

Transgender Representation in Offline and Online Media: LGBTQ Youth Perspectives

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Transgender people are increasingly depicted in both offline and online media. These representations inform the general public about transgender communities and have a significant impact on transgender young peoples' identity development and lived experiences. However, despite increasing awareness of this representation, a lack of research persists on the perspectives of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer (LGBTQ) youth regarding depictions of transgender people in contemporary media. This is despite the fact that this population may be particularly well positioned to consider the impact of these representations on themselves and their peers in the LGBTQ community. In this article the trends in contemporary media representations of transgender individuals are described, the perspectives of LGBTQ youth ($N = 19$) regarding these messages are examined, and the particular perspectives of transgender youth participants ($n = 4$) are explored. Clinical implications for social work practice are considered, including the potential usefulness of an ecological framework in considering the media engagement of LGBTQ young people.

Keywords: Transgender, LGBTQ, media, online, youth, ecological theory

INTRODUCTION

Many forms of contemporary media increasingly contain depictions of transgender people, including both traditionally offline media (e.g., television, movies) as well as emerging online media (e.g., websites, social media) (Burgess, 2009; Ghazali & Nor, 2012; Phillips, 2006). Media is the predominant source where people, both transgender and nontransgender, gain general knowledge about transgender issues. Thus, media representation influences and informs the general public's attitudes. These depictions also have a significant impact on transgender individuals' lives and experiences, including their development of their gender identities (Heinz, 2012; Shelley, 2008). However, even with an increasing awareness of the importance of media representation, a paucity of research persists on the perspectives of LGBTQ (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer) youth regarding this representation, despite the fact that LGBTQ youth may be particularly well positioned to consider the impact of transgender representation on themselves and their peers in the LGBTQ community. The purpose of this article is to describe the current trends in media representation of transgender people, identify the perceptions of a population of LGBTQ youth ($N = 19$) regarding

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these messages, and explore the influence of media on a subsample of transgender participants ($n = 4$). Clinical implications of this media representation for social work practice are also discussed.

The most common term used to encompass a spectrum of gender minority people is transgender (Davis, 2009; Ekins & King, 2006). For the purposes of this article, transgender refers to “a diverse group of people whose gender identity [and/]or expression diverts from prevailing societal expectations. Trans[gender] includes transsexual, transitioned ... and genderqueer people” (Bauer et al., 2009, in Heinz, 2012, p. 326). LGBTQ (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer) is a common acronym used to refer to all sexual and gender minority identities and people. The term transgender man (trans men, transgender male, etc.) refers to individuals who transition from the socially constructed gender category of woman to the category of man, while the term transgender woman (trans women, transgender female, etc.) refers to individuals who transition from the category of man to the category of woman (Davis, 2009). Transition, the process of living as the gender with which one identifies, is undertaken by some transgender spectrum individuals. Transitioning may include changing clothing or appearance, medical processes such as hormones or surgery, and/or changing one’s name on legal documents (McInroy, Craig, & Austin, 2014; National Center for Transgender Equality, 2009; Vanderleest & Galper, 2009).

Transgender People in Offline Media: Representation and Identity Negotiation

The representation of transgender people in traditional, offline media (e.g., television, movies) has increased since the 1970s, with the most significant growth occurring in the last several decades (Ekins & King, 2006; Ghazali & Nor, 2012). However, a recognizable inconsistency has persisted — the proliferation of both negative and positive representations. Negative or problematic representation may sensationalize or exploit transgender people. Comical caricatures of transvestites and cross-dressers are common (Phillips, 2006), as are depictions of transgender people as criminals (Shelley, 2008) as well as “sex workers, mentally ill ... and as unlovable” (Davis, 2009, pp. 16–17). Additionally, information provided in media about transgender people may frequently be inaccurate, incomplete, or biased or ignore historical context (Chiland, 2003; Shelley, 2008). In contrast, more positive or constructive media representation also exists in offline media, particularly in movies (Shelley, 2008). Such characterizations depict more sympathetic or emphatic characters and may inform people of the possibilities for medical treatment and support or educate the public about the violence and other social barriers transgender people experience (Shelley, 2008). Importantly these representations, either negative or positive, overwhelmingly depict adult transgender characters, with scant representations of transgender youth.

Offline media is frequently the medium by which people who come to identify as transgender first encounter representation of transgender individuals and communities (Chiland, 2003; Heinz, 2012). Research has indicated that the negative depictions frequently portrayed in offline media may have detrimental impacts, such as depression or shame, on transgender people who consume them and incite fear in the nontransgender population (Ringo, 2002). A recent study of transgender individuals and media in the United Kingdom found participants frequently experienced victimization as a result of popular media representation of transgender people. More than 20% of respondents reported experiencing verbal harassment, and 8% reported experiencing physical harassment stemming from negative media representation (Trans Media Watch, 2010). Additionally, most felt media had informed negative reactions they experienced from family and friends. Participants reported instances of being called sex workers or mentally ill, which they felt stemmed from media the perpetrators had consumed (Trans Media Watch, 2010).

Media may also be crucial to the development of transgender identity, aiding in the emergent consciousness of one’s sex or gender, as well as in reconciling one’s gender identity (Ghazali & Nor, 2012; Ringo, 2002; Shelley, 2008)— allowing transgender people “to generate a new awareness of their embodied selves ... [and helping them] to either construct or consolidate their identity”

(Shelley, 2008, p. 136) as transgender individuals. The media depictions consumed may include both offline and online media as well as both fictional characters and real people (Shelley, 2008). Ringo (2002) found that multiple forms of media are significant in individual's realization of transgender identity and may be used as a comparison tool, allowing transgender people to contrast their experiences with those of characters portrayed in media. Media may also be the point from which people begin their search for resources, further information, or medical treatment (Chiland, 2003). For young people in particular, the increasing visibility of transgender people in contemporary culture may also be encouraging disclosure of transgender self-identification with those in their lives (Burgess, 2009).

Transgender People in Online Media: Representation, Resources, and Community

Ekins and King (2006, p. 58) argue that "the most significant change in the telling of [transgender] ... stories ... [has been] the rise of the internet." Transgender people are increasingly becoming visible in online media (e.g., websites, social media) resulting in a wealth of diverse, real-life, and/or increasingly positive representations (Ghazali & Nor, 2012; Heinz, 2012; Phillips, 2006). Heinz (2012) argues that the internet provides a critical, if not the most crucial, resource for transgender people. Transgender populations are increasingly active producers of online knowledge about transgender identity and issues through active blogging and resources sharing. Online media may offer increased access to information, resources, and community (Heinz, 2012; Mallon, 2009a; Shelley, 2008)—particularly for transgender people who have not yet disclosed their transgender identity or who have limited access to offline resources (Mallon, 2009a). Similarly, the internet also offers the opportunity to develop communities and support networks while remaining geographically dispersed (Heinz, 2012).

Unfortunately, despite this emerging research, a lack of attention to the perspectives of LGBTQ youth remains regarding representation of the transgender population in offline and online media. LGBTQ youth are particularly well located to consider the impact of these depictions, because they frequently possess a heightened awareness of representation of LGBTQ populations and are typically active consumers of both offline and online media. The vast majority of young people in North America are online; in 2011 in the United States 95% of teens (12–17) and 94% of young adults (18–29) were online (Pew Internet & American Life Project, 2013). Indications also suggest that LGBTQ youth may be particularly avid consumers of online media, spending notably more time online than their non-LGBTQ peers (GLSEN, 2013).

METHODS

This study utilized grounded theory to investigate media depictions of transgender youth and young adults. The research was undertaken in Toronto, Canada, an urban city with a significant LGBTQ community and was part of a larger study of media and LGBTQ youth. In-depth interviews were carried out with 19 LGBTQ-identified young adults. Participants were recruited from more than a dozen organizations providing programming and services for the intended study population. To be considered for an interview, participants were required to (1) be between ages 18 and 22, (2) identify as LGBTQ, (3) be avid consumers of both offline and online media, and (4) report seeing representations of transgender people in media. Participant recruitment occurred in September to December 2011 and continued until theoretical saturation occurred and minimal new information was emerging (Creswell, 1998; McCracken, 1988). Before the interviews participants were informed of the study purpose and provided written informed consent. This study has a University of Toronto Research Ethics Board Protocol (no. 26749). Participation was compensated with a gift card to a retailer of their choice.

Interviews were several hours in length, used a semistructured interview process, and were audio recorded. Questions and occasional probes were asked related to participants' perception of, and reaction to, depictions of transgender people in the media. Questions included the following: *What are transgender youth characters in the media usually like? What are some of the messages about transgender people in the media? Is there transphobia in the media?* All interview data were analyzed using ATLAS.ti by seven separate coders (each individual interview was analyzed by three coders).

Demographics

Demographic data were gathered using pre-interview assessments and analyzed in SPSS 19.0. The study population was comprised of 10 ($N = 19$) LGBTQ-identified participants: *age*: 18–22, with a mean of 19.47 ($SD = 1.219$); *gender identity*: cisgender woman (47.4%), cisgender man (31.6%), transgender man (15.8%), and genderqueer (5.3%), where cisgender refers to being nontransgender; *sexuality*: gay (31.6%), lesbian (21.1%), bisexual (10.5%), queer/polysexual (10.6%), and multiple identities (26.3%); *race*: white (73.7%), Asian (5.3%), black (5.3%), and multiracial (15.8%); *ethnicity*: participants identified in a multiplicity of ways, including Jewish (15.8%) and partially/fully Hispanic (15.8%); and *media consumption*: participants used at least four kinds of offline media and four kinds of online media. Participants were also asked about their media consumption containing LGBTQ content, with study participants consuming a significant amount of content with representations of LGBTQ people or issues.

Television and Movies With Transgender People Consumed by Youth

Participants were consuming an array of representations of transgender people in offline media via television and movies. Television shows with transgender characters or representations consumed included *America's Next Top Model* (2003 to present); *Degrassi: The Next Generation* (2001 to present); *Dancing with the Stars* (2005 to present); *Queer as Folk* (U.S. version, 2000–2005); *Ru Paul's Drag Race* (2009 to present); *The L Word* (2004–2009); *The Real World* (1992 to present); *Ugly Betty* (2006–2010); and *Young Americans* (2000). Movies with transgender characters/representations consumed included *Soldier's Girl* (2003), *Becoming Chaz* (2011), *Boys Don't Cry* (1999), *Hedwig and the Angry Inch* (2001), and *Ma Vie en Rose* (1997).

RESULTS

In discussing their experiences with transgender representation in media, participants in the study generally discussed their experiences with depictions of transgender people in offline media (e.g., television, movies) as distinct from their experiences with online media (e.g., websites, social media), often comparing and contrasting the quality of transgender representation in the two media types.

Offline Media: Transphobic Versus Authentic Representations

Transphobic Representation

Participants overwhelmingly agreed that transphobia (negative reactions to or opinions of transgender people) was an issue in media, particularly emphasizing transphobic representation in offline media. In fact, a notable number of LGBTQ youth felt that transphobia in media was a more significant issue than homophobia (negative reactions to or opinions of gay, lesbian, or bisexual people):

I think transphobia is a much bigger problem in mainstream media or any media than homophobia. I think most people would say, regardless of how they actually feel about [LGBTQ people], they would probably say that homophobia is not acceptable. Or at least we shouldn't be open about it. But people are very open about being transphobic. And it's terrible. (Emma, cisgender young woman, queer/bisexual, 22)

Many participants felt that there were few positive representations of transgender people, and their responses indicated that the transgender representation available within offline media remains very limited, problematic and stereotypical:

I think there's a huge gap [in media] that really isn't shown. Because it's sort of the forgotten ... like everyone forgets the T in LGBTQ sometimes, but some people don't even know what it stands for too ... most people don't even know that it exist[s]." (Brian, cisgender young man, gay, 18)

When trans[gender] people are represented in the media it's represented as a joke or as a funny little aside ... trans[gender] people [are] hardly represented which I think is an issue. ... It's easy to hate people when you've never seen them. It's very easy to make fun of trans[gender] people when there's no trans[gender] person sitting in front of you. There's no human being that you're making fun of. There's only some sort of fictional idea of someone that you're joking about. (Andy, cisgender young man, queer/gay, 21)

This lack of representation was in contrast to other LGBTQ populations, such as gays and lesbians, whom participants felt were addressed more often (though the quality of these representations was also varied). Participants indicated this lack of representation, combined with limited stereotypical and/or problematic representations, facilitated a lack of awareness and knowledge about transgender people by society:

I feel like transphobia is a problem in society, because we always fight for homophobia and respecting gays and lesbians, but no one really cares about trans[gender] people and I feel like ... transphobia is really out there. And I feel like the media is not doing anything to help this, because we have gay characters, we have lesbians, but we don't have like many trans[gender] people. I only know about two people—two trans[gender] people: Chaz Bono [on *Dancing with the Stars*] and a character in *America's Next Top Model* and that's it. (Ray, cisgender young man, gay, 19)

A lot of straight people will also put gay people into categories and you'll have like the butch/fem thing ... you'll always have the masculine one and the feminine one, and they're still playing the roles that a lot of straights would play in their relationships. And so to them I think that kind of helps them accept gay people as a different kind of person who is still essentially doing the same things. But when they come across trans[gender] folk there is no precedence; they don't know how to start looking at them and I think in media they're often portrayed either as sex workers or as mass murderers or something else that's equally violent and terrifying. (Sam, genderqueer young person, polysexual, 19)

Participants indicated that LGBTQ representations in offline media oversimplified sexuality and gender, acting to reinforce heterosexual, cisgender notions of gender presentation, behavior, and intimate relationships. These oversimplifications and heteronormative constructions of transgender characters were perceived by participants as transphobic:

So for this [transgender] character [in *Degrassi*] ... the way in which they were discussing their own gender was a really like almost like archaic way of looking at things. ... [That] stupid phrase like sex is between the legs and gender is between the ears which is like really actually transphobic, they use it in the shows because that's the like heteronormative way of looking at things so they're just like oh because everyone's going to understand that but really they don't understand that that actually affects a lot of people who have transitioned. (John, transgender young man, queer/pansexual, 19)

Whenever characters are featured ... since [I] identified as trans[gender], I really look towards that ... whenever they [are a] feature, they're always the traditional heteronormative—I don't know, sexist form, either girl wants to be a guy and you're going to go really masculine, really butch, really tough or

guy wants to be a girl and gets really femme and wants to look like a Barbie. (Shawn, transgender/androgynous young man, gay, 18)

Transgender men were also perceived as being less visible than transgender women. While many felt representations of transgender women on television and in movies were stereotypical or problematic, they felt that transgender men were nearly invisible in offline media, except for a few notable examples:

[W]hen trans[gender] women are depicted in the media they're seen as like these outlandish drag queens or they're sex workers and that is depicted in an extremely negative light. I have a huge issue with the way trans[gender] women are depicted. ... [But] trans[gender] men aren't really depicted at all in the media. (Lyssa, cisgender young woman, lesbian, 19)

[A]t least transgender women are visible. Trans[gender] men are not so visible. I guess Chaz Bono probably a little bit ... and that one Brazilian model. But those are like the only transgender people I can think of off the top of my head who are popular and at all respected. ... That's pretty grim. (Emma, cisgender young woman, queer/bisexual, 22)

Similarly participants, particularly transgender participants, also emphasized that the scope of representation of transgender people in offline media was limited to particular categories of identity, and not reflective of the spectrum of transgender identities. As a result, they felt that their social experiences were made more challenging:

I think there is a lot of media right now about trans[gender] people and there's been a lot about like this third gender aspect or like the fluidity of gender. ... [T]hat fluidity doesn't exist for me I find it harder to navigate in the world ... when every image is talking about how someone feels so fluid about their gender and, while I fully support that, it doesn't make my life easier ... it makes their life easier, which is awesome, but we need like a balance [of gender representation] so that my life can be easy too. (Eric, transgender young man, queer/pansexual, 19)

Interestingly, several participants also discussed transphobia in offline media created specifically for LGBTQ audiences, particularly in the ground-breaking LGBTQ television shows *Queer as Folk* and *The L Word*. One particular character in *The L Word* was emphasized: Max Sweeney, a transgender man who became pregnant in the show's final season. Such portrayals made even LGBTQ-specific media representation problematic:

I've never really seen a positive depiction of trans[gender] identities or gender identities, period. I love *The L Word*, but I hate with a passion *The L Word* when *The L Word* is awful. Like [the transgender character] Max its awful. And with the pregnancy thing with how he felt, they treated him and they talked to him and they put him down. It was awful. (Sara, cisgender young woman, queer/lesbian, 19)

Authentic Representation

However, many participants also discussed offline representations that they perceived as more positive or less problematic, indicating the presence of more complex and authentic characters in offline media. They found these representations to be more diverse than other depictions of transgender people they had seen:

I remember [a movie] called *A Soldier's Girl*. ... I think it was actually written by a trans[gender] woman—I do remember that one. And then there was [a movie] called *Ma Vie en Rose*—it's French and it's kind of sweet and takes away that threatening aspect, so I think people from all sorts of backgrounds can watch it and still feel some influence, and it's positive. (Lyssa, cisgender young woman, lesbian, 19)

I watched the documentary [by Chaz Bono] ... it showed his life and it showed him really as a regular person you know like he got angry just like everyone else. He had hard times and had fun times just

like everyone else. He like very strictly identified as male and ... was really interested in the community, was really interested in helping the community but didn't really focus on his transition you know. Like although the documentary was about his transition he didn't really like focus on it and that I think was really great because you know it relieves pressure. (Eric, transgender young man, queer/pansexual, 19)

The more positive representations emphasized by participants also tended to be more fully integrated into storylines and less tokenistic. These more authentic portrayals often normalized transgender identity, depicting characters as complex individuals instead of disproportionately focusing on their transgender identification. Participants emphasized quality of representation, rather than quantity as a crucial consideration:

[A] cupcake show ... one of the employees at the shop is trans[gender] ... you're watching the show and I had no idea and then she was talking about it once ... so she just mentioned it and then the show went on about cupcakes you know. So it was things like that, where I was just like that's awesome. ... So yeah, so things like that would be cool to not have the storyline focus on the queer character. But some people would argue like well then how do they get visible and I'm like that's how they get visible in being considered like a person ... not like a checkpoint. (Eric, transgender young man, queer/pansexual, 19)

Interestingly, the same representations of transgender people in offline media some participants found problematic (such as television shows *Queer as Folk* and *Degrassi*) were perceived as positive representations by other participants:

Degrassi, there was a trans[gender] character on there which was really, really cool. I thought that was really done well ... because I'm trans[gender] as well. So it's just really cool to see somebody's who transgender in the show. Because not a lot of people really know what it is. And I think the directors did a good job incorporating it. And the struggles that trans[gender] people have to go through. ... In some cases yeah [it was realistic], they did a really good job. But in other cases, no, really [it wasn't realistic], just the character itself, like the person they chose for it. ... But other than that, the issues that the character was going through are very true and realistic as what trans[gender] people go through. (Darius, transgender young man, straight/questioning, 19)

Youth believed that offline media had significant problems, but also indicated that positive depictions were helpful in terms of increasing representation of and knowledge about transgender people. Previous research has found that offline media is the source of knowledge for most people on transgender communities and issues, influencing people's attitudes and impacting the experiences of transgender people (Heinz, 2012; Shelley, 2008). Importantly, representations of transgender people and transgender themed storylines in offline media have particularly crucial implications for transgender youth who are often actively negotiating their transgender identities when consuming such content (Ghazali & Nor, 2012; Ringo, 2002; Shelley, 2008). Participants, particularly transgender participants, echoed the emotional and psychological importance seeing depictions of transgender people in offline media during their adolescence.

Online Media: Explicit Transphobia Versus Resources That Support Healthy Development

Explicit Transphobia

Participants also discussed transgender representation in online media. Several participants felt that while transphobia existed in offline media, it was more covert than transphobia online. They felt the anonymity online allowed people to be more explicitly transphobic:

I guess there are a lot of misconceptions when it comes to transgender and transsexual people. Online that tends to come out a lot more because people are more candid about what they say or do. So I don't know, the internet in general is very transphobic I would say. (Nathalie, cisgender young woman, bisexual, 19)

Resources That Support Healthy Development

However, despite the overt transphobia online, participants elucidated numerous benefits to online media for transgender people, particularly transgender youth. Participants, especially those who identified as transgender, discussed the wealth of resources and information available for transgender youth online to support their identity development and provide a sense of community and representation:

At the time I could not find a media outlet that addressed the way I was feeling. It's only until I sat until 4am on Google searching trans[gender] and ... gender; what that means. When I found that, there was a cornucopia of wonderful things ... like uplifting messages. Even on [the blogging site] Tumblr. Tumblr is such a huge platform right now for trans[gender] people. ... It's wonderful. There are so many places online, so many. (Shawn, transgender young man/androgynous, gay, 18)

Many participants referenced a common trend among transgender people involving documenting their transition process on the video-sharing site YouTube. Although none of the transgender participants in this study posted their own experiences on this site, the majority had used these videos as support during their transition process:

[W]hen I first was going through being trans[gender] ... I didn't really know what it was called or whatnot. Like there's no resources. ... So I'd just go online [to] YouTube and type in transgender and then some guys that were trans[gender], they'd pop up. And then they'd have videos of their whole [transition] process ... [of being] on testosterone and it's like 'first month this is how it's going' sort of thing ... and gradually show all the changes, and then pre-op, before their operations for chest surgery, their post-op. So that was really helpful to me. And I would always watch it and just kind of be excited as to what can happen. I just really wanted to start it and get on that process because I've seen a lot of people who've gone through the situation. It gives you hope. (Darius, transgender young man, straight/questioning, 19)

[T]here are a million and one trans[gender] blogs on You Tube. Like so many people document their transition and like that is my first go to [advice] when I meet a younger trans[gender] person and I'm like "you want to see the changes in six months watch these guys' videos" you know. (Eric, transgender young man, queer/pansexual, 19)

Online, transgender participants were able to access information and role models that remained largely inaccessible in their offline lives. Most transgender participants were also able to develop a community of transgender people online, who were able to provide relevant support, resources, medical information, etc.:

Actually through the YouTube videos [I found resources and community] ... some of them had Facebook. So I had Facebook as well. So I'd add ... other trans[gender] people ... now I have about 100 people who are female to male [transgender] on my Facebook and see their transitioning. It's just like wow. I didn't really know how many people were going through the same thing, and how common it is. ... I felt more inclusive. I could ask anybody questions. And also for me starting testosterone too ... I heard [about] some of the resources locally, they're not as helpful. There's a guy and he went to see and endocrinologist in [another city]. So it's kind of like—he said that it was really helpful. And that's how I started my testosterone. And I went to [the same doctor]. (Darius, transgender man, straight/questioning, 19)

DISCUSSION

This study found that the media representations of transgender youth both online and offline were multifaceted and influential. Media representations of transgender people have significant implications for the identity development of transgender youth (Ringo, 2002; Shelley, 2008). Ghazali and Nor (2012) found that media, both offline and online, assists transgender youth in rehearsing and negotiating their transgender identities. Previous research has also determined that these representations have a direct impact on transgender people's lives as the perceptions and behavior of people they encounter are influenced by the media (Heinz, 2012; Shelley, 2008). Participants were overwhelmingly transgender-positive in their comments and encouraged the positive representation of transgender people in offline media. This is in contrast to some previous research that has indicated "a particularly tense relationship between the non-transgender and transgender segments" (Morrison, 2010, p. 651) of the LGBTQ community. As these respondents were youth, such transgender positive and inclusive responses bode well for the future of the LGBTQ community.

Perceptions of participants regarding traditionally offline media were generally consistent regardless of gender identity. Participants indicated transphobia was rampant, and that the media shows few authentic representations of transgender people, resulting in limited or stereotypical portrayals. Participants felt that transgender men in particular were underrepresented when compared to transgender women—who were more visible, but also highly stereotyped. This finding is consistent with previous research on the representation of transgender people in mainstream media (Trans Media Watch, 2010). Participants, particularly transgender participants, indicated offline representations often oversimplified gender and reinforced heterosexual, cisgender norms onto LGBTQ people generally, and transgender people in particular. However, participants also discussed many representations that they perceived as more positive, diverse, accessible, integrated, and representative, and that were less tokenistic or menacing. Several participants indicated problematic transgender representations in media created specifically for LGBTQ people. Interestingly, perceptions of particular representations, including in media created for LGBTQ people, varied significantly—suggesting that the experience of these depictions is quite individual. Some participants found particular representations positive or supportive, whereas others found the same depictions negative or offensive.

In contrast, online media offered a more realistic form of representation. Although transphobia was more explicit online, as a result of the anonymous nature of online communication, participants also revealed numerous available benefits. Participants described the high-quality resources, information, and real-life experiences accessible to transgender youth. Online media may be the predominant purveyor of notions of transgender identity for some transgender youth (Ghazali & Nor, 2012). Positive role models for transgender youth are exceptionally rare in mainstream media (Davis, 2009), yet transgender participants were able to access role models online. Online spaces provide transgender youth with the opportunity to develop a peer group, track one another's transitions, and share information (Ghazali & Nor, 2012). In this study, several transgender participants were able to develop personal support communities, which provided relevant resources and encouraged a sense of connectedness. These supportive interactions were fostered through social media (e.g., Facebook, Tumblr) and the practice of some transgender people documenting their transitions online (via YouTube).

Access and Offline Life

Although the wealth of representations and support relevant to transgender people online elucidated by participants are important, the issue of access to these resources offline should not be overlooked. Access to the internet is reduced for adolescents from low-income environments (Pascoe, 2011; Roberts & Foehr, 2008). This is particularly true for transgender youth, who

frequently experience violence, harassment, ostracization, and discrimination as a result of their identities (Davis, 2009; Shelley, 2008). This “economic and societal marginalization” (Davis, 2009, p. 16) potentially limits access to the wealth of resources provided through the internet. Additionally, even if youth have adequate access to online resources, the relevance of the content available online must be considered in the context of their offline social environment. The literature indicates that the “dizzying offerings of ... identity choices [online] appear more limited [offline], [and are] often geographically [restricted] to metro areas or to younger age groups, and strongly marked by economic and class privilege” (Heinz, 2012, p. 339). In future research, the role of gender, race/ethnicity, and class in youths’ experiences of transgender representation must be considered (Shelley, 2008).

Limitations

Participants had significant knowledge of various types of media and were very engaged in the study—potentially representing a more motivated segment of the LGBTQ population in the North American context. They were also generally well educated, came from a diversity of income backgrounds, resided in an urban area, and experienced a variety of family and community responses to their LGBTQ status. Yet, participants were screened to ensure their active consumption of media and were not intended to be representative of all LGBTQ youth. Another limitation is the small size of the sample ($N = 19$), as well as the transgender-identified subsample ($n = 4$). Of this transgender subpopulation, three identified as transgender men and one participant identified as genderqueer; thus no participants identified as transgender women or any other transgender spectrum identities.

Clinical Implications

Although the concerns of all members of the LGBTQ youth community overlap somewhat, important differences are seen in clinical implications as well as disproportionate barriers to care experienced by transgender youth that are not experienced by cisgender LGBTQ youth (Davis, 2009). Use of an ecological framework (Bronfenbrenner, 1979, 1994), which considers the individual within their multilevel (e.g., interpersonal, community, and sociocultural) environment, may be a helpful assessment tool when working with LGBTQ youth (Craig, McInroy, McCready, & Alaggia, *in press*). Ecological approaches permit the consideration of both negative factors (risks and barriers) and positive factors (benefits and supports) in multiple contexts of a young person’s life. Recent literature has also incorporated media, both offline and online, as a critical component of the ecological framework—recognizing media as both a source of risk and a source of support (Craig, McInroy, McCready, Di Cesare, & Pettaway, 2015; Craig et al., *in press*). The use of such a framework with transgender youth will aid in the identification of areas for clinical consideration, including the potential impacts of media on their lived experiences.

Clinicians working with transgender youth should be aware that generally “few screening, intake, and assessment procedures recognize transgender identities” (Davis, 2009, p. 14), rendering transgender youth invisible and allowing their specific concerns and issues to remain unaddressed in clinical environments. Additionally, clinicians should be cognizant of the differences between biological sex, gender identity, and sexual orientation (Davis, 2009) when interacting with LGBTQ young people. Other sources provide more extensive definitions and implications for clinical practice with transgender youth (see, for example, Mallon, 2009b).

Language and terminology is a prevalent issue, particularly given the inadequacy of media representation of transgender people. Just as representations of transgender people in media inform the general public, these representations are also frequently the source of clinicians’ knowledge about transgender people (Mallon, 2009a). Clinicians and health care settings may use terminology

in significantly different ways than the transgender community (Davis, 2009) and may frequently use inaccurate, outdated, or even discriminatory language. It should also be recognized that when working with young people who are transgender, or who think they might be transgender, that these youth might not have access to terminology or definitions themselves, particularly in the early stages of their transition (Davis, 2009).

Clinicians should make a conscious effort to educate themselves about transgender youth and the resources available to the population (Craig et al., 2015; Mallon and DeCrescenzo, 2009). It has been suggested that media, both offline and online, may offer useful insights for clinicians seeking information about transgender identities (Craig et al., 2015). However, clinicians opting to use media for this purpose should be aware of the varying quality of representations of transgender people in media (as discussed above) and balance popular media representations with more academic and professional sources of knowledge (Mallon & DeCrescenzo, 2009). Similarly, the use of popular media representations of transgender identity “has been proven to be useful with clients ... [and] many materials ... can be shared with clients to increase their information and knowledge” (Mallon & DeCrescenzo, 2009, p. 79). Thus, supporting clients’ exploration using media may be one way for clinicians to foster identity development among transgender youth.

Conclusion

One participant in this study indicated that online resources and information on transgender people should extend to offline media, suggesting it would be more accessible to the public as well as helping professionals. This accessibility of information would better inform people about available transgender identities, experiences, resources, and support. At a minimum, clinicians should take initiative to develop their awareness of transgender representation in offline and online media, recognizing both the risks and supportive opportunities of media consumption and using the knowledge gained through the use of an ecological theoretical framework to facilitate the constructive information seeking and identity exploration of their adolescent and young adult clients.

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