researcher will note natal-sex of the participant when asking the history of the subject, if natal-sex is not readily noticeable.

“Okay, to start off, would you mind telling how your history and how you first came to understand your gender identity?”

Keep notes on what factors may seem important. Family, internalized feelings, references to media or media figures and other factors emphasized by the subject should be noted. Interviewer should allow this topic to continue for some time, redirecting the conversation only if it begins to derail into unrelated topics.

If the topic is not described in detail during the participant’s natural discussion, the interviewer would ask:

“Was there any role model, or something else that helped you better define your gender?”

Notes would be taken regarding any sources, media, and imagery played a significant role in defining their gender.

If the topic was not brought during the previous topic, the interviewer should ask:

“Was there anything which may have disrupted you in defining or accepting your gender identity?” Take note of any stereotypes, relationships, and sources may have caused the disruption.

If this topic does not come up, the interviewer would ask:

“Did social media play any part in coming into, or growing comfortable with your gender identity?”

If so, ask how they used social media; whether they had used it as a means of finding information, or as a means of communication.

If the topic was not emphasized, the interviewer would ask:

“Did you ever consider yourself to have a different gender identity?”

If yes, the interviewer would follow up with:

“Alright, would you mind explaining what that previous gender identity was?”

Follow up question: “Would you mind telling me how it changed?”

Further follow up questions may reflect the individual’s answer, depending on what factors or media affected their deciding on the newer definition.

“Would you mind telling me about your experiences with explaining your gender identity to others? Such as family, friends, etc.”

Keep notes on comparisons they may have drawn and what methods they used to explain their experiences. Note if they had used any imagery to convey their experiences. Also keep note of who they may have not told, and why.

If it is not brought up:

“Did you have any factors that you had to work around when explaining your gender identity?”

If they have not brought it up, ask if stigma was a consideration when coming out to family or friends. If stigma was a factor, ask what those stigmas were and where they may have originated.

“Is there anything else that you think we should cover?”

APPENDIX B
LIST OF PARTICIPANTS

Participants

| | AGE | Gender Identification | Pronoun Preference | Ethnicity |
|-----|-----|-----------------------------------|--------------------|---------------------|
| B1: | 24 | trans-girl | she/her | unsure of ethnicity |
| B2: | 57 | male to female | he/his | Caucasian |
| B3: | 59 | female | she/her | Caucasian |
| B4: | 56 | transgender female | she/her | Caucasian |
| B5: | 19 | female | she/her | Caucasian |
| B6: | 63 | transgender woman | she/her | Caucasian |
| B7: | 48 | female | she/her | Latina / Caucasian |
| B8: | 47 | female | she/her | Caucasian |
| B9: | 18 | female | she/her | Caucasian |
| N1: | 20 | neutrois | it | Caucasian |
| N2: | 19 | genderless, with feminine leaning | it | Caucasian |
| N3: | 19 | a-gender or non-binary | they/them | Caucasian |
| N4: | 28 | gender fluid | no preference | Caucasian |

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