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Exploring social television, opinion leaders, and Twitter audience reactions to Diane Sawyer's coming out interview with Caitlyn Jenner

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ABSTRACT

With increasing visibility in both fictional and nonfictional media, transgender individuals have become a staple of the media landscape. Nonetheless, the general public has been slow to warm to transgender individuals and the rights of this community of people. The present study explored the audience reception to Caitlyn Jenner's coming out interview with Diane Sawyer. Examining Twitter conversations as part of a social television experience, this paper focuses on the types of words and phrases used in response to the interview, the themes that were present in the conversation, and the opinion leaders who helped to shape the discussion. Co-occurrence of themes was also explored. Results indicated an overwhelmingly positive response from live tweeters watching Jenner's coming out interview, led by a small but influential group of celebrities and media personalities such as Oprah Winfrey and Perez Hilton. Top themes included support, gender, journey to truth, family drama, and bravery. The results are positioned within an exploration of the social nature of television viewing and reception of transgenderism by mainstream audiences.

KEYWORDS

Caitlyn Jenner; celebrity; media events; social television; transgender attitudes

According to the World Professional Association for Transgender Health (WPATH), the word *transgender* describes a varied range of individuals who transcend traditionally defined categories of gender (Coleman et al., 2012). Even compared to other members of the queer community—such as individuals who are gay, lesbian, and bisexual—transgender individuals experience greater levels of prejudice (Dispenza, Watson, Chung, & Brack, 2012; Norton & Herek, 2013), often referred to as transphobia. Transphobia can be defined as an “emotional disgust toward individuals who do not conform to society's gender expectations” (Hill & Willoughby, 2005, p. 533). There persists much transphobia in American culture and in many cultures around the world. Using a computer-assisted content analytic approach, the current study explored the reception of Caitlyn Jenner (then identifying as Bruce) declaring her trans identity in an April 24, 2015, interview with Diane Sawyer on *20/20*. In particular, the present research investigated the real-time Twitter reaction to this significant media event from a social TV standpoint. Examining Twitter responses to the coming out of a popularly known and historically

beloved Olympian illuminates how transgender lives and the disclosure of trans identities are seen when they occur on a public stage.

Research indicates that gender identity impacts individuals' success in the job market (Kirk & Belovics, 2008; Reed, Franks, & Scherr, 2015) and in the workplace (O'Neil, McWhirter, & Cerezo, 2008), their interactions with governmental agencies and policies (Dispenza et al., 2012), and discrimination in areas such as housing and education (Dispenza et al., 2012). Transgender individuals report discrimination from both within and outside the LGBTQ community, including discrimination from family, friends, and romantic partners (Dispenza et al., 2012). Transgender individuals are also extremely likely to be victims of violence and abuse (Stotzer, 2009). In one sample of female transgender individuals, more than half reported gender-related physical abuse, and more than three-quarters reported gender-related psychological abuse (Nuttbrock et al., 2010).

As such, transgender individuals are at risk for developing negative coping mechanisms, such as depression, anxiety, and substance misuse (Clements-

Nolle, Marx, & Katz, 2006; Dispenza et al., 2012; Gainor, 2000; Irwin, 2002). They receive less familial support than their cisgender siblings (Factor & Rothblum, 2007), and thus, they may feel especially isolated. Therefore, the positive reception of a transgender celebrity may be especially important for transgender individuals' cultivation of their perceived acceptance and legitimacy in society.

Transphobic persons most often tend to be cisgender and heterosexual (Winter, Webster, & Cheung, 2008), and males tend to exhibit stronger levels of transphobia than females (Carroll, Güss, Hutchinson, & Gauler, 2012; Norton & Herek, 2013; Winter et al., 2008). In a study of college students in Hong Kong, transphobia was linked to both gender stereotyping and homophobia, and it was found to often be rooted in religious scripture (Winter et al., 2008). Transphobia has also been linked to heterosexism and political conservatism (Norton & Herek, 2013). Therefore, it is important for researchers to focus on public, mainstream media when engaging in the study of reception of a transgender celebrity's coming-out event. Knowing or interacting with minority group members can lead to a lessening of prejudice from majority group members (Allport, 1954), and because the world "knows" Caitlyn Jenner, her coming out offers a particularly interesting case study.

Literature review

Social TV and Twitter

The current television environment includes web-based and social media, often in the form of real-time commentary that coincides with the broadcasting of entertainment or news. This is often referred to as social TV. Social TV is motivated by viewers' need to communicate and the enjoyment and social gratification that arise from mediated social interaction at the same time as television viewing (Kramer, Winter, Benninghoff, & Gallus, 2015). The trend of engaging online while watching television has become so popular that Nielsen is now monitoring social TV ratings of shows as they air for the first time (Deggans, 2016). Nielsen refers to those who use social media while watching television as "social TV authors," because they regularly join program conversations and share their reactions, attitudes, and feelings (Nielsen, 2015). In other words, these social TV authors help to shape the meaning of television broadcasts, as well as the

cultural understandings of programming, events, and people.

Social media can be a useful barometer of the reach of an ongoing event or real-time issue. Ongoing events are "those topics which are introduced by a community of users tweeting about an event as it unfolds" (Zubiaga, Spina, Martinez, & Fresno, 2015, p. 464), and they are often broadcast live in the media. Twitter is commonly known by experts as the leader in social TV platforms (Cohen, 2013), though Facebook is close behind. Sites like Twitter may be used as a tool to measure reactions to both planned and unplanned ongoing events (Kaleel & Abhari, 2015). According to Kaleel and Abhari, "the typical change in the volume of data in social media related to a specific topic is often an indication of the occurrence of a significant event in the real world" (2015, p. 48). The larger the online response to a media event, the more weight the event may be assigned in terms of its importance.

Individuals tend to congregate, both online and off, when consuming media, particularly broadcasts that are depicted as "must-see" events. As noted by Shamma, Kennedy, and Churchill, "There are a number of live media events, like award shows or championship games, where real-time consumption of the action is a compelling experience—people often gather together to share in the experience or communicate with each other online" (2010, p. 589). In place of, or in addition to, joining together with others in an offline setting, many individuals may choose to engage with others online during the broadcast of a large and important media event. As audience members tuned into the event, "users might be interested in gaining an ambient awareness of what conversations are unfolding online" (Shamma, Kennedy, & Churchill, 2010, p. 592).

The practice of live-blogging is a dynamic consequence of the Internet age, and Twitter is perhaps the foremost social network for real-time reacting and for the monitoring others' reactions. Twitter is noted for the shortness of its 140-character maximum for tweets, and this brevity is as a fundamental element of the site's success (Zubiaga et al., 2015). Another central feature important for Twitter's success is the relative ease with which users can spread these short messages (Zubiaga et al., 2015). With a few clicks of a mouse, Twitter's users are able to retweet or quote short text, with or without their own commentary. News and memes are the most frequently retweeted content, though memes and tweets related to ongoing

media events have the capacity to spread faster and occur more frequently than other types of tweets (Zubiaga et al., 2015). Tweets related to live events tend to be shorter than other types of tweets, but they occur in rapid-fire succession (Zubiaga et al., 2015).

According to Zubiaga et al., “the practice of live-tweeting an event has become fundamental as Twitter has gained importance as a real-time, information-sharing media” (2015, p. 464). In their assessment of Twitter use during Norwegian political debates, Kalsnes et al. (2014) refer to Twitter as an important “backchannel” for making audience feedback and commentary visible. Other scholarship has referred to Twitter as a “virtual lounge room” (Harrington, Highfield, & Bruns, 2012), wherein audiences essentially interact and participate virtually as they would in a real-world gathering.

Transgender representation and awareness

The average person knows very little about trans individuals and gender identity. Thus, the media may be their primary source of exposure to transgender persons and their primary source of education. People who do not often encounter a minority group’s members in everyday life are likely to rely on the media when forming their opinions of these group members (Hart, 2000). Thus, it is crucial to consider how transgender individuals and issues have been represented in American media throughout time.

Historically, transgender people have tended to be scarce in terms of portrayal in the media. Trans women are more visible than trans men, however, trans women are overly sexualized and stereotyped. As Abbott (2013) noted in a discussion of film, “transwomen are further sexualized and stigmatized due to their role in prostitution and pornography, but even more by popular narratives which sensationalize these stereotypes further” (p. 33). When transgender depictions have been present, they have tended to fall into certain recurring narratives, such as the trans person who deceives others, the trans monster, the trans mammy, and more recently, the trans revolutionary (Ryan, 2009).

Generally, media stories about transgender persons have highlighted the most salacious details and provided little discussion in terms of transgender lives in a social or cultural context (Ryan, 2009). Trans individuals, in many media depictions, have been shown

to be victims and to lack agency. They are overrepresented as casualties of violence, prejudice, and homicide (Cavalcante, 2013). Many of the more cited transgender depictions document tragic stories, such as the films *Boys Don’t Cry*, *The Crying Game*, and *A Girl Like Me: The Gwen Araujo Story* (Cavalcante, 2013). Trans persons have also, historically, tended to be depicted as deceivers, such as in *The Crying Game*, and trans issues depicted as comedic relief, as seen in most television (e.g. *Bosom Buddies*) and film (e.g., *Mrs. Doubtfire*) with a male cross-dressing lead.

Recently, scholars and activists have begun to note some variation in transgender representations. For instance, Barker-Plummer (2013) surveyed the news media’s response to the slaying of transgender teen Gwen Araujo and found that “public discourse around the death of Gwen Araujo represented progress in transmediation,” because “it moved away, for the most part, from patterns of marginalization and demonization that have characterized much news representation of trans identities historically” (p. 720). Occasionally, media representation of transgender persons will focus the lens on gender ambiguity in an attempt to label transgender individuals. This is most commonly seen in coverage aimed at uncovering the identity of nonfictional individuals, such as Araujo or Brandon Teena (Sloop, 2000). As Sloop (2000) illustrated in his work, media coverage of Teena was framed using the guise of deception; Brandon Teena was presented as having a condition rather than a valid trans identity. His maleness was consistently questioned and invalidated in the media, and much focus was on the “cause” of his trans status (p. 182).

Paratexts, such as film reviews, movie posters, director’s commentary, and other media that exist on the textual periphery, have been noted as being especially hospitable to the validation and exploration of LGBTQ identities (Cavalcante, 2013). This may perhaps be due to the relative lack of trans representation in television, film, books, and other media. Nonetheless, trans persons and issues seem to be on the rise in popular mainstream formats. Recent examples of gender-variant portrayals in the media include everything from children’s books (e.g., *The Sissy Duckling*) to reality television (e.g., *I Am Jazz*). Still, trans persons are not always the negotiators of their own stories in these formats.

One mediated forum that breaks from tradition is YouTube, wherein transgender individuals have more

of a voice and more agency to frame discussions. Transgender video bloggers have been found to discuss things like physical changes and emotional state of mind (Raun, 2015). Of these vlogs, Raun has claimed that “the vlogs can be regarded as a kind of autobiography, being representations in the first person, focusing on the narrator’s own personal life and experiences and usually told in their own voice” (2015, p. 370). Popular YouTubers like Gigi Gorgeous and Princess Joules have devoted followers, with Gigi’s subscribers numbering in the millions. Nonetheless, because these viewers tend to skew female and/or transgender, the reach of transgender-focused YouTube content is quite narrow. A mainstream celebrity and athlete coming out as transgender on a respected and well-known news program, in an interview conducted by a veteran journalist, was a rare event in terms of trans media representation. Rarely do transgender stories get told to such a broad audience and in such depth.

While minimal research explores Twitter and trans identity or issues, Kruger and Young (2015) conducted a study that examined hashtags related to transgender people, such as #trans, #transgender, and #girlslikeus. The authors separated tweets into four separate categories: positive social tweets, negative social tweets, positive personal tweets, and negative personal tweets. More than half of the tweets in the study were classified as being positive social tweets, or tweets that illustrated socially progressive ideas. These messages included ally pronouncements of support toward transgender individuals and causes, conversation about improving the social conditions in which transgender people live, and the promotion of research related to trans issues. There existed many more positive tweets than negative ones and many tweets related to current events, such as transgender actress Laverne Cox’s Emmy nomination and Hobby Lobby’s discrimination against a transgender employee.

Humanizing stories—such as Diane Sawyer’s interview with Caitlyn Jenner—may play a role in cultivating favorable attitudes toward trans individuals and issues. For instance, Tompkins, Shields, Hillman, and White (2015) found that watching a personalized account of a transgender individual and then engaging in a perspective-taking task wherein participants are asked to take on the views and feelings of a trans person, aided in the promotion of protrans attitudes

when compared to educational but nonhumanizing exposure. The Internet, in particular, is an avenue for trans education and activism (Shapiro, 2004). Nonetheless, while scholarship has examined the use of the Internet to spread messages related to transgender issues, few studies have investigated the reception of media events associated with transgender celebrities. As a one-time Olympian, a reality television steadfast, and a popular tabloid personality, Caitlyn Jenner’s coming out was a noteworthy and important event in American (and world) culture. It allows for the exploration of real-time public reception concerning the declaration of a trans identity, perhaps by individuals who may not otherwise seek out trans-inclusive media. Thus, the following five research questions were posed:

Research Question 1: What were the most frequently tweeted (a) words and (b) phrases during the Sawyer/Jenner interview?

Research Question 2: What were the most frequent retweets during the Sawyer/Jenner interview?

Research Question 3: What are the characteristics of the most retweeted opinion leaders (e.g., celebrities) during the Sawyer/Jenner interview?

Research Question 4: What are the dominant themes that emerged from tweets during the Sawyer/Jenner interview?

Research Question 5: Do themes co-occur in meaningful ways in tweets during the Sawyer/Jenner interview?

Method

Twitter is recognized as a primary site for social TV activity, and live tweeting of television events helps to capture viewer responses to television content. Activities such as retweeting while watching a television program also captures the social element of live tweeting, as viewers engage with other users in the social media space. Thus, twitter was determined to be a good site for analysis of audience social media response to the Sawyer/Jenner interview.

Sorting and cataloging tweets is not without its challenges. Hotho, Nrnberger, and Paa (2005) identified four of the most pressing issues with mining text from social media sites. Firstly, social media posts are often quite short and contain very few words. This makes classification more difficult, particular when examining a micro-blogging site like Twitter, which

has strict restrictions on the number of characters that can be used. The second challenge, according to the authors, is the abundance of information that can be found on social media. Mining this text requires one to eliminate spam and offside conversations, which may take a great deal of effort depending on the size of the data set. Thirdly, social media contains many noisy phrases that must be filtered out before a meaningful analysis can be done. Lastly, classifying social media content is time sensitive. Categorization of tweets, for example, is dependent on the real-world events with which they chronologically and contextually coincide.

The present research is a systematic analysis of more than 4,000 tweets posted from the time of the start of the interview airing on the EST television schedule and the end of the interview airing on the PST television schedule. Computer programming was used to gather tweets containing the following words during this time period: Bruce Jenner, Diane Sawyer, and 2020. This captured the words most commonly present in hashtags used for this social TV event and helped to eliminate irrelevant tweets, which is often an issue with text mining social media (Hotho et al., 2005). These data were then downloaded into an Excel file with the twitter username, tweet containing the searched words, and the date and time stamp.

Coding

A three-level analysis approach was used to analyze the Twitter content data. First, textual analysis software, WordStat and QDA Miner, were used to conduct a computer-assisted content analysis of the tweets. Frequencies of words and phrases contained in the tweet were obtained at this first level of analysis. Although these results were descriptive, they have little validity without further analysis; thus, the researchers used a constant comparative approach to qualitatively analyze the tweets to generate understanding of the context of words used in the tweets. The data were examined for emergent themes. Similar to the approach used by Conway, Kenski, and Wang (2015), the human analysis was then used to create a dictionary file for further analysis using WordStat and QDA Miner. The computer-assisted content analysis (CATA) approach provides a high level of reliability, whereas the human coding element adds validity to the analysis. The qualitative analysis revealed 14

themes within the responses to the Sawyer/Jenner interview, which were then used to create the customized dictionary. Within these themes, many common words were used to express similar sentiments.

The themes (with example words from the dictionary file) are: bravery (e.g., brave, courage, bravery), champion (e.g., champion, hero, Olympian), congratulatory (e.g., bravo, kudos, congrats), education and awareness (e.g., awareness, dialogue, tolerance), emotional reactions (e.g., heartbreaking, inspirational, crying), family drama (e.g., Brody, ex-wives, Kardashians), gender (e.g., body, gender identity, bathroom), God (e.g., Christian, hell, God), journalism and the interview (e.g., candid, comprehensive, journalism), journey to truth (e.g., authentic, free, truth), negativity (e.g., delusional, disturbed, fag), politics (e.g., Constitution, conservative, liberal), Sexuality (e.g., heterosexual, gay, straight), and support (e.g., accept, admire, hug). The third, and final, level of analysis included further quantitative analysis using the customized dictionary in WordStat and QDA Miner.

CATA analysis

WordStat and QDA Miner were used to calculate frequencies and co-occurrences (using the dictionary) to explore the research questions. First, word frequencies were calculated to identify the *top words* used by individuals tweeting about the interview. Phrase frequencies containing 4–5 words were calculated to capture the *top phrases* of expression tweeted about the interview. Next, the *top retweets* were identified by calculating retweet frequencies both during the live tweeting event and at a later point in time (October 5, 2015) to examine reach of these tweets. Lastly, frequencies were calculated to determine who were the most retweeted *opinion leaders* during the interview event. Phrase and retweet frequencies provide more context than the single word frequencies.

Additionally, co-occurrences of themes were examined to provide additional context. For example, the bravery and champion themes may frequently co-occur or the God and negativity themes may co-occur. Co-occurrences of themes provide suggestions as to how these themes are linked within tweets and divulge further meaning and interpretation of audience responses to the Sawyer/Jenner interview. A

dendrogram was analyzed for hierarchical clustering of themes.

Results

Research Question 1

Research Question 1 was concerned with the most frequently tweeted (a) words and (b) phrases during the Sawyer/Jenner interview. Results reveal that the language used to tweet about the Sawyer/Jenner interview was predominately positive and encouraging in nature. This is evidenced in nearly all of the top words and phrases. For instance, the five most frequently used words were “bravo” ($n = 542$, 11.89%), “deserve” ($n = 482$, 10.57%), “loved” ($n = 456$, 10%), “brave” ($n = 404$, 8.86%), and “love” ($n = 303$, 6.65%). All of these words indicate that the public both supports and admires Caitlyn Jenner’s choice to disclose her gender identity. One poster wrote that, “You may not agree or be in a position to understand, but going against the grain is never easy. Support bravery. #BruceJenner,” while another tweeted, “I love #BruceJenner, so so brave.” Oprah Winfrey’s tweet—the most repeated tweet in the sample—included multiple of these words. She tweeted, “All of us deserve the right to be loved for who we are. Bravo #BruceJenner.” More discussion of influencers and retweets can be found in the results for Research Question 2.

The next 10 most frequently used words included “woman” ($n = 295$, 6.47%), “support” ($n = 234$, 5.13%), “real” ($n = 209$, 4.85%), “LOL” ($n = 196$, 4.30%), “transgender” ($n = 192$, 4.21%), “acceptance” ($n = 191$, 4.19%), “damn” ($n = 182$, 3.99%), “Whitegirlproblems” ($n = 177$, 3.88%), “respect” ($n = 176$, 3.86%), and “truth” ($n = 170$, 3.73%). Of these frequently employed words, only “LOL” and perhaps “Whitegirlproblems” indicate a negative or disdainful response. For instance, rapper Brose Royce’s tweet connecting Jenner and the parody hashtag “White Girl Problems” can possibly be read as negative, due to its sarcastic nature, but even this tweet has the hashtag #acceptance attached to it. The much-retweeted tweet read as follows: “After dat #BruceJenner peep #damn to see real #WhiteGirlProblems lol youtube.com/watch?v = a4eere... #ratrace #acceptance #420VIBE #GrindorDieGods.” While some “LOL” tweets related to gender, many related to other aspects of the interview, such as trying to avoid spoilers. Many of these tweets also referred to the fact that

Table 1. Frequently used phrases during the Sawyer/Jenner interview.

Phrase	Frequency (n)	Percentage of cases
Damn to see real	177	3.88
Sending lots of love	118	2.59
Giant leap for mankind	92	2.02
Champion always a champion	44	0.88
Bruce Jenner interview is nuanced	40	0.88
Startlingly intimate and direct	40	0.88
Comment for ABC News	25	0.55
Icon but Bruce Jenner	19	0.42
Trolls attack Kris Humphries	19	0.42
Born with the strength	18	0.39

Jenner identified as a Republican, a political position that seems somewhat incompatible with an LGBTQ identity. For example, one tweeter wrote, “I got the gender choice- but the republican thing ?? Lol #BruceJenner abc.”

The commonly employed phrases were also positive in nature, with many praising Jenner’s bravery, sending love, and discussing how the interview was well done. Table 1 contains the full list of the most frequently used phrases.

Research Question 2

Research Question 2 explored the most frequent retweets during the Sawyer/Jenner interview. These were identified in the sample with RT and the @ symbol followed by the original twitter user’s name and tweet. The top 15 retweets are displayed in Table 2. The retweet frequencies are contained in Table 3. The list of the top retweets reveal which messages were most frequently shared by Twitter users, representing tweets that had the greatest reach during the Sawyer/Jenner interview. The majority of the top 15 retweets were positive in nature (e.g., “Sending lots of love and support to #BruceJenner”), and none were what one might consider negative in tone. This suggests that viewers who were tweeting live during the Sawyer/Jenner interview were more likely to retweet positive rather than negative statements about Caitlyn Jenner or the interview.

Research Question 3

Research Question 3 was concerned with the top opinion leaders, or those twitter users whose tweets were most frequently retweeted. Thus, the top 15 opinion leaders were identified based on retweet counts from Research Question 2, and these opinion leaders tended

Table 2. Top 15 retweets.

	Retweet
1.	RT @Oprah: "All of us deserve the right to be loved for who we are." Bravo #BruceJenner
2.	RT @BroseNotGuilty: After dat #BruceJenner peep #damn to see real #WhiteGirlProblems lol https://t.co/jJHnnX6Gut#ratrace #acceptance #420Väö_
3.	RT @Lavernecox: Sending lots of love and support to #BruceJenner and their family tonight. It is always brave to stand in one's truth. Congrats darling.
4.	RT @ABC: WATCH: Bruce Jenner to @DianeSawyer: "I'm a woman" - http://t.co/RoBCufzQpn #BruceJennerABC http://t.co/nd0IQKA7EM
5.	RT @jimmyfallon: One small step for man, one giant leap for mankind. #BruceJenner #Brave
6.	RT @LanceBass: Bravo #BruceJenner #DianeSawyer and #ABC !! Beautifully told!!
7.	RT @RobertDowneyJr: A corrective experience with legitimate journalism @kellyandmichael #dianesawyer #kellyandmichael ... instagram.com/p/12-Mm7RUsl/
8.	RT @JLo: Once a champion always a champion. #BruceJenner #transgender #beyourself #loveyourself #LevelsLove
9.	RT @ABC: WATCH: Bruce Jenner: Kanye West helped Kim Kardashian understand transition: http://t.co/NuyaV4AiA0#BruceJennerABC http://t.co/Vläö_
10.	RT @TimTeeman: #DianeSawyer's #BruceJenner interview is nuanced, educational, startlingly intimate and direct. Brilliant television, brilliant journalism.
11.	RT @donnabrazile: For a more extensive Reference Guide on covering transgender issues, please visit http://glaad.org/reference/transgender ... #BruceJennerABC #DianeSawyer
12.	RT @SarahKSilverman: Major revelation by #BRUCEJENNER 2nite & tho I don't approve, I respect him 4 finally coming out as a republican
13.	RT @ABC: Bruce Jenner to @DianeSawyer: "I am not gay; I am ... heterosexual" - http://t.co/wHgWvUKd2f #BruceJennerABC http://t.co/PeSYKpEMZ3
14.	RT @ABC2020: Bruce Jenner on @kanyewest's Reaction. #BruceJennerABC WATCH: http://t.co/MglekrBObH
15.	RT @PerezHilton: Kris Jenner has no comment for ABC news and the #BruceJenner interview. His other two ex-wives give supportive statements.

to fall into a number of categories. Four were big-name media personalities, such as Oprah Winfrey and Perez Hilton. These opinion leaders were generally talk show hosts or celebrity interviewers. Three more

opinion leaders—Jennifer Lopez, Robert Downey, Jr., and Sarah Silverman—were popular and well-known performers. Another three opinion leaders were LGBT actors or singers, including Laverne Cox, Matt Bomer, and Lance Bass. Two opinion leaders were journalists (Tim Teeman, Donna Brazile) and the other three influencers fell outside of these categories. The top 15 opinion leaders and tweet frequencies can be found in [Table 3](#).

Research Question 4

The fourth research question asked about the emergent themes that arose from the Sawyer/Jenner interview. Nearly all of the identified themes were positive in nature, with negative tweets occurring in very small numbers ($n = 101$, 2.22%). For instance, one tweeter posted, "WTF is This World Coming too? #BruceJenner comes out as a Women? Da fuck? #BruceJenner-Interview." This was classified as a negative tweet. Other themes, such as family drama ($n = 488$, 10.70%) and God ($n = 72$, 1.58%) are more debatable in terms of their valence, particularly because analysis occurred not in terms of the overall tweet, but in terms of individual words. Nonetheless, many of the tweets in these categories could be deemed transphobic and destructive in nature. For instance, many of the God-focused tweets commented on the posters' feelings that there existed an incompatibility between gender transition and religious doctrine. More than one quarter of all tweets ($n = 1316$, 28.87%) contained explicit messages of support. [Table 4](#) summarizes the themes and their occurrences, as well as some dictionary examples.

Table 3. Top opinion leaders and their retweet counts.

Opinion leader	Followers	Retweet frequency (n)	Percentage of cases
Oprah Winfrey (@Oprah)	29,200,000	441	9.67
Perez Hilton (@PerezHilton)	6,130,000	248	5.44
Brose Royce (@BroseNotGuilty)	127,000	177	3.88
Laverne Cox (@Lavernecox)	491,000	119	2.61
Jimmy Fallon (@jimmyfallon)	30,000,000	91	2.00
Lance Bass (@LanceBass)	405,000	84	1.84
Tim Teeman (@TimTeeman)	3,398	63	1.38
Live with Kelly & Michael (@KellyandMichael)	899,000	53	1.16
Robert Downey Jr. (@RobertDowneyJr)	5,63,000	53	1.16
Jennifer Lopez (@JLo)	33,700,000	44	0.97
Donna Brazile (@donnabrazile)	450,000	33	0.72
Sarah Silverman (@SarahKSilverman)	6,990,000	32	0.70
Jennifer Brown (@BrownJenJen)	27,200	30	0.66
Matt Bomer (@MattBomer)	473,000	25	0.55
Melissa B. (@mellberr)	36,400	23	0.50

Note. Followers and retweets valid as of October 5, 2015.

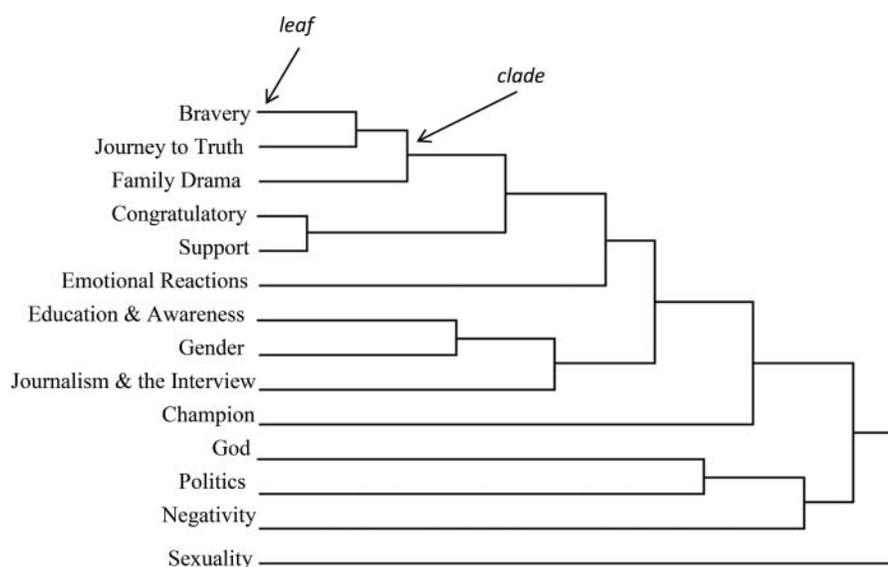
Table 4. Emergent themes from tweets during the Sawyer/Jenner interview.

Theme	Key word examples from dictionary	Frequency (n)	Percentage of cases
Support	accept, admire, deserves, embrace, hug, love, proud, respect, supported	1316	28.87
Gender	bathrooms, bodies, dress, gender, man, reassignment, trans, transition, woman	898	19.70
Journey to truth	authentic, born, free, freedom, honestly, journey, peace, real, reveal, secret, true	719	15.77
Family drama	Brandon, Brody, children, family, father, Kardashians, Kim, Kris, mom, sons	488	10.70
Bravery	brave, bravery, bravely, courage, courageous	617	13.53
Congratulatory	bravo, cheered, commend, congrats, congratulations, kudos, mazel, props	603	13.23
Education and awareness	conversation, educational, enlightening, help, inform, lesson, myths, terminology, tolerance, understanding, visibility	383	8.40
Journalism and the interview	candid, comprehensive, fascinating, historic, intimate, journalist, landmark, nuanced, respectful, revolutionary	379	8.31
Emotional reactions	affected, cried, emotional, empathy, heartbreaking, inspirational, life, pain, peace, speechless, tears	265	5.81
Champion	1976, athlete, champion, gold, hero, medal, Olympic, Wheaties	177	3.88
Politics	Constitution, conservative, liberal, politics, Republican	151	3.31
Negativity	delusional, disturbed, fag, offend, penis, psycho, publicity, shameless, sick, stupid, tranny, therapy, wtf, weird	101	2.22
Sexuality	heterosexual, homosexual, sexuality, gay, straight	95	2.08
God	bless, Christ, Christians, created, God, hell, Jesus, Lord, mistakes, theology	72	1.58

Research Question 5

Research Question 5 explored whether themes co-occurred in meaningful ways in tweets during the Sawyer/Jenner interview. A dendrogram was produced to examine hierarchical clustering of themes and indicates similarity of the themes, suggesting which themes co-occur more frequently in the data. See Figure 1. The end of line connected to a theme in Figure 1 is called a *leaf*, and the branched connections between leaves are called *clades*. The 14 themes are

represented by 14 leaves, and 13 clades emerged in the dendrogram. Taller clades indicate weaker association, whereas shorter clades indicate stronger association between themes. In the present case, the dendrogram reveals the congratulatory and support themes to be the most similar in the data. The second strongest co-occurrence was between the themes bravery and journey to truth. Next, gender and education/awareness themes appear to be related. Lastly, a present but somewhat weaker co-occurrence was between god and politics.

**Figure 1.** Theme co-occurrence (dendrogram).

In addition to these pairings (i.e. two-leaved clades), there are six themes that are simplicifolious, meaning that they are one-leaved clades: Family drama, emotional reactions, champion, negativity, and sexuality. Simplicifolious clades are not closely related to other themes in the dendrogram. The sexuality theme, in particular, is not related to any one other theme and is the most distant from other clades in the dendrogram. Likewise, the negativity theme does not appear to relate closely to other themes. This is consistent with the finding that most of the words and phrases in the tweets were positive, thus it is not surprising that the negativity theme stands largely on its own and is only distantly related to the god and politics clustering or words. Perhaps, if more instances of the negativity, god, and politics themes were present in the data, this relationship between the clusters would be stronger.

These simplicifolious clades that are distantly related to the rest of the clades in the model indicate that some themes are unique in that they do not co-occur with other themes in the data. No clear patterns emerged for relationships between most of the simplicifolious clades and the other clade themes. On the other hand, some simplicifolious (i.e., one-leaved) clades in the model are linked to other clades. Again, height is an indicator of the strength of this connection, where taller is weaker and shorter is stronger. Results suggest that although family drama does not co-occur significantly with another specific theme, this theme is most closely related to the bravery and journey to truth clustering of words compared to other clusters in the model. This suggests that the family drama theme is more closely linked to positive themes than negative themes (e.g., negativity). See Figure 1.

Overall, the dendrogram reveals significant relationships between some themes (e.g., congratulatory and support) and unique occurrences of themes (e.g., sexuality) that do not pair with other themes in the data. It is suggested that some themes co-occur, whereas others are not linguistically similar.

Discussion

The current study aimed to explore the response to an impactful media event, the Caitlyn Jenner coming-out interview with Diane Sawyer, and to uncover audience response as they engaged with the media event and

social media at the same time. As outlined in the introduction of this paper, transgender individuals are some of society's most disadvantaged and vulnerable. Not only do they experience discrimination in employment (Kirk & Belovics, 2008; Reed et al., 2015; O'Neil, McWhirter, & Cerezo, 2008), in housing, and in education (Dispenza et al., 2012), but transgender individuals also experience discrimination from family, friends, romantic partners, and the government (Dispenza et al., 2012). Furthermore, transgender persons are extremely likely to be victims of violence and abuse (Stotzer, 2009). Thus, the coming out of a well-known celebrity as transgender had the potential to expose the dark, dangerous, and venomous sentiments often lobbed at members of this community. Surprisingly, the results of the current study were overwhelmingly positive in nature. While the Internet (including news stories about Caitlyn Jenner and other transgender celebrities) is filled with hateful comments (e.g. TMZ Staff, 2015), the reaction to the Sawyer/Jenner interview was noteworthy for the exhibition of kindness and the picture of acceptance painted by Twitter users. It is also noteworthy for the way in which it brought viewers together in a social virtual setting.

The current research is high in social validity, reflecting what Krippendorff refers to as "that quality of research findings that leads us to accept them on account of their contribution to the public discussion of important social concerns" (2012, p. 330). Content analytic studies with social validity are said to have "relevance and meaning beyond an academic audience" (Riffe, Lacy, & Fico, 1998, p. 137). Given the current state of transgender rights and the ongoing debates and votes about bathroom bills, discrimination laws, and so forth, the current work must be positioned within the current culture – a culture that is not yet trans inclusive and, in many instances, not even trans tolerant. A lack of exposure to transgender individuals, and a lack of education on issues important to transgender persons and communities, may be at least partly to blame for the discrimination and violence directed at gender nonconforming individuals. Thus, it was surprising to find such a wide array of positive comments and a lack of negativity directed at transgender persons during the Sawyer/Jenner interview. While it is possible that those who tuned into the broadcast were more open-minded to begin with, it is also possible that dissenters were simply quieter. Furthermore, 20/20's target audience is unlikely to

have aligned with Twitter's prime demographics, as Diane Sawyer is a seasoned journalist who may appeal to an older crowd.

In any case, it seems likely that the immediate support for Caitlyn Jenner, and transgender persons more generally, was symptomatic of an empathetic audience engaging in social television viewing more so than an indication of widespread support in American culture. Those who only came to hear about the interview or Jenner's coming out after the fact may have had far more negative or unpredictable reactions. There may even be something about the live-tweeting experience that fosters community support and togetherness, particularly as it relates to marginalized persons. The results indicate that those who watched the interview live and subsequently tweeted while watching were supportive of transgender individuals and of Jenner herself. Clearly, these individuals felt strongly enough to explicitly express their support and congratulations as the interview unfolded. The desire to paint oneself as a member of, or an ally to, a marginalized community seems to have been a contributing factor in terms of the conversations that unfolded during the Sawyer/Jenner interview.

There are a number of potential explanations for the overall positive nature of the response observed by the current study. Firstly, self-selection bias was a likely factor in relation to the interview's audience. Those with more interest in and empathy toward trans individuals and/or the Kardashian clan are arguably the most likely to have tuned in to the Sawyer/Jenner interview. Therefore, one might expect the Twitter reaction by viewers watching live to be more positive than reception of Jenner in society as a whole or reception from those who heard about the interview after the fact.

Secondly, the educational and nonexploitative nature of the programming may have contributed to the overall positive reception. The interview lacked the scandalous and salacious elements that so often color trans stories on television. Moreover, the public was confronted with an educational but relatively atypical account of what it means to be trans in America today. White privileged transwomen tend to be received much more positively than trans women of color or trans women from less prestigious economic and social backgrounds (Skidmore, 2011). Jenner fits the dominant mold for acceptable trans stories; it is a story about a wealthy, White individual undertaking a

gender transition that is linear, permanent, and abides by cultural expectations and norms set forth for gender classification.

Much of what is said online in reaction to a media event is shaped by a selection of social opinion leaders. These are often celebrities or well-known media figures, and their thoughts are often retweeted in place of or in addition to, individuals' own thoughts and feelings. This may be another reason why the reception may have been more positive than negative. Individuals expressing positive sentiments may have been taking their cues from Oprah Winfrey and the other popular and influential celebrities who tweeted and from the general positive nature of others' tweets.

Much support came in the form of retweets. A retweet tends to symbolize support for the original poster's statement; that all of the opinion leaders in the conversation surrounding the Sawyer/Jenner interview expressed positivity was an important component of the live-tweeted conversation. The social nature of live tweeting may be both enhanced and restricted by these opinion leaders. Retweeting popular sentiments allows users to become involved in the conversation, but it also limits their own ideas, thoughts, and feelings, as they are regurgitating the words of others in place of expressing their own words.

It is also worth noting that Twitter users make up only 20% of the adult population, are more likely to live in urban areas, and tend to be more diverse, more political, wealthier, and younger than the population as a whole (Duggan, 2015). These statistics may help explain the reception Jenner received. When compared to comments sections on articles or other social media such as Reddit or Yik Yak, Twitter lacks in relative anonymity. While this may have contributed to less negative tweets, it is likely not the best explanation for the lack of negativity. Recent Twitter negativity directed at celebrities such as Leslie Jones are proof that individuals will express hatred and ignorance even in non-anonymous online spaces (Brown, 2016).

The theme of bravery was dominant in the current study and merits further discussion. Some scholars may propose that a focus on bravery, in this instance, indicates something about how we view men and women in culture. An individual transitioning from male to female must give up their cis male privilege, something Serano (2007) would refer to as transmisogyny, or the intersection of transphobia and

misogyny. While this type of rhetoric certainly expresses support for Jenner, it may not do so for entirely constructive reasons. The current study does not explore transmisogyny, in particular, but its roots may be evident in the themes uncovered, and thus may impact the ability to deem “bravery” as inherently positive.

One of the unique aspects of the current study was the examination of co-occurrences between the identified themes. Many of these co-occurrences were noteworthy in their connection. For instance, that the theme journey to truth was most closely linked with the theme of Bravery indicates that the live-tweeting audience felt that recognizing and announcing her true gender identity was a brave move for Caitlyn Jenner. Putting aside the issue of transmisogyny, this finding may help to explain the admiration lobbed her way. Mainstream media’s continued focus on gender binaries and the transition from one binary to another may inform how “brave” the public feels it is to journey from one gender classification to another, more “true” classification. Those who refuse to conform to gender binaries may be seen as less brave, for they may also be seen as having stories that veer from the journey to truth theme.

The themes of education and awareness and gender were also closely linked. The co-occurrence of these two themes is interesting in that it highlights the educational value of the interview’s discussion about gender identity, trans issues, and difference. A clade connected these two themes to journalism and the interview, which further encourages the idea that the interview was a well-structured and informative piece of journalism. Negativity was very loosely linked with God and politics, which is crucial for understanding some of the negative sentiments in the sample. That Jenner identifies as a Republican was a source of scrutiny and one that had little to do with transphobia. On the other hand, discussions of religion and God can be traced more toward negative feelings about transgender individuals rather than about Caitlyn Jenner herself. The co-occurrence of themes is a necessary component of studies that aim to capture the nuances of tweets and other social media.

Limitations and future research

Tweets that occurred after the time frame used in the present study paint quite a different picture in how

Jenner is seen by the public. In a search of the #BruceJennerInterview hashtag at the end of June 2016, the first post is that of a meme with the following quote: “Cutting off your pecker doesn’t make you a woman. It just makes you a guy that cut off his damn pecker” (@bagoftalent420). Other transphobic tweets compare Caitlyn Jenner to Lucifer (@ManyCaringHands), wager a bet that she will commit suicide within two years (@radiatorger), and call for violence against her (@GEE_R2). These tweets speak to the importance of monitoring conversations and reactions to media events after they finish. As an exploratory study, the current work investigated the live-tweets that occurred during this influential media moment. Future research should strive to capture a more robust set of tweets, from a much larger time frame. This would allow us to track the conversation as it evolves, not only during the broadcast, but in the following hours, days, and weeks. The narrow conversation time–frame captured is a limitation of the current study.

The key words used to capture tweets were another limitation of the current work. Because keyword choices were made prior to the broadcast, and because the technology used to capture tweets was set up before the media event, some influential hashtags and key words were not included as search terms. Hashtags like #BruceJennerABC and #BruceJennerInterview would have provided more data, and there is no way to know whether that may have altered results. This is a limitation of capturing tweets using software that is prepared in advance, rather than in a retroactive manner.

Social television, particularly tweeting, has become a staple for many viewers. The current research explored how social television relates to social issues and issues of identity. Future work must continue to explore how marginalized communities and related social issues are discussed online in relation to their representation on television. One limitation of the Sawyer/Jenner interview is that Caitlyn Jenner is a well-known and complicated persona. The next step would be to examine the social television conversations that occur when the transgender person is not as famous, wealthy, and enduring as Caitlyn Jenner. The current research must consider Caitlyn Jenner and how she impacted the reception in particular—as a former Olympian, as a reality television star, as a member of the Kardashian franchise, and as a tabloid staple whose gender identity has been under scrutiny

for some time. All of these elements contribute to this particular analysis, and all make it difficult to generalize from the results of the current study.

It would also be useful to explore the conversation when trans-specific topics are illuminated in more depth. For instance, what conversations occur when viewers tweet during programs such as *I Am Jazz*, which depicts more controversial topics such as testosterone blockers for a transgender teenage girl and death threats from those who do not agree with the family's choices? Furthermore, because interviews or reality television shows featuring transgender persons may garner an already-sympathetic audience, it would also be useful to examine the conversation that surrounds similar issues when they occur in a less-specified context. For example, if a transgender storyline were to be featured on a mainstream television show, one would imagine that the viewers would be less trans friendly and less trans educated than the viewers of a show like *Transparent*, which revolves around a transgender lead. It would also be interesting to note whether the conversation differs based on the fictional or nonfictional content.

Opinion leaders clearly play an important role in shaping online conversations about televised media events. In the current study, many of the most tweeted words and phrases could be traced to opinion leaders. That nearly 10% of all tweets in the examined time period were retweets of Oprah Winfrey's origin tweet speaks to the sheer enormity of her influence. None of the top retweets were negative in nature, which may have contributed to the mostly positive reception by those watching live. This indicates that researchers should also be investigating how opinion leaders help to shape the conversations as they unfold.

Finally, future research should explore the impact of media events such as the Sawyer/Jenner interview experimentally. This would allow us to understand the effect of these interviews on both those who would naturally tune in to the event and those who may not be exposed to the media event in other circumstances. It would also be useful to compare the tweets of those who view a media event live with the tweets of those who view the event after the conversation has already begun to unfold. Additionally, because many who join the conversation about a media event may never even watch the actual event themselves, a comparison between the conversations of viewers versus non-viewers would be interesting and valuable.

The current study explored twitter reactions to Diane Sawyer's monumental interview with Caitlyn Jenner in which she came out as a transgender woman. Results indicated a mostly positive initial reception, led by a small number of opinion leaders and characterized by a number of common themes. Whichever way history decides to remember Caitlyn Jenner, in the moments of her public coming out, many in the tweeting public saw her as brave, inspiring, and educational; everyday transgender individuals are rarely met with such an optimistic and sympathetic welcome.

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