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Transgender Experience Depicted through Memes: An Ethnographic Investigation of
Minority Stress and Resilience

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Presented to
the Faculty of Social Sciences
University of Denver

In Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of Arts

by
Ashley L. Blewitt-Golsch
June 2019
Advisor: Alejandro Cerón

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Chapter 1 Introduction

Transgender people (those who identify as a gender other than that they were declared at birth) face a disproportionate amount of discrimination and violence compared to national averages. Despite the recent florescence of transgender representation in the media and attention paid to transgender (alternatively referred to as “trans”) topics in academia and health sciences, transgender people are marginalized and victimized at alarming rates. As Susan Stryker notes in her seminal text on transgender history “however much familiarity has risen, there remains a great deal of ignorance about actual trans lives” (Stryker 2017:198). To combat this ignorance, researchers (Grant et al. 2011, Bevan 2014, and others) have endeavored to create the foundation upon which meaningful inquiry can be brought to bear. Pioneering surveys investigating the lived experiences of transgender people found that gender minorities face elevated levels of hardship in an array of ways, including economic hardship, familial and peer rejection, denial of treatment and access to services, and elevated rates of physical and mental distress (James et al. 2015; Grant et al. 2011). Notably, the U.S. Transgender Survey (James et al. 2015) reported that 40% of respondents had attempted suicide at least once in their lives.

Reports like the National Transgender Discrimination Survey or the U.S. Transgender Survey help us understand, by the numbers, what trans people go through,

and to an extent, how trans people identify themselves. However, these surveys do not help us understand how transgender people think of themselves and the issues they face in their own words. More nuanced research can better provide the data to fill in these holes in the literature, with two important aims. First, to elevate the voices of trans and gender non-conforming people in their own words, discussing topics that they have chosen as important, rather than what researcher deemed important enough to study. Second, to better inform future research and programs by helping professionals meet transgender people where they are.

Transgender and gender non-conforming people find outlets to discuss their lives besides academic studies, of course. Transgender social/support groups are one such outlet for transgender people in population dense areas with enough trans people to facilitate such circles, for example. Another avenue is social media, where one can interact with thousands of other queer and trans people, regardless of where one lives (provided one has access to the internet). Many such digital communities exist on Facebook alone (an exact number would be very difficult to obtain), while others exist on Tumblr, Instagram, and other social media sites. In these digital spaces, transgender people are able to provide and receive validation and advice to/from other trans/queer people, and in so doing discuss what matters most to them about being trans. While users are able to post text, videos, and even audio files to discuss their lives, one popular medium for discussion is image memes: image files usually with both text and picture(s) that communicate a thought or idea.

Image memes may be more frequently thought of as giving voices to pictures of cats in amusing poses/situations, but they are also capable of giving a voice to transgender internet users. Memes on transgender Facebook groups and pages are often relatable, and concisely convey aspects of life as a trans person (Figure 1-1).



Figure 1-1 Meme featuring transgender actress Jamie Clayton discussing the phenomena of cis men portraying trans women in film and media.

While the term “Meme” was first coined by Richard Dawkins (1976) to describe contagious ideas (such as religion), internet memes are better understood as pieces of media that convey ideas, are easily re-sharable, and are easily altered. Some of the first images to be recognized as memes were pictures of what were eventually dubbed Lolcats (a portmanteau of “LOL,” which stands for “laugh out loud” and “cats,” as they were pictures of cats that would make you laugh out loud). These images, overlaid with text, framed the pictured cats as speaking the provided text, to amusing result. Later memes

took the concept of characters in memes describing their situation to apply not to cats, but cartoon depictions of people, often referring to the self (Figure 1-2). These memes were meant to express situations that others would find relatable, through the use of recurring facial expressions with generally understood meanings, applied to situations that others would understand and with which they would empathize.



Figure 1-2 A meme featuring "rage faces," an early way of expressing anecdotal experience in meme format.

As memes became outlets for the experiences of those who were creating them, their audience shifted from the broad totality of internet users to targeted subsets of that audience. There were now memes about certain video games that only made sense for those who had played that game, and memes about life as a woman, which may be understandable by a male audience, but hold more potent meaning for women readers alone (Figure 1-3). Memes about race, sexuality, and gender appeared, and communities

surrounding specific identities began producing memes for those specific communities. One noteworthy example that has been well documented in academic and health literature is the memes shared in anorexia groups, which depending on the group can promote either healthy behaviors or pro-anorexia behaviors (Smith et al. 2015, Ging and Garvey 2018, and others). The feelings of the group members dictate the topics of the memes.



Figure 1-3 Meme discussing female experiences, that while intelligible to all, has special significance to a female perspective.

It is not hard to see, then, how trans digital communities would foster the creation of memes that discuss the lived experiences of trans people. Many such memes are intended to seek or provide validation through the creation of relatable media. As such, trans memes discuss a wealth of situations and experiences that make up trans life, including medical transitions, coming out and/or explaining trans issues to family members, and experiencing discrimination. The breadth of topics discussed in trans memes will be further discussed later in this work, but suffice it to say, if a phenomena is

an aspect of life as a trans person, it is likely that someone has made a meme about it. With this in mind, it is worth asking: can trans memes be used as a dataset for understanding trans lives and culture?

This project, therefore, has two goals. First: to determine what trans people are using memes to discuss in anglophone digital spaces. Second: to demonstrate, if possible, that memes make up a valuable dataset from which important anthropological, sociological, and health inquiries can be answered - and in so doing, discuss Gender Minority Stress through the dataset of transgender memes. To do so, this work collected the most reacted to memes across five popular transgender meme pages on Facebook. Of these pages, one was specifically about the experience of being a transgender woman (or “transfeminine”), one was about being a transgender man (“transmasculine”), one was about being non-binary (not identifying as male or female), and two were meme pages with no specific gender declared, which included memes about all trans experiences regardless of specific gender. The most reacted to memes from each page were coded based on affect and topic, and subsequently underwent an emergent themes analysis. The results demonstrate that transgender memes on Facebook discuss a great deal of topics, many of which would be useful for researchers across disciplines.

Through an inductive analysis, this work identified four broad categories that most transgender memes fell into: Bodies, Community, Transgender Experience, and “Gender is a Broken System”. These memes allowed for a deep level of ethnographic analysis, discussing a great deal of topics concerning transgender experience. Most notably, transgender Facebook memes discussed aspects of transgender minority stress

and resilience against such stress. Each stress discussed in Meyer's (2003) and Testa et al.'s (2015) minority stress models were present in memes investigated for this thesis, as well as a stress this work identified, fetishization, which has not been identified these minority stress frameworks. Overall, this work found and demonstrated that memes make up a very fertile and valuable dataset from which ethnographic and health research can be conducted.

Positionality

It is important that I establish my positionality and note that I am a white transgender woman, who considers herself genderqueer. I am also not straight. These identities afford me a certain perspective into the analyses I have conducted in this work that cisgender and/or heterosexual people are not likely to have. Despite this, I do not consider this work autoethnographic (for reasons discussed in Chapter Three).

Structure of this Thesis

Chapter Two of this thesis discusses foundational concepts pertaining to memes, transgender topics, minority stress, and resiliency. A brief discussion of transgender people and topics includes commonly used terms and concepts, important statistics, and barriers faced by trans people today. Memes are discussed, including a brief history of the term, types of memes, and pertinent examples of meme study in academia and health studies that demonstrate the community-defining power of memes as discursive units of speech. The minority stress model originally conceived of by Ilan Meyer (1995, 2003) is presented and discussed, with careful attention paid to a later variation, the Gender Minority Stress and Resilience Measure (Testa et al. 2015), both of which are helpful for

understanding exactly what transgender people experience. Resiliency is presented as an important concept in tandem to minority stress; despite minority stress being an ever-present shadow over transgender life, some trans people are able to draw upon resources of resiliency to mitigate the impacts of stress. Community connectedness and pride in one's community identity are discussed as sources of resiliency.

Chapter Three discusses in detail the methods utilized in selecting and analyzing this dataset. The selection criteria for which social media outlet, and which specific communities to target is discussed, along with sampling methods, coding strategies, and analytic techniques. Attention is paid to why an inductive approach is best for this type of work. The codes used and themes identified in this work are discussed.

Chapter Four presents the results of the inductive analysis, in extensive detail. Four themes are identified and presented: Bodies, Community, Trans Experience, and Gender is a Broken System. For each of these themes, specific topics within each theme are presented, with provided examples, which are discussed so that those who are not fluent in transgender topics and culture may be able to understand the meanings behind each meme as they are understood by this work.

Chapter Five provides a brief quantitative analysis of the memes coded in this work, including descriptions of most used codes, what percent of memes fell into what identity categories, and what affects were most present in the memes coded for this work. Though this analysis is descriptive and not statistical, it is still a useful tool to understand what memes were discussing.

Chapter Six discusses the use of trans memes as a dataset for understanding minority stress and resiliency. While the breadth of themes found in analyzing the memes harvested for this analysis is discussed in Chapter Four, only those memes pertinent to discussing transgender minority stress and resiliency are presented as examples in Chapter Six. Each of the stresses identified in Testa's Gender Minority Stress and Resilience Measure are discussed with examples of memes that illustrate their presence in meme-based discourse. The two resilience factors identified in both Meyer's and Testa's minority stress model, community connectedness and pride in one's identity, are discussed and illustrated with meme examples.

Chapter Seven concludes this work by discussing the power that memes provide as a dataset for understanding trans lives, culture, and health. This chapter includes recommendations for future research on health, stress, and wellness within the trans meme community, as well as in other meme-based communities.

Chapter 2 Literature Review

The ethnography that comprises this thesis involves topics from very disparate spheres of knowledge, from media and communications studies, to gender studies and theory, queer theory, sociology, and anthropology. It is fitting that a discussion of the lives of transgender people, who are comprised of such diverse population of groups and peoples, brings together so many different veins of inquiry and investigation. Minority stress and resiliency, for example, is most commonly discussed in sociological literature, but is used here as a tool for understanding various anthropological aspects of life as a transgender person. Memes, which are perhaps a dataset most at home in mass communications studies, are the basic analytic unit of this ethnography. Transgender people and their rights are classically the purview of gender and queer studies. However, by bringing these spheres of knowledge together, we can begin to understand the lived experiences and culture of transgender people from a perspective that emphasizes the topics, events, and discussions that are most important to this under-studied population.

Though the data investigated in this ethnography could be looked at through a multi-disciplinary approach, it is through the lens of anthropology that this work becomes most meaningful. As Carol Delaney notes, anthropology is not shy about studying the minute and the mundane, using ordinary aspects of daily life to gain an understanding of “a much larger set of beliefs, power relations, and values” (Delaney 2011). As a dataset,

memes might be overlooked by researchers as goofy, trivial elements of internet culture. To the anthropologist, however, memes might better be understood as artifacts – very real and meaningful evidence of human behavior which can inform our understanding of the values, beliefs, and power structures Delaney discusses. While the content of many memes may be silly, the ideas they express provide a window into the world of the producers and audiences of such content. Through applied anthropology, we can investigate these mundane elements of transgender culture and society and use them to inform further work in this discipline and in others.

Digital Anthropology

Digital anthropology as a subdiscipline is the study of the intersection of culture and technology. Digital anthropologists have studied topics ranging from cell phone use, to Facebook and Instagram, all to understand the ways these technologies impact, or perhaps facilitate, culture. According to Daniel Miller (2018), digital anthropology describes “the consequences of the rise of digital technologies for particular populations, the use of these technologies within anthropological methodology, or the study of specific digital technologies.” Miller, who is a prolific figure in the discipline of digital anthropology, recognizes that this definition is dependent on how one defines “digital.” The term could denote only those technologies that support or are supported by the internet, the “digital world” of online spaces and games, or as Miller contends, all technologies that rely on binary coding, which pushes the domain of digital anthropology much further back in time than many might initially consider upon hearing the word “digital.”

It is important to consider that while terms like “cyberspace” or “the digital world” are intrinsically positioned opposite from “real” space, the “real world,” or “real life,” the internet, and the technology that support it, are very much real, and are utilized by people, who are very much real. Also real is the impact that these technologies have on human life and culture. In the same way a historical ecologist may view landscapes as both modified by humans and as, over time, modifying *of* humans (see Isendahl and Stump 2019), digital anthropologists argue that the internet is both shaped by humans, and shaping *of* humans (Uimonen 2001).

One example of how humans shape digital spheres is the development of what has been termed “Web2.0,” a use of internet technologies that enabled users to generate and host content cheaply or freely on platforms where this content could be easily viewed. Facebook is a prime example of a Web2.0 platform, which enables users to post text, photos, videos, etc. and expect that these media can be easily viewed and shared. The creation of Web2.0 platforms led to significant community creation and aggregation through communication tools, creating digital spaces in which conversations and digital praxis can occur. In this way, the needs and habits of those who use digital technologies, in this case the internet, shaped digital practice, and the internet was developed to adapt accordingly.

Conversely, it may go without saying, digital technologies have significantly impacted human life in a myriad of ways. The creation of the “gig economy” in the tech industry for web developers is one such way in which digital technologies have shaped human life and lifeways, leading to a precarious and somewhat tenuous lifestyle (David

2017). More pertinently to this thesis, digital technologies on the internet have also greatly impacted the lives of Web2.0 users, both in how they conduct their daily lives as well as in how they form and participate in their communities. In a case study of the culture of Facebook image posts in Trinidad, Miller and Sinanan (2017) describe the ways the internet is used to project and reinforce kinship roles and ties. For example, fathers who do not cohabit with their children may project an image of being present through sharing photos of the time they do spend with their family members.

Since what can be considered “digital” is broad and in many ways nebulous, there is no single methodology or criteria for what can be considered the methodology of digital anthropology. How one analyzes the culture of Information Technology (IT) workers might, and likely would, look very different from how one analyzes tweets from campaign workers during an election. Both of these examples fall under the broad definition of digital anthropology, but require very different tools to accomplish their ethnographic goals. One discipline that has a more concrete methodology than digital anthropology, yet is closely related is visual anthropology. Indeed, Pack and Takaragawa (2013) note the interests visual anthropology has taken with “new media,” noting an emphasis on YouTube videos. To bridge the interdisciplinary divide between digital and visual anthropology, this thesis uses content analysis as its primary method of inquiry, analyzing both the linguistic and non-linguistic elements of communication present in digitally shared images– a key component of visual anthropology (Ruby and Chalfen 1974) – and making ethnographic inferences based on those analyses.

Memes

In order to take an inductive approach to this research and understand what trans people are discussing in memes, this thesis harvested memes from five transgender Facebook meme pages. Shifman (2013:41) defines internet memes thusly:

(a) A group of digital content units sharing common characteristics of content, form, and/or stance. For instance—photos featuring funny cats with captions share a topic (cats), form (photo + caption), and stance (humor). (b) These units are created with awareness of each other—the person posting the “cat with caption” image builds on the previous cats in the series. (c) These units are circulated, imitated, and/or transformed via the Internet by many users. Internet memes are multiparticipant creative expressions through which cultural and political identities are communicated and negotiated.

While memes take many forms, and can in fact be as much practice as product, this thesis looks specifically at image memes. These memes are image files, usually but not always including text superimposed on the image. Because of the prevalence of free image editing software for both mobile and desktop operating systems, and the relative ease with which these tools can be used, the creation and editing of image memes is an equitable practice that anyone with a computer or smartphone can engage in.

Importantly, memes (including image memes) are not just comical pictures of cats with captions (as described in Shifman’s definition), but can function as units of conversation. As Grundlingh (2018) points out, memes can act as “speech acts” in which the sharer of a meme is a speaker/writer, and those that view memes are hearers/readers. In this way, sharing a meme is tantamount to making a statement, of conveying a thought to others. Grundlingh also discusses how some memes can contain no words, yet still convey a message, such as through the use of facial expressions that convey an emotional

response to something that was said or shared. In this way, we can directly understand how the sharing of memes (both original posts, and those offered in response) can be conversational. Memes can be (and are) shared in response to text posts, where the original poster makes a point and a responder uses a meme to illustrate an emotional reaction, or perhaps a rebuttal, all through the commonly understood meaning of the meme that is shared (Figure 2-1).



Figure 2-1 A simple meme that acts as a conversational response to something someone else has said.

Context plays an important role in studying memes as digital anthropology. The meme shown above (Figure 2-1) shows, at surface level, one person offering another person congratulations. When used in a conversation, the meme could simply express congratulations. However, those who know the origin of this meme in the television sitcom "Parks and Recreation" and the relationship between the characters portrayed would use it to express a more sarcastic or mocking congratulations. Digital anthropology, as a subdiscipline, investigates this interface between digital creations and social context, and the cultural outcomes that result from it.

Mememes as originally defined by Dawkins (1979) who coined the term, are ideas that are contagious, such as religion, that motivate their holders to share them. It is easy

to see how this concept was applied to internet memes. In fact, it can be hard sometimes to differentiate some internet memes from memes in the sense that Dawkins described. The internet video meme “It Gets Better,” for example, incorporated praxis, product, and idea in one. The meme involved creating a video to be shared on youtube.com (a popular video sharing site) describing the autobiographical stories of LGBTQIA+ participants who had faced (and often overcome) hardship, sharing the message that difficulties faced as a queer youth are alleviated over time. The meme encourages not just the creation and sharing of these videos, but also encourages sharers and viewers to hold the idea that “it gets better” thereby acting as a vehicle for a concept in the fashion of Dawkins’ memes.

Internet memes can (and likely do) exist in any form of digital media, including audio, text, image, and video. In reviewing existing literature for this thesis, it is clear that the most studied forms of memes are video and image memes. As the formats most easily created and edited (especially so in the case of images) it is not surprising that these formats are most interesting to researchers.

The production of image memes, from creation, sharing, consumption, to editing and re-sharing, can all take place on a single device, allowing almost anyone to participate in the production and consumption of memes. However, the interface of human and device is crucial in this practice. Current digital technologies make it possible for memes to exist, but it is social context that allows memes to have meaning. This author’s position as a trans woman who uses Facebook to share memes allows her to analyze these communities and interactions from an emic perspective using digital anthropology. Digital anthropology is an approach to researching virtual spaces “that

permits addressing the object of study in its own terms (in other words, not as merely derivative of the offline)” while always considering how social contexts of the physical world influence and are influenced by these spaces (Boellstorf 2012: 40).

Memes as Community Tools and Identity Aggregators

The group formation power of digital spaces and media is well understood (Shirky 2008), as is the specific role of memes in this formation process. Much of this previous research has focused on digital communities that act as support spaces for those experiencing eating disorders or anorexia (whether the communities act as recovery support or in a pro-anorexia fashion). Such studies have demonstrated how online communities formed around a marginalized group identity serve not only as an identity reinforcer - creating boundaries for what constitutes this community identity and subsequently fleshing that identity out - but also as a window into the identity of the group members from a research perspective (Smith et al. 2015). Image memes, because they are used as conversational pieces, are studied as potential tools with which communities can construct and reify their identity. Ging and Garvey (2018) demonstrated not only the prevalence of image memes that discuss pro-anorexia sentiments and the high degree of use among pro-anorexia group members on social media, but also the value of these memes as a dataset for understanding group identity and wellness. Through content analysis, Ging and Garvey were able to determine in what ways pro-anorexia community members communicate about their behaviors, but also how recovery and healthy behaviors are supported and promoted. In this way, the image meme dataset was useful in informing future interventions with those suffering from anorexia. This type of

work has been expanded into LGBTQ identity boundary work, notably in Gal, Shifman, and Kampf's 2016 analysis of the YouTube meme project known as "It Gets Better" in which they explicitly discuss the boundary work that is done in LGBTQ meme production, reproduction, and sharing that elicits, reifies, and refines LGBTQ group identity in digital spaces.

Who are Transgender People?

While there are many narratives used to understand what it means to be transgender, a helpful definition would be that a transgender person is someone who identifies as a gender other than that which they were assigned or declared at birth. A transgender woman, for example, is a woman who was declared to be male at birth. A non-binary person is someone who was assigned a gender at birth, but identifies with neither of the binary male or female genders. Intersex people, while not necessarily transgender, face many of the same stigmas and hardships as transgender people do. To be intersex means that your biological anatomy at birth has traits that were not strictly male or strictly female, such as having XXY (two X and one Y) chromosomes, or having ambiguous genitalia. This thesis does not delve into the many issues faced by intersex people, but readers are strongly encouraged to educate themselves further on the topic (*Bodies in Doubt: An American History of Intersex* by Elizabeth Reis would be a good jumping off point).

An important concept in understanding what it means to be transgender is "Gender assigned at birth." In European and American societies, gender is often conflated with biological sex, which is observed at childbirth, by the presence of

phenotypically male or female genitals (Rubin 1984). As such, the presence of a penis will result in the child being assigned a male gender, and the presence of a vagina will result in the child being assigned a female gender. Gender, in contrast to “sex,” is the identity associated with social roles and customs, and while gender as both a concept and as a system of rules has been abstracted and challenged by feminists and queers for years, it is still worth differentiating this social construct of behavior and presentation from the social construct of how bodies are perceived and codified. For those who are not transgender (herein called cisgender, with the prefix “cis” literally meaning “on the same side” which is the opposite of the prefix “trans” which means “across”), these assignments often go unquestioned throughout the course of their lives. For those who are transgender, however, the gender they are assigned in this way does not fit with their internally held sense of gender.

The distinction between biological sex and “internally held sense of gender” can be difficult to understand for people who do not personally experience a dissonance between the two. It can be helpful to understand gender and phenotypic sex as two distinct features of a given person, that do not always align. In studies of children, for example, the awareness of gender – both in oneself and in observation of others – can be observed as only existing after a certain developmental phase, generally occurring around four years of age (Beven 2014:139). Gender is not something that we have a concept of from birth, despite the fact of our phenotypic sex. For reasons not yet well understood, some people recognize a gender in their selves incongruent with what is usually

associated with those who share their phenotypic sex. The gender they come in to can be understood as their internally held sense of gender.

Often, the incongruity between sex assigned at birth and the internally held sense of gender takes the form of gender dysphoria and/or gender euphoria. Gender dysphoria is the phenomenon of negative feelings for your body, gender, social roles, or any/all of these in any combination. Transgender people who are dysphoric experience frustration or sadness with their current state of being, which can be a prompt for transitioning socially and/or medically. Gender euphoria is the experience of joyful feelings when living, presenting, or being perceived as one's internally held sense of gender. Feeling good about dressing the way you want, enjoying being called by the appropriate honorific, or feeling good about how your medical transition has changed your body are all examples of gender euphoria. It is important to note that some people argue that gender dysphoria is a necessary part of being trans, and that you are not really transgender unless you have dysphoria. While this may conform with many common narratives about being trans, a more open-minded view, and one held by the author of this work, is that gender euphoria is equally qualifying of a criteria for being transgender. Certainly, the dataset collected for this thesis is in agreement with the author.

Many studies (Gizewski et al. 2005, Olyslager and Conway 2007, Gates 2011, and many more) have attempted to estimate the prevalence of transgender individuals in society. Beven (2014) reviewed over 70 sources making various estimates based on many different criteria, and after aggregating this wealth of data, posits the prevalence of transgender women as high as 1% of the population and transgender men as high as 0.5%

(Beven 2014). It is important to note, however, that there are many potential problems with this approach. Most notably, these estimates do not explicitly include non-binary and gender non-conforming people. It is unclear if they were excluded entirely, or in some way lumped in with either a transmasculine or transfeminine population. Furthermore, many of the criteria used to determine a population size were biologically essentialist in nature, only counting those who were in the process of medically transitioning with the aid of a medical professional. This is problematic because not all trans people will undergo medical transition (James et al. 2015:47), and as Beven points out, not all who transition will do so with the aid of a medical professional.

According to the 2015 US Transgender Survey, 29% of respondents (out of 6,456 individuals) identify as transmasculine (assigned female at birth, and identifying as masculine gender), 33% identify as transfeminine, and 35% identify as non-binary, genderqueer, or gender nonconforming. 3% of respondents identified not as transgender, but as crossdressers, an identity not within the scope of this thesis.

Along with population data, to understand transgender people it is important to understand transgender experiences of discrimination, victimization, and distress. According to the United States Transgender Survey (2015) executive summary 39% of respondents reported experiencing “serious psychological distress” in the month before completing the survey instrument, while 40% had attempted suicide at least once in their lifetime, which the report cites as nine times the rate of the general population. Respondents of the survey reported HIV rates at nearly five times the general population (1.4% compared to 0.3%). Respondents also reported higher rates of bullying and

mistreatment in school, as well as elevated rates of harassment and mistreatment in the workplace and in medical settings, compared to the general population. Respondents reported a heightened rate of unemployment (three times the national average) and homelessness (30% of respondents). Importantly, rates of psychological distress, suicide, and homelessness dropped for those respondents who reported having a supportive family, while rates were elevated for those who did not.

The data on victimization are similarly shocking. Transgender respondents of the U.S. Transgender Survey reported incredibly elevated rates of violence and altercation, including high rates of experiencing sexual violence (Figure 2-1). In particular, violence by intimate partners is frighteningly high. The problem is so pervasive, there is a term for a common legal defense that perpetrators of violence against transgender people pursue in court: the “Trans Panic Defense” (Lee and Kwan 2014).

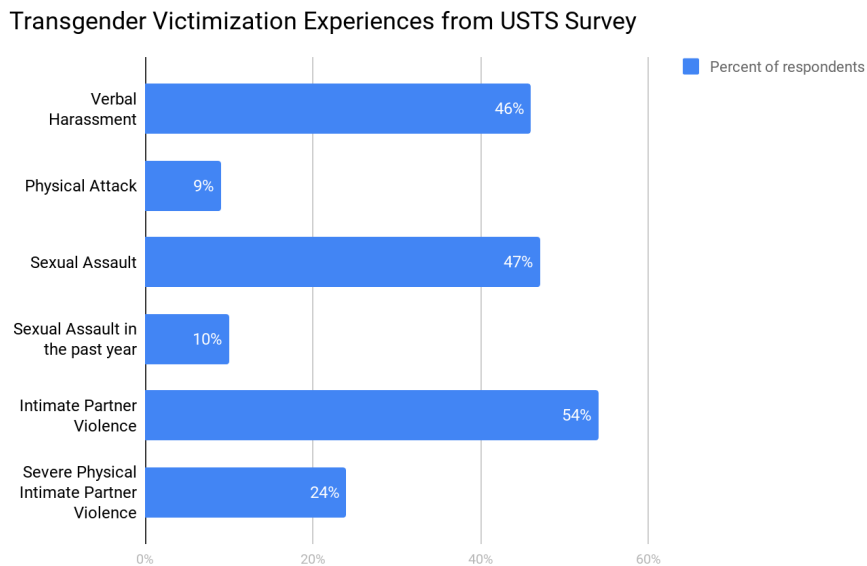


Figure 2-2 Transgender Victimization Experiences from the U.S. Transgender Survey. (James et al. 2015)

Minority Stress

Minority stress is a concept originally discussed by Meyer (1995, 2003) to describe the specific stresses experienced by LGB sexual minorities, though conceptually was meant to be expandable to other minorities as well. The model was not purely hypothetical, but was tested and incorporated knowledge previously found in other literature on the stresses minorities experience. The model, which has been widely applied, described how stresses unique to minority populations can lead to negative mental and physical health outcomes. Several stresses were identified and described, grouped into distal and proximal categories, which, respectively, included stresses caused by others and stresses originating from one's own attitudes and expectations. Meyer's LGB Minority Stress Model was meant to contribute to the debate on whether being LGB was a mental illness, with proponents of that view citing the prevalence of mental health issues in sexual minorities as their "proof." However, Meyer demonstrated the ways constant stress experienced by minorities leads to greater incidences of health troubles, concluding that the co-morbidity of mental illness with an LGB identity is not an indication that and LGB identity is itself a mental illness, but rather is a natural response to extreme adversity.

Recent attention to transgender individuals has led researchers to apply Meyer's minority stress model to trans and gender non-conforming folks. Notably, Testa et al. (2015) adapted the model into the Gender Minority Stress and Resilience Measure, which draws on the parallel stresses experienced similarly between LGB and TGNC (Transgender and Gender Non-Conforming) groups. Testa et al. expand on the ways

some of these stresses are uniquely experienced by TGNC people, and consider ways in which trans people face unique minority stress not experienced by LGB people (at least, not in the same way and/or to the same extent).

There are 7 aspects to trans and gender non-conforming minority stress that are outlined by Testa: Discrimination, Rejection, Victimization, Non-affirmation, Internalized Transphobia, Negative Expectations, and Nondisclosure. These are trans-centric versions of Meyer's LGB minority stressors, but with the addition of non-affirmation (meaning, having your identity questioned or outright rejected by others). Like Meyer's minority stress model, Testa notes that stressors range from distal or external (stresses in one's environment) to proximal or internal (stresses originating from the self). Distal stressors lead to negative health outcomes and contribute to proximal stressors, which in turn also lead to negative health outcomes.

Testa et al. (2015) include a newly identified stressor in their Gender Minority Stress and Resilience measure: non-affirmation. This form of stress, unique to TGNC people, is defined as the experience of having your gender identity questioned, or even denied by others. With this inclusion, and the acknowledgement that the stressors shared by both the LGB and TGNC minority stress models are similar, but distinct, the Gender Minority Stress and Resilience Measure is presented as a unique and separate model from what Meyer originally conceptualized. Despite these differences, the Gender Minority Stress and Resilience Measure functions the same way that the LGB model does. Each of the stressors described in the Gender Minority Stress and Resilience Measure are presented and/or described in the memes studied in this work, to varying degrees.

Resiliency

An important question to consider in understanding minority stress is, as Van Breda (2001:14) put it, “why, when people are exposed to the same stress which causes some to become ill, do some remain healthy?” The answer Van Breda is leading us to in this question is *resilience*. Resilience theory has been used to understand the ways in which minority populations withstand adversity and in so doing avoid negative mental and physical health outcomes. Luthar et al. (2000:543) provide a definition of resilience as the “process[es] encompassing positive adaptation within the context of significant adversity.” Essentially, resilience can be conceived of as the behaviors, attitudes, and resources that individuals or groups facing significant adversity enact or utilize to achieve better than expected physical and mental health outcomes in the face of said adversity. These behaviors, attitudes, and resources are known as “resilience processes” (Van Breda 2001).

In a 2003 discussion of minority stress, Meyer outlined many studies that described resilience processes in minority populations. Meyer summarized these works and concluded that “group solidarity and cohesiveness” contribute greatly to minority resilience, and therefore, resistance to minority stress. One such study (Branscombe et al. 1999) described how experiences of prejudice faced by black Americans created greater group cohesiveness, which was a mitigating factor for such stressors. Similarly, Testa et al. (2015) described connection to one’s community as a resilience factor for transgender people. The other, equally important factor Testa et al. noted, was pride in one’s marginalized identity. In addition to resilience processes, which are behaviors

marginalized individuals engage in, resilience can also be a sort of resource that people partake of. For example, community support groups are resources that can foster community connectedness and pride. While participating in such a group is a process, the group itself acts as a resource.

There are three distinct levels of resilience resources or processes: personal, interpersonal, and community level. The hypothetical support group listed above is something one might personally engage with, but is a resource to the community, making it a community level resource. Interpersonal resilience comes from others, but is not necessarily available to the broader community. Peer support or a supportive family member are both interpersonal resources. Personal or individual resilience comes from acts or resources that stem from one's self, such as feeling love for one's self, or engaging in actions that assert one's marginalized identity.

Queer Theory

“Queer Theory” is a loose but expansive assortment of critical (and often post-structuralist) philosophies that deal with anormativity, famously with regards to “queer” people (or perhaps people who do “queer” things). There is a blurry and mutable line between what is, and isn't queer, but it can be helpful to think of queerness in terms of a reaction against normative, dominant pressures (Halperin 1995, 62). Queer theor(ies) then are those philosophies that problematize, critique, and investigate normative pressures and modalities and the responses to them. This is not to say that the spotlight of queer theory focuses only on anormative people and actions, but rather investigates normativity as a whole, including normative people and actions. Among the many

authors whose works have contributed to queer theory, this work demonstrates the theses of three authors in particular: Michel Foucault, Judith Butler, and Anne Fausto-Sterling.

Michel Foucault and Biopower

Michel Foucault wrote, among other things, about power and control, especially with regards to surveillance and the policing of bodies. Power, which for Foucault encompassed surveillance, forms of knowledge and the (re)creation of normative ideas and narratives, and control over the health of bodies, is helpful in understanding transgender memes in several ways. Most importantly, the control the medical industry has over transgender people, and the policing transgender bodies face are power dynamics in line with Foucault's conceptions of power and control.

An important phenomenon that Foucault described is "Bio Power" (Foucault 1976, 1988). In comparison to earlier forms of power exerted over populations (the power of a ruler to kill their subjects) biopower is a way to control populations through the selective application of medicine and medical practice. Rather than killing subjects to exact control, in a capitalist society, enforcing healthiness has the benefit of producing a productive labor force, which benefits those in control of capital and the means of capitalist production. However, the policing of bodies in this way is enforced by normative conceptions of what it means to have a body. Normative bodies are, most importantly for biopower, productive, but the enforcement of normativity does not stop there. In what Foucault refers to as "technologies of the self," ideas and conceptualizations of normative being are instilled in and internalized by members of a population.

Normative technologies of the self encourage and enforce compulsory cis-heteronormativity, for example, and punish deviation (which, notably, is a component of minority stress). Transgender, homo/bisexual, and other anormative groups face particular scrutiny from medical providers (and indeed, countless other arenas in society) as they are not normative bodies, and so must be policed. In the case of denying transition related care, transgender people are made to live normative lives in a normative body. Once a transition has begun, however, transgender bodies, it seems (see Grant et al. 2011), do not receive the compulsory health treatment to maintain them as working, productive bodies, and instead are allowed to face significant health adversity, and, as Foucault would say, allowed to die.

Transgender people face surveillance and control over their bodies in a number of ways (Stryker 2014), and transgender memes discuss this. Transgender people are observed, policed, and excluded from spaces that are regulated on the basis of gender, such as bathrooms or locker rooms and transgender bodies are often scrutinized and investigated by cisgender people, who feel it is their privilege to know about the pre/post/non operative status of transgender bodies and genitals, for example. Furthermore, control over transgender bodies can take the form of restriction of access to medical care, or other health or wellness resources.

Notably, transgender people are gatekept from medical services, whether they be transition related, or routine. For transition related care, transgender people are often required to undergo extra(nious) steps to receive hormone therapy or gender affirming surgeries, sometimes including a waiver, or other times including letters from

psychologists affirming that a trans person has undergone appropriate (and often extensive) steps to prove that they are the gender they claim. The transgender person in this scenario is surveilled and policed before receiving access to medical treatment. For routine, non-transition related care, transgender people are denied or restricted from care at an elevated rate compared to national averages (Grant et al. 2011). Sometimes called “trans broken arm syndrome,” this phenomenon occurs when a medical provider is so uncomfortable with treating (or even interacting with) a transgender person, that they deny care that is not complicated by one’s transgender status, stating that one’s status as transgender makes them require more specialized care. Importantly, some providers will deny care to trans people outright, claiming their discomfort prevents them from being compelled to treat a transgender patient (Grant et al. 2011).

Biopower is more pervasive than to just exist in doctor’s offices, however. The enforcement of bodily normativity occurs in a myriad of places, from the difficulty it takes to update your name on a credit card, to getting your gender marker changed on your passport, to the very constructions of sex-as-gender and gender-as-binary. Biopower is transmitted along several vectors, from the state and leaders of industry to community and family members. The body policing that occurs in bathrooms, as mentioned above, is an example of community enforcement of normative technologies of the self.

Judith Butler and Gender Performativity

Of the topics discussed in Judith Butler’s works, two main topics are most helpful for how we interpret transgender memes: the (de)categorization of gender and gender performativity. The (de)categorization of gender explores and problematizes the view of

gender essentialism, contending that immutable categories such as “women” or “men” are counterproductive in discussions about gender (Brady and Schirato 2011). Conversations about the category of “women,” Butler argues, run the risk of emphasizing the experiences of only some members of that group, often those with the greatest privilege (Barker 2016). As others have argued (Lorde 1980, hooks 2000), broad categories of gender are often not the primary facet of identity upon which oppression is experienced. In applying this thinking to transgender lived experience, one might argue that transgender women experience their oppression along the identity axis of “transgender” more than along the axis of “woman” (though undoubtedly experience oppression along both, and likely other axes as well). The lived experience of being a transgender woman is distinct from being a transgender person, or a woman, and treating these categories as monoliths excludes many of the presumed members of such groups.

In discussing gender, Butler takes an existentialist view that gender is performed, rather than something one has or is (Butler 1990). Importantly, Butler rejects the idea that one’s gender is built upon the framework of one’s body, but rather is something one reifies every day through behaviors that (re)create discursively constructed and understood patterns of gender. Butler contends that as much as we enact certain gendered behaviors (prescriptive gender norms, for example) these actions and performances are read to be of a gendered category, that is, these performances are intelligible. In reading, or, “interpellating” one’s performance, identities can be assigned to others (or indeed, ourselves).

This particular theory on the construction of identity has been used by some to contend that transgender people (especially transgender women) are only “acting” like their gender, or more perniciously, reinforce potentially harmful gender stereotypes through their deliberate performances of a gender (Barker 2016, 141). This view is problematic and harmful in a number of ways. Most importantly, Butler herself refutes this view, and makes the point that one’s gender identity being self-determined does not make it less real than those whose identities are aligned with how they have always been interpellated since birth. Furthermore, the assumption that transgender people “intentionally” enact a gendered performance presupposes that cisgender people do not intentionally recreate femininity or masculinity, but rather fall in to it naturally, which is not the case.

The rejection of gendered performance can also, in a way, be conceptualized as a gendered performance itself. Those who are gender non-conforming, non-binary, or agender, for example, might not intentionally recreate masculine or feminine gendered behaviors, but may find themselves trapped by the historical gendering of all behaviors, forcing them into a box. Indeed, a problem for many non-binary people is being read (interpellated) as a binary gender due to some element of their presentation or other aspects of their gender performance (Finlay 2017).

Butler’s views on the nature of gender contradict how many transgender people discuss their own gender identities, however, not how transgender people discuss the gendered performances of cis people upholding gender roles. It’s very common (as will be apparent in Chapter Four), for transgender people to declare their gender as essential,

that is, something one is or has (e.g. “I am a boy,” Figure 6-4). Despite this, it is also clear that many trans people understand gender is at least in some ways performed by memes that discuss or demonstrate cis people enforcing (or recreating) traditional gender roles through actions and presentation (Figure 4-68). As far as transgender perspectives represented by the memes studied for this thesis indicate, gender can indeed be performative, but there is still an understanding that it is also, at least in part, essential as something one is or has.

Queer Conceptions of Sex and Gender

The distinction of physical sex and gender is frequently discussed in transgender memes, and requires some clarification. Physical sex refers to the morphological state of one’s body, with regard to various traits that have come to be conceptualized as “sex traits,” which is to say, traits that make up one’s sex. Commonly, these traits refer to one’s genitals, hormones, secondary sex characteristics, and chromosomes. Frequently, one’s sex assigned at birth is determined based solely on the presence of either a penis or a vulva; chromosomes and hormones are not investigated, and secondary sex characteristics are not present. Gender, while often (erroneously) considered to be predicated on one’s sex, is actually distinct from sex, and is an internal, psychological phenomena, which may be masculine, feminine, both, or neither.

Importantly, physical sex is as fluid and complex as gender. As Fausto-Sterling (2012) describes, the development of one’s sex (which is comprised of several categories) is multi-layers, with aspects of one’s sex developing over time (such as secondary sex characteristics which are not present at birth). As Fausto-Sterling points

out, no one element of sexual development is necessarily predicated on any previous development. For example, while there is a high correlation of secondary sex characteristics that are perceived of as feminine developing in people assigned female at birth, this is not always the case. While a common assumption is that one's entire sexual body is determined upon the first sexual development, chromosomal sex (Fausto-Sterling 2012), this is not the case. A person's sex is not infrequently a jumbled association of various sex traits, some feminine, and some masculine. Even within a "sexed" trait there is variation. All of this is to say, the conception of a "sexed" body is often dimorphic, but not exclusively so. When considering the infrequency of having various sex traits (such as chromosomes, hormones, or [other] intersex traits/anatomy) investigated, it is not surprising that this view has remain unchallenged in common conceptions of sexual morphology. The conception, then, of gender as predicated upon sex is complicated. With uncertainty of one's physical gender, with the many variables present in sexual development that can contribute to a sex that is not entirely "male" or "female," it is difficult to say that one's gender should be either determined by sex, or even if so, strictly dichotomous.

Of course, as transgender experience demonstrates, gender, a social construct often associated with but distinct from the social construct of physical sex, is not always tied to sexual development. Despite this, bodily gender dysphoria (a feeling of "mismatch" between one's physical sex characteristics and the one's they feel they should have) is a common experience for transgender people. While sex and gender are distinct, it is worth recognizing their close relationship to one-another. For many transgender

people this means experiencing a mismatch between both the gender they were assigned at birth and the gender one identifies with *as well as* the sex one was assigned at birth and the sex one feels, understands, and knows to be correct for that person.

Queer Theory Summary

Queer theory, as a body of work, gives us tools through which we can analyze common conceptions of sex and gender, and understand not just typical experiences of these phenomena, but how different groups experience them differently. A common moment discussed in transgender meme is being faced with someone whose knowledge of high school level biology is used as a weapon of “common sense” against transgender people, while the truth of biology is far more nuanced and complex. As with an understanding of biology, we must investigate what is already “well-understood” if we want to arrive at a more accurate and useful conception of human experiences. While queer theorists would reject a positivist view of epistemology, these tools still help us arrive at understandings often more nuanced and accurate than traditionally held ideas. Questioning and elucidating the systems that reinforce normativity gives us a strong window into the oppressive systems which marginalize queer people, among others.

While queer theory allows us to inquire into the experiences of “queer” people and how they break the mold when it comes to traditional conceptions of bodies, gender, and relationships, it also affords us a more nuanced view of those who conform to normativity. As many memes in this work discuss, gender is not just performed by transgender people, but by cis people as well. Technologies of the self don’t just affect queer people, but put cis-het people in positions to reinforce power dynamics that shape

their lives just as much as the lives of others. While the focus of this thesis is transgender people, who undoubtedly have an anormative experience, it is important to keep in mind that philosophical tools used in this analysis could just as easily be used to investigate normative behaviors, attitudes, and power dynamics as well.

Marginality, Precarity, and Stigma

Though Minority Stress models and Resiliency are not typically discussed in anthropological literature, they are useful tools for understanding the culture, situation, and behaviors of transgender people who engage in digital spaces. Many topics that are well understood and discussed within the realm of anthropology share facets with minority stress and resilience, most notably the topics of marginality, precarity, and stigma.

The origin of stigma is as diffuse and complex as the various forms that stigma takes, but for our purposes we can understand stigma's origin in understanding aesthetically based stigma, which is stigma based in the appearance of others, and Disruptive stigma, which is the perception of a trait as disrupting others (Jones et al. 1984, Jackson 2005). Aesthetic stigma comes from the sensory experience a person has when faced with a stigmatized person, such as feeling unease watching two men kiss in public, or finding the appearance of a queer punk's hair and facial piercings unpleasant to look at. This form of stigma can prompt an on-the-spot reaction to an individual that can be as mild as alienation, or as severe as physical assault. Disruptive stigma is not triggered in reaction to perceiving a stigmatized person, but rather objection to the idea of a stigmatized person's existence. Jones et al. use the example of someone with a physical

handicap requiring extra accommodation that can disrupt the experiences of others, but in terms of queer stigma, it can be understood as feelings that being queer interferes with cis, straight society. The bathroom predator myth, for example, while unfounded, posits that transgender people will assault cis, straight people in bathrooms, disrupting (to put it mildly) everyday life. More realistically, to fold both of these stigmas together, feelings of intense hatred can well up in stigmatizers when confronted with queer people, leading to an emotional disruption. Disruptive stigma is more conceptual and ideological in origin, but nevertheless leads to four elements of minority stress: discrimination, victimization, and rejection, as well as negative expectations of experiencing said stigma on the part of queer people.

The term precarity has been used in anthropological literature to mean a few different things, but is understood by this work as a state of being in which one's socioeconomic and health situations are dangerously close to eroding into a state of crisis. A precarious individual, in this way, has few, if any, opportunities for upward mobility, and is getting by in life by such a thin margin that nearly any disruption to their situation would render them unable to continue living without incredible amounts of welfare from others/the state. The disruption of life and the inability to (stably, meaningfully) work in traditional-labor jobs pushes people towards precarious other forms of work/living. Life can go from typical to precarious nearly immediately following a major life upset or disaster. Unfortunately, those in precarious situations can experience higher rates of life disruption. "Typical" life situations remove control from life, leading to greater hardships, like the inability to set one's own schedule (say, around childcare needs).

Anthropological discussions of precarity illustrate an important aspect of minority stress, which is the ease in which marginalized minorities can face downward mobility as a result of their treatment or social situation as a marginalized, stigmatized group. In Millar's (2014) work discussing the labor positioning of Brazilian Catadores (garbage dump laborers and scavengers), the tenuous social and economic position of those who are unable or unwilling to participate in traditional wage labor is explored, providing insight into the reasons why some are forced into informal labor arrangements. These reasons are shared, in many ways, with many transgender people, who either through direct discrimination (being refused work for the reason of being transgender), indirect discrimination (being made uncomfortable and unwelcome due to marginalization and/or harassment in the workplace), or fears of such negative experiences, are not able/willing to engage in "typical" wage labor, and instead turn to informal economic labors, perhaps the most well-studied of which is transgender sex work (James et al. 2015). Indeed, David (2017) noted the phenomenon of transgender laborers flocking towards informal, gig-based tech work. The forms of discrimination and deterrent experienced by (potential or otherwise) transgender wage laborers are each instances of minority stressors: marginalization, victimization, and negative expectations. As Miller points out, those in precarious positions are more likely to experience "disruptions" in their lives, and this is well demonstrated in data regarding the lives of transgender people, who across the board experience higher rates of violence, discrimination, homelessness, and general unwellness compared to the general population they are compared against (James et al. 2015).

Precarity is a state of being for many transgender people, who, through one devastating experience of discrimination or unwellness, can find themselves without a home, a job, or reliable medical care. Transgender people are also faced with a more difficult time being accepted into new arrangements for any or all of the services or situations they need. How transgender people protect against these possibilities and how they adjust to new, difficult situations, can be understood as resiliency in the face of precarity. People living in precarious situations sometimes adjust to their situation, such as finding economic opportunities outside of traditional (and potentially exploitative and/or inaccessible) labor arrangements. While these adjustments to life are not without their negative consequences, they have their benefits, such as providing agency to the precarious individual, or an income without risk of ostracization.

Precarity, with its emphasis on the uncertainty of labor opportunities, affect, and non-belonging (Ettlinger 2007), engages with the workplace and hiring discrimination faced by transgender people (James et al. 2015), the black/grey market work (including sex-work) that trans people engage in (James et al. 2015), the mental health concerns trans people face as a result of their minority stress (James et al. 2015), and the alienation trans people experience (Grant et al. 2011), as well as in the data collected for this thesis. The understanding of precarious conditions specific to a given minority population would be tremendously similar to understanding the minority stress of that population. When you add understandings of the stigma faced by that population, you have, essentially, minority stress.

Chapter 3 Methods

This thesis aims to study the lived experiences of transgender people as they are discussed in trans-centric online spaces that use image memes as a primary mode of communication. The goal of this effort is to understand what transgender people use this popular and accessible interactive medium to discuss and to determine if these conversations can help inform health research and intervention efforts. Understanding memes, their content, and what they convey about transgender lifeways is important in determining if this under-studied dataset should be included in future research efforts.

This work focused on transgender communities on Facebook, one of the most popular and well recognized social media networks in anglophone countries. The communities hosted on Facebook are created and moderated by administrators (“admins”) who decide what content can be shared to the community. Admins may be professional social media managers hired to curate an organization’s digital engagement, but often they are simply individuals who care about the community focus and are moderating on a volunteer basis. On admin driven pages, the admin(s) generate most of the posts and followers respond by using Facebook’s “react” button to log their reactions to the content (at time of writing, Facebook’s react options were “Like”, “Love”, “Haha”, “Wow”, “Sad”, and “Angry”). The posts with the most reactions are those whose content sparked the greatest response from the community. By analyzing the posts with the most

reactions, we can understand what content speaks most to the experiences of transgender community members. Since “content” (in this case, specifically image memes) was under scrutiny for this investigation, content analysis was the primary method of inquiry and analysis for this work.

This research investigated five Facebook pages that had a relatively high number of followers, posted regularly, and whose posts were mainly image memes that discussed aspects of transgender life. These included pages that were specifically designed for transmasculine, transfeminine, or non-binary audiences. Memes were harvested from these pages and sorted by number of reactions. The most reacted-to memes were analyzed, coded, and distilled into four major themes through content analysis and emergent themes analysis. While the author’s own transgender lived experience and knowledge contributed to their understanding of the content, they used an inductive approach in determining these themes to avoid bias. The four themes identified by this work are: Bodies, Trans Experiences, Community, and Gender is a Broken System.

Facebook Pages

This project selected Facebook as the social media outlet to study for several reasons. The primary reason was that there is a software component called NCapture that will record Facebook page posts and associated metadata. This data could then be imported into NVivo for analysis. Without the NCapture plugin, capturing this amount of data and metadata would have been infeasible. Metadata captured along with each post included type of post (image, text, or video) and number of reactions. These categories made it possible to filter and sort the captured posts to select those that included photos

(almost always memes) and sort by reactions (descending) so that the most reacted to memes could be studied.

There were several additional reasons for using Facebook to create this dataset. Facebook's "pages" are publicly available and can be viewed by anyone, as opposed to its "groups" where one may need to be a member before one can view any content. While members of Facebook groups (and other social media outlets such as subreddits, Tumblr blogs, or Instagram accounts) may have some expectation of privacy, followers of Facebook pages do not. A final benefit to using Facebook is that the network automatically calculates and displays data such as a page's number of likes and followers (which represent audience size and reach), message response time (how quickly a page will respond to your message to them, on average, which is a useful proxy for admin engagement with their audience), and most recent post date, which helps a researcher determine if a Facebook page is active and engaged in current and contemporary discourse. Each of these criteria were used when selecting which pages to study in this thesis.

This thesis studied the following Facebook Pages: "Gay Trans Guy Things" (now listed on Facebook as "Achillean Trans Guy Archives"), "Genderfluid Rocks," "Girl Inside," "I stole your trans meme, hope that's ok," and "Just Trans Things." These pages were selected out of a list of 35 meme pages that frequently share memes related to transgender topics. It is worth noting that it is not currently possible to do a comprehensive search to identify all transgender meme pages on Facebook. The 35 pages initially discovered for this work were located using Facebook's search function to look

for “trans memes” and similar phrases and by selecting those with more than two thousand followers. Of the five pages selected to be analyzed in detail, there included a page dedicated to transmasculine memes (“Gay Trans Guy Things”), a page dedicated to transfeminine memes (“Girl Inside”), a page dedicated to non-binary memes (“Genderfluid Rocks”), and two pages that were general transgender meme pages with no specific gender associated (“I stole your trans meme, hope that’s ok” and “Just Trans Things”). It is worth noting that each of the three gender-specific pages would, on occasion, share memes about other genders out of solidarity and community togetherness.

The number of pages chosen was intended to include representation from both binary genders as well as non-binary people. An intentional choice was made to include two meme pages that had no particular gender associated so as to capture a greater number of memes that represented the trans community as a whole. The three gender specific pages were included to ensure that a broad range of perspectives were represented.

The five pages were chosen based on several factors, ranked here from most important to least. The most important factor was the nature of posts to the page. Pages whose posts consisted mostly of articles or memes unrelated to the trans community were deprioritized. If the page posted primarily memes which were explicitly in reference to being transgender, then the page was prioritized. The second factor considered was most recent post date. Page activity was important to ensure that the page was currently active and actively engaged in current meme discourse. The third factor was message response time. This measure informed how engaged with their audience a meme page was. Lastly,

two very prominent meme pages, “Femme 4 Memes” and “Gaylor Moon” were disqualified for study on the basis that they only shared memes made by their own admins, never from other sources. A distinction can be made in the function of meme pages that share user selected/curated content from other sources (perhaps along with their own content) and those that share only self-generated content (Neuendorf 2017:210). Femme 4 Memes and Gaylor Moon were distinct in this regard. These pages also had substantially more followers than other pages. Based on the nature of their content and audience, these pages were deemed outliers not in keeping with other pages selected for study and were therefore not included in this research.

Methodology

Berelson (1952:18) defines content analysis as: “A research technique for the objective, systematic, and qualitative description of the manifest content of communication.” Content analysis provides a way to make inferences from units of communication (such as memes) so as to interpret their meaning through qualitative descriptions. The process involves defining units to be analyzed, in this case discrete memes, sampling these units (the criteria for which is discussed below), making inferences as to the thematic and semiotic content of these units, coding and grouping the units, and finally analyzing them in their groups to elicit meaning.

An inductive approach to understanding a marginalized group such as transgender people allows researchers to listen to what is being said and discover what topics are important to that group. This mitigates issues of bias in data collection that might occur when the researcher is only focused on topics that they find interesting, but that may not

actually be relevant to the community. This form of inquiry is not just preferable, but necessary in order to illustrate the versatility of trans memes as a dataset. Through a process of discovery, this work is able to illuminate more than a deductive approach would. Consequently, this inductive approach informed this work's later deductive approach into minority stress and resiliency (as discussed in Chapter Six).

As a transgender woman researching transgender memes, culture, and lived experience, my positionality with regards to my work places this thesis near to bordering on autoethnography, which has, as a methodology, its own conventions and common practices. Often autoethnography is highly reflexive and at times experimental (fittingly so, as it comes from the “reflexive turn” in anthropology [Warms and McGee 2013]). While this work utilizes and relies upon my own experience as a transgender woman, which enables me to (more) efficiently “read” transgender memes from an emic perspective, the work is not necessarily reflexive, and therefore is perhaps best understood not to be autoethnographic, and as such does not utilize many of the techniques and methodologies involved in that approach.

Analysis Techniques

The Ncapture plug-in was used to capture posts made on the five Facebook pages selected to be part of this thesis. This plug-in allows users to capture posts from Facebook pages, along with their reactions, comments, and information about the sources that made each post. These data are downloaded and can be imported as a dataset in NVivo.

NVivo for Mac was used to open the files saved by Ncapture, and was used further to refine and filter the data collected by Ncapture to create the final dataset used

for this thesis, as well as to code that data. First, all data collected besides what was relevant to this research was hidden, so as to not bias analysis or interpretation. Information such as comments, location of posters, religion, and gender (which is especially unreliable in this context) and others were hidden from view and ignored entirely for this work. In the end, only the following data were used in analysis: type of post (photo, text, link, video, etc.) which was used as a filter to only display photo posts, content of post (the photo itself), and likes, which was used to sort the data in order of number of likes, descending.

From the five selected meme pages, this work studied the one-hundred most reacted memes. This number was arbitrarily chosen to capture a large enough number of memes to sufficiently cover an array of topics, while still being of manageable enough size for the project to be completable in a reasonable time frame. While future work could include a larger sample size, it is worth noting the richness of data achieved by sampling one-hundred memes from each page. It is also worth noting that when sampling one-hundred memes from each page, several memes began to repeat themselves across the different pages. Conceptual saturation, if not achieved at one-hundred memes, would likely have occurred shortly thereafter.

Once the top one-hundred memes from each page were identified, the data were quickly reviewed to determine initial codes to be used in analysis. This was done by noting topics and details about memes in a notepad, and noting the frequency of each potential code. In the end, the codes used for this analysis encompassed several different aspects of the data. The coding categories used were affect (which attempted to qualify

the tone of the meme), explicit association (which tracked what identities were explicitly associate with a meme, such as specifically trans, or female, etc.), template (which tracked what format the memes were in - this was ultimately excluded from analysis), and topic. After coding, and reviewing which codes were frequently used and to what extent, the data was distilled down to several broad topics which were further reduced into 4 major themes. These themes were: Bodies, Community, Trans Experience, and Gender is a Broken System.

Chapter 4 Inquiry into the Content of Transgender Memes

Through the processes of content and emergent themes analyses, four main themes were identified that nearly all of the memes harvested for this work could be attributed to. These themes are Bodies, Trans experiences, Community, and Gender is a Broken System. Descriptions of these themes, and subthemes that comprise them, are described below, with examples. The memes pictured are accompanied by a description of the meme, including its content, as well as the meanings behind the discourse and semiotics it contains.

Bodies

It's unsurprising that trans people would discuss bodies and bodily experiences. Not only do many trans people endeavor to medically change our bodies, but our bodies are also under intense scrutiny by others. Discussions of bodies, bodily experiences (such as dysphoria or euphoria), bodily processes (puberty, menstruation, etc.), and medical transition are frequent topics in memes. Along with memes that deal with a trans perspective of bodies are memes that discuss perceptions of bodies, and the scrutiny of those views. In these memes it is important to read the layers of text not explicitly written in the memes, but what these memes represent. Discussions of longing, unease, discomfort, and non-belonging are heavily pervasive in these memes. So too are examples of joy, pride, and community.

Understanding memes about bodies requires rejecting traditional narratives about the journey transgender people go through in navigating their lives as trans people. These memes discuss how and why some people choose not to transition medically, for example, or the specific reasons others do transition, all the while confronting and subverting the traditional transsexual narrative biases that cis readers may hold while first exploring trans memes/literature.

Euphoria/dysphoria

A common narrative surrounding trans bodies is “dysphoria” - or an intense feeling of disdain and/or disconnect with one’s own body. A common phrase used to describe trans people is “born in the wrong body,” which, as a concept, resonates heavily with many trans people. That being said, there are a large number of memes that offer alternative narratives and terminology to discuss dysphoria. More so, there are memes that discuss an appreciation for the body one has, even in its imperfections. Beyond that, there are memes that discuss feelings of happiness or joy with one’s own body - an experience known as “euphoria.” Euphoria presents itself in memes in different ways. Euphoria can be a comfort or appreciation for one’s own body, or it can be excitement for changes on the horizon. Euphoria can be empowering, especially in a culture that emphasizes and expects a narrative of dysphoria, discomfort, and pain over happiness, comfort, and pride.



Figure 4-1 Tweet with before and after photos.

Figure 4-1, Figure 4-2, and Figure 4-3 illustrate a present tense euphoria in that they are celebrations of the body as it currently exists. Figure 1 is a popular type of meme you could call a “before and after” in which trans people celebrate the progress they have made since coming out. This progress is emphasized by a commenter believing the author of the tweet to be two different people, in a (presumably) cis-heterosexual relationship. Figure 2 also puts bodies on display as a mood board, literally calling for a celebration of bodies that do not conform to standards of traditional attractiveness, and illustrating their place in a relationship. While not overtly trans, the normalization and celebration of differing types of masculine bodies plays an important role in how trans men might come to love their bodies, even if they are not what they expected or were told were desirable by mainstream standards.



Figure 4-2 Mood board style meme celebrating chubby bodies.

Figure 4-3, similarly, illustrates a celebration of a body in a way that is counter to mainstream expectations. The meme features a transgender woman at an airport being screened by TSA. It is important to note that transgender women are very frequently selected for extra screening due to backscatter x-ray software not expecting external genitals on an observably feminine body. The meme flips the script on expectations that a trans woman in this situation would be ashamed and embarrassed to explain that she has a penis and that that is what is setting off the machine, by presenting a character that is proud of her penis and is unphased by the situation. In a situation in which transgender

women are often made to feel vulnerable and exposed, this meme demonstrates that pride in one's body can be a reclamation of power in such circumstances.



"Are you carrying any explosives?" "Just this bomb ass **GIRLDICK** ♀."

Figure 4-3 Meme discussing the experience of being a trans woman in airports.

Figure 4-4 is an example of gender euphoria in future tense: looking forward to the euphoria you will feel once you have changed aspects of your life, body, and or appearance. The all-text meme is a "bucket list" for the activities the author wants to accomplish after having their breasts removed (known as top surgery). Some of the items on the list might seem like very trivial things to a cisgender man, but are profound in the case of transgender men who are prevented from performing such activities because of dysphoria and/or the illegality of exposing breasts publicly. Performing chores topless or walking around the house with no top on, for example, would be symbolic acts of self-love and celebration. Donating their binder since they would no longer need it to conceal their breasts, similarly, would be an acknowledgement of freedom from dysphoria.

Post top surgery bucket list:

- go swimming shirtless
- walk around the house with no top on
- donate my binder
- breathe easy
- fix my posture
- workout/ do chores shirtless
- wear whatever I like
- get tan everywhere in the summer
- take douchey selfies
- change my shirt anywhere
- go to sleep with no shirt on
- walk out of the shower with just a towel on
- etc. etc. etc.

Figure 4-4 List of goals to accomplish after transmasculine top surgery.

This type of euphoria is important to understand, as there are tense discussions in trans communities as to what makes someone transgender. Some believe that it is the presence of dysphoria that makes a trans person, while others believe that euphoria is just as qualifying. (See Finch 2015 for a discussion dysphoria as a requirement for being transgender) Figure 4-5 is a great example of the kind of euphoria a person might experience and understand while coming to terms with their trans-ness or their decision to transition. The meme does demonstrate dysphoria, but the drive behind the items on the bucket list is to experience euphoria, which is an important distinction.

i wish all my problems were as little as
my boobs

Figure 4-5 Text meme about having small breasts.

Figure 4-5, Figure 4-6, Figure 4-7, and Figure 4-8 discuss the other side of the coin; dysphoria. While euphoria memes celebrate bodies, dysphoria memes express dissatisfaction, frustration, and a disconnect with one's body. Gender dysphoria is not experienced by all trans people, but is still extremely common. Figure 4-5 is a brief text meme that expresses not only dissatisfaction in the author's body, but in their life as well. Their small breasts are not only a disappointment for being small, but are in a way useless, for not being capable of mitigating the scale of the author's other life problems. Figure 4-6, similarly, expresses an exasperation towards one's body. The comic, written and drawn by a cisgender woman, is appropriated into a trans context to illustrate a problem had by many transgender women, which is an unwanted hairiness. The fact that the comic was drawn by and meant to express the experience of a cis woman provides a sense of comfort to this very transfeminine moment, bringing those trans women out of the realm of "just trans things" and into the realm of disappointment to conform to the (sometimes self-imposed) feminine beauty standards of mainstream culture. The comic,

in a transgender context, is both a venting of frustration, while also acting as a validator of transfeminine womanhood.

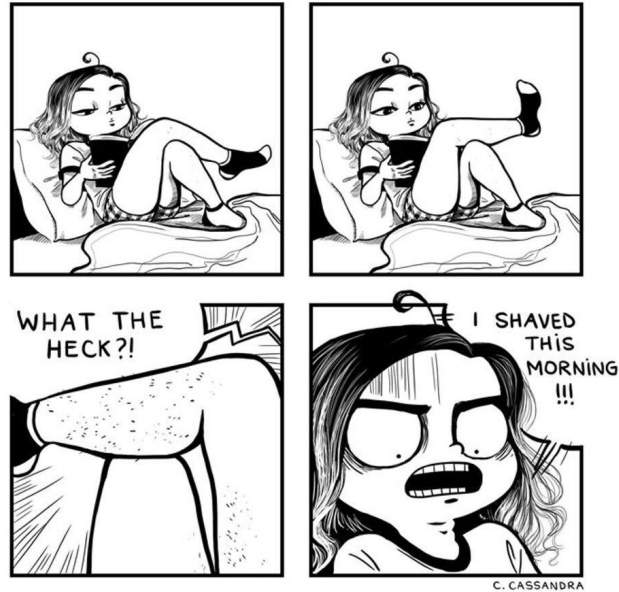


Figure 4-6 Comic about leg hair growing back too quickly.

Figure 4-7 demonstrates a disconnect between how trans people feel they should look, and how they recognize they do look. The meme touches on a common feeling for transmasculine people that if they pass for cis men, they often look incredibly juvenile for their age. This neoteny is troubling for many transmasculine people, and illustrates the disconnection one can feel with their own body - sensing that something is wrong, but you cannot fix it. Figure 4-8 demonstrates a similar feeling of disconnect in appearance through juxtaposition. Like Figure 4-7, the meme illustrates a recognition that one is not appearing the way they should, but also creates a barrier between the trans person and cis people. In Figure 4-8, the line of demarcation is clear, in that the trans person is represented to not even be human in comparison to the cis girls in the illustration. This is

not only a discussion of appearance, but also a harsh self-condemnation and rebuke as a result of dysphoria.

Being ftm be like: You vs everyone else your age



Figure 4-7 Meme about the neotenous appearance that is common for transgender men.

me trying to blend in with a group of
cute girls

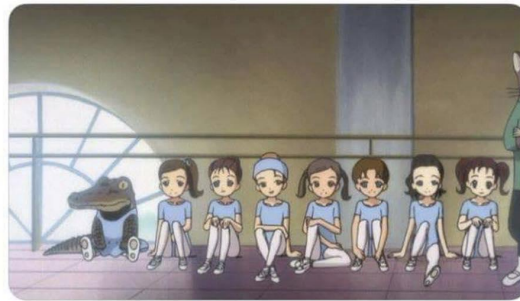


Figure 4-8 Meme about feeling physically distinct in appearance compared to cisgender peers.

Barriers to Medical Transition

Memes explicitly about medical transition deal with more than just the processes and procedures of hormones and surgery. They also deal with external barriers to

transition including social and economic factors, and internal barriers such as anxiety and fear of transition and transition related experiences. Barriers to transition are also seen in memes discussing many other topics, illustrating how such barriers impact many aspects of transgender life.



Figure 4-9 Wayward Boyfriend meme about placing priority on transition related care over other, important aspects of life.

Figure 4-9 and Figure 4-10 only briefly touch on the economic issues faced by transgender people (see Lenning and Carriel 2013 for further discussion). While they directly describe the difficulties trans people face in affording gender-affirming medical care, they also can be read as an example of some causes of the economic hardship trans people face. While not all trans people elect to medically transition, those who do place high priority on their transitions. Though not explicitly discussed in these memes, there is a subtext that suggests that living an authentic life (which for many trans people included medical transition) can exhaust the finances trans people need for living otherwise healthy and full lives.



Figure 4-10 Tumblr post about the cost of transition, while encouraging others to be respectful.

Figure 4-11 depicts the process one trans person went through in obtaining their hormones, including social pressure to reject liberating genderqueer discourse encouraging people to obtain the hormone therapy they desire. The social pressure the trans character faces is two pronged: first that trans-liberating discourse encourages harmful (and, it implies, irreversible) action, and second that anyone considering transition must be mentally ill. Interestingly, the author of the comic notes that their trans character has autism, perhaps encouraging them to consider some truth in the social pressure they face. (Note: there is a growing amount of literature discussing a higher than typical correlation of autism and being transgender. See Van Der Miesen et al. 2018 for an overview of recent research on this topic). The character decides to act upon the social pressures and seeks professional help, at which time their initial impulses and perceptions are validated by a professional health provider, who represents the ever-

broadening understandings of the positive outcomes of gender-affirming care (Colton-Meier et al. 2011 and Davis and Colton-Meier 2014).

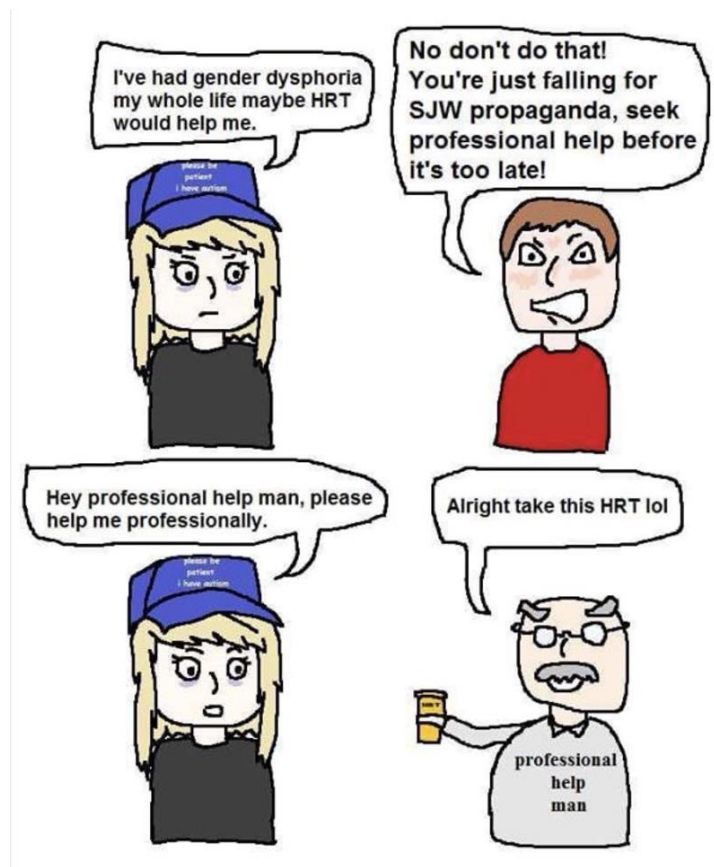


Figure 4-11 Comic about social pressures against transition.

Figure 4-12 outlines the hypocrisy of many medical professionals faced by trans people seeking affirming care. Often (though with decreasing regularity) providers will require trans people to jump through certain arbitrary hoops before they can undergo medical transition. These hurdles often include living “in your gender” for one or two years (depending on the provider’s personal perspective) before any transition related care will be prescribed, and seeking recognition from a psychologist that the trans person in question is indeed transgender. The incredible gatekeeping transgender people go

through in the interest of preventing what some see as a possible irreversible mistake is, as pointed out in this meme, absent in similar procedures unrelated to trans specific gender affirmation.



Figure 4-12 Tumblr post about barriers to hormone therapy.

Figure 4-13 continues to describe hypocrisy in how transgender people are treated as opposed to others, but in this case the dichotomy is trans people and intersex children. The meme accurately states that non-reversible surgical interventions are not performed on transgender minors as part of their transition related care. The World Professional Association for Transgender Health (WPATH) Standards of Care for the Health of

Transsexual, Transgender, and Gender Nonconforming People (the standards by which almost all transgender health specialists practice) clearly acknowledge that trans-affirming surgeries are irreversible and should never be performed on minors. The meme emphasizes the reversibility of puberty blockers which are used to delay puberty until such a time as the child can decide if they want to transition, or undergo the puberty they have delayed. The complexity of the process trans youth go through is juxtaposed to the split decision doctors make in surgically altering the genitals of intersex children shortly after birth, coercively assigning a gender to a child based not on the desires of the child (who obviously cannot contribute to the decision) but on the whim of the doctor involved (Claudia 2018). The meme illuminates the hypocrisy and irony of these extremely dichotomous standards for treatment.

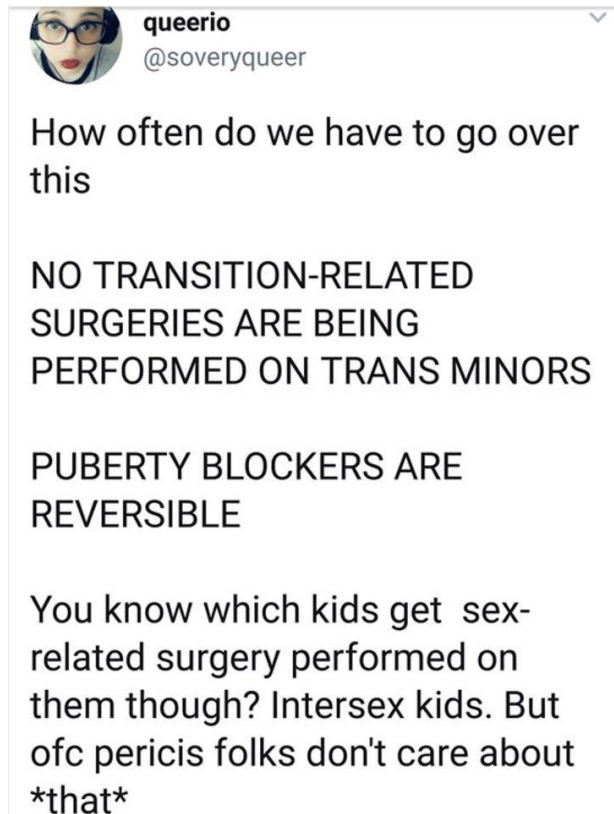


Figure 4-13 Tweet about unwanted surgeries being performed on intersex children.

Figure 4-14 and Figure 4-15 illustrate some of the internally felt barriers to transition, along with the anxiety mentioned in Figure 4-9. While much of the anxiety felt regarding medical transition can originate from the oppressive experiences trans people face from the medical community, fears of transition related care can also act as a barrier. In Figure 4-14, fear of needles (used to take the most therapeutically effective forms of testosterone and estrogen) can force trans people to use alternative forms of hormones that are less effective, and possibly not covered by insurance. The worry that hormones will not have enough of a therapeutic effect is itself a barrier to transition, as seen in Figure 4-15. There is a common worry that people too far removed from adolescence will not “pass” even with HRT, and therefore should avoid transitioning.

Both fear of transition related care and concerns of the therapeutic effects possible in transition are strongly felt by the trans community.

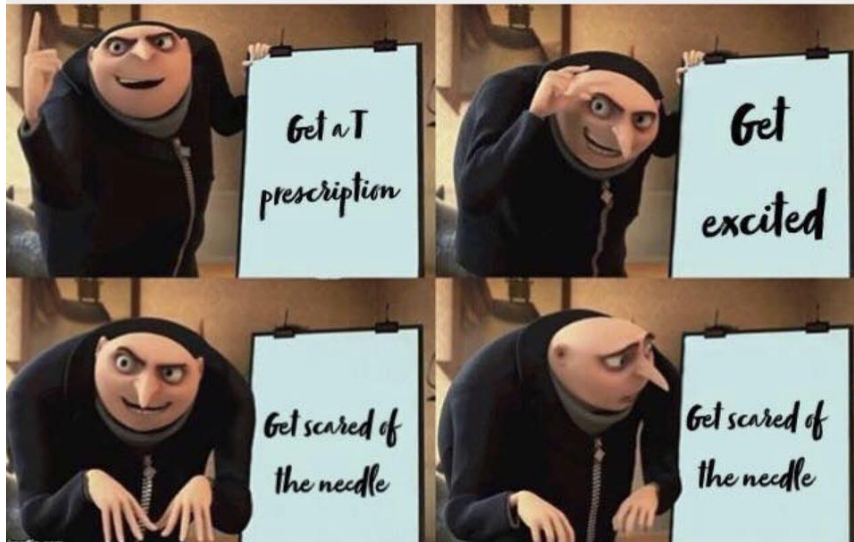


Figure 4-14 Meme about internal barriers to transition, in this case fear of needles.



Figure 4-15 Drake meme encouraging anyone to transition regardless of age.

Talking to cis people about bodies

Transgender people's bodies face a great deal of scrutiny from cis people, some trans people ("truscum," for example – see Finch 2015), and from themselves. There is a meaningful distinction, however, in the ways cis people view trans bodies and how trans people view trans bodies. Discussions with cis people about bodies can often be very difficult for trans people, because even well-meaning cis people often have no experience with gender dysphoria. Cis people also rarely have any reason to understand the complexity of hormone replacement therapy or other gender affirming care. This can lead to difficult exchanges in which cis people overstep or are insensitive, or at worst, overtly offensive.

Figure 4-16 explores the phenomenon of cis lay-people overestimating their knowledge of biology and gender studies when considering transgender people and transgender bodies. The overly reductive and inaccurate portrayal of sex as a binary biological fact, as opposed to what it is - a spectrum of traits that are social constructed and understood - is a common fallacy that many people learn in their youth. Of course, science is never so simple, and unfortunately few cis people explore the topic further than this. Despite their lack of understanding on the topic, it is not at all uncommon for conversations with cis people to be dominated by their insistence that they know more about trans bodies than trans people do. To further frustrate matters, the reductive view that many cis people hold about gender is necessarily at odds with the reality of the transgender experience, and is therefore tremendously invalidating. The tendency to use this bad science in conversations with trans people almost always leads to cis people cis-

plaining (cis people explaining trans topics to trans people who likely know better than said cis people) gender to trans people, which leads to great frustration.

every cis person on the
fucking planet about my body

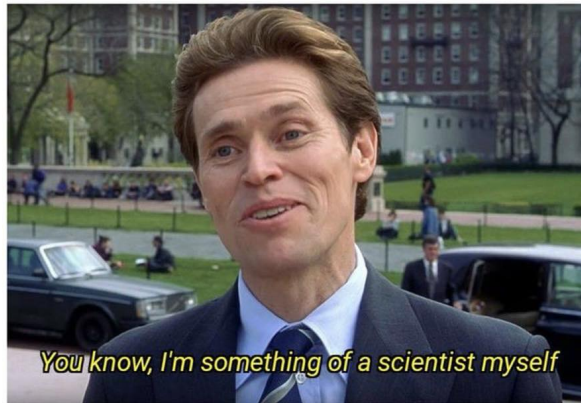


Figure 4-16 Meme about the presumptive attitudes of cis people contemplating transgender bodies.

Figure 4-17 and Figure 4-18 express the same sentiment quite clearly, which is that trans people do not appreciate being asked about “the surgery.” The term “the surgery” refers to what trans people often call “bottom surgery,” which is either phalloplasty or vaginoplasty; surgeries often considered to be the ultimate culmination of the transgender experience in pervasive transsexual narratives. Cis people often hold narrow and reductive views of trans bodies, and the expectation that undergoing “the surgery” equates to living a full transgender life is often brought up when cis people learn someone is transgender. Of course, there are more surgical interventions trans people might undergo besides bottom surgery, but whether or not trans people elect to undergo surgeries is a personal choice that is deeply private. Figure 4-10 touches on this, but the

view that cis people are not entitled to know about the status (past, present, or future) about trans bodies generally, and genitals specifically, is commonly and strongly held.



Figure 4-17 Tweet about etiquette when talking to trans people.

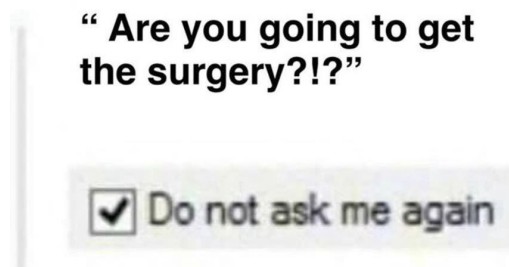


Figure 4-18 Meme about etiquette when talking to trans people.

Similarly, there seems to be an expectation held by cis people that trans people must feel at odds with their bodies – that dysphoria is universally experienced by trans people. Of course, as this line of thinking falsely presumes, if one requires surgery to live their authentic life, they must have a problem with their body. Reality, is of course, more nuanced and complex than this view holds. Even those trans people who elect to medically transition may not hate their bodies, but would prefer them to be different all

the same. Some trans people do hate their bodies, but the assumption, as presented in Figure 4-19, that all trans people must feel great unease in their own skin, is untrue and presumptuous. This ties into the distinction between dysphoria and euphoria; some trans people elect to change their bodies not out of hate for the old, but rather love for the new. This reality is often not considered by cis people who are unfamiliar with trans discourse, leading to this frequent microaggression.



Figure 4-19 Meme about the assumption that transgender people must hate their bodies.

Ironically, there are instances in which cis people might assume trans people would celebrate aspects about our bodies that with which we are deeply uncomfortable. Figure 4-20 depicts a trans girl who is experiencing the intense feeling of frustration that many trans women feel when told to be grateful that we do not menstruate and cannot conceive children. Motherhood is something many trans women wish we could experience, including the pain and joys that come along with pregnancy. The reminder that our bodies might not be what we want them to be, and being told, essentially, that

there is an expectation that we should be grateful to not experience things that we are enculturated to understand as defining aspects of womanhood can be deeply painful.



Figure 4-20 Meme about the pain trans women feel when told they should feel “lucky” for not being able to menstruate or give birth.

Interpretation of “Bodies” Memes

The memes presented in this section illustrate the intense and constant dialog trans people are exposed to about their bodies. These discussions come from well-meaning cis people, malicious and/or hateful cis people, other trans people, and from

those trans people who discuss their own bodies. Trans memes about bodies act as depictions and commentary of these conversations, but also as examples of these discussions. Some of these memes are acts of speech directed at others in discussion, and some are just trans people expressing their thoughts on their own bodies.

Obvious examples of memes meant as comments to others are text posts that explicitly discuss respecting trans people or argue for providing trans affirming care. Other memes are less obvious, but play in to larger discussions in less obvious ways. Memes that discuss barriers to transition, for example, are not just commentary advocating for transition related services, but also serve as reminders to the community that not every trans person is able to transition, but that doesn't make them any less trans. Arguments like this complicate narratives surrounding what makes a trans person, inviting perspectives that challenge what it means to be trans, and becoming part of arguments for the inclusion of people who have no desire to medically transition as part of the trans community.

Memes that are discussions of one's own body can be just as complex and nuanced. The exploration of dys/euphoria is highly evident in memes, from explorations of self-love, to feelings of isolation and despair. In some cases, these memes are ostensibly straightforward, but explore complicated feelings of belonging. Presented in this chapter is a meme wherein the author likens themselves to an alligator trying to blend in with human girls – seemingly accepted but ultimately and fundamentally distinct. Interestingly, there is a not-uncommon trend for some meme-makers to depict themselves as not human. In other more positive memes explored for this thesis, trans meme makers

have also depicted themselves as dragons, cats, and, most prominently, aliens. Feelings of inhumanity, or at least a distinct departure from humanity with regards to bodies seems to express neither dysphoria nor euphoria only, but an understanding that being trans and having a trans body is seen as – and feels – painfully different.

Trans Experience

Memos about Trans Experiences can act as a handbook for the process of coming into and living in a trans identity. They describe occurrences that many experience for the first time as they begin to live life as a trans person, but that continue on in perpetuity. Memos that discuss uncertainty or being misgendered, for example, are most relevant while a trans person explores their identity for the first time, but never truly lose their relevance. Different stages and aspects of transition are also represented within this meme category. These memos could discuss the experience of coming out to family, or they could illustrate important moments with family well after coming out, once family members have accepted a trans person and are beginning to understand more about gender (Figure 4-21).

Relatable feelings or experiences are also represented by these memos; shared moments that are ubiquitous enough to be considered a fact of transgender being. Memos about taking off a binder at the end of a day, or what transgender musicians one might listen to are examples of everyday trans occurrences. Some memos delve into the bio/medical aspects of life as a trans person, such as the disappointment one experiences when hormones do not have the specific therapeutic effects one hoped for, the strong desire for pickles experienced by trans femmes, or the diuretic effect of a frequently

prescribed testosterone blocking medication. Memes about discussions of gender within the trans community are particularly prevalent as a common activity for community members.

Social experiences are also heavily represented in this category of memes. Most notably are interactions that trans people have with cis people, whether positive, passively negative, or explicitly antagonistic. Memes about school or personal relationships with youth are some of the most positive of such memes, showing the effort young people put in to being uplifting of trans people, and the relative ease with which they obtain that state of mind. More negative social moments are discussed, usually, in relation to trans-exclusionary radical feminists (known commonly as TERFs), who are illustrated as actively disrupting trans people's lives, sometimes explosively or even violently. While some of these memes are exaggerations, others are grounded in real experiences, illustrating in some cases how such attitudes lead to antagonism directly responsible for suicides in the trans community.

While the experiences described in these memes are both positive and negative, they can be viewed with the goal of understanding the stresses trans people face and how memes function to relieve this stress. Even positive memes can express, in their positivity, a reprieve from negative experiences. Understanding these memes not just as descriptors of single events but rather as tied to myriad other experiences can be vital in reading the individual meme and in understanding all that can be gleaned from it for the purpose of education and intervention.

Considering the context in which an experience is situated is also important for reading memes on trans experiences. How old the author is, or whether the author has experienced certain milestones in being transgender, can influence how a meme might be interpreted. It is critical to ask: “how is the author related to the people in this meme, and what is their relationship like?” and “what experiences has/will the author have with the people or emotions discussed in the meme?”

Family

Memes about family are particularly good examples of memes intended for an audience of people beginning to explore trans identities. They serve as examples of what newly realized trans people might have to look forward to. Sometimes these memes incite hopefulness in the reader - showing that sometimes family will be there for you, support you, and make every effort - and sometimes they discuss the possibilities of pain that can come from unaccepting family.

In reading Figure 4-21, small elements that lend context to the experience discussed in the meme add important narrative value. First, note that the author describes their father as “my oldass 70 year old dad.” The author is drawing attention to the age of their father to illustrate that *despite* his age, he is affirming of trans people - something that might be unexpected. We can then infer a history of their relationship, in which the transgender author and their father have undergone the “coming out” process, and have matured to a point where they watch queer television together and the father is profoundly affirming. Thus, the meme is no longer just about the affirmation of trans people, but also an anecdote of family acceptance and growth. The meme doesn’t just tell

a simple story, but the subtext can reassure other trans people that it is possible for family members to not just accept trans family, but also truly understand and uplift them.



Figure 4-21 Tumblr post about familial acceptance.

Figure 4-22 demonstrates something similar yet distinct from Figure 4-21, in that there is an understanding that the author's 7-year-old sister simply understands, without difficulty, the fluid nature of the author's gender. There was still a coming out, and a discussion of terms and experiences that took place before this meme, but there is no hint of difficulty or turmoil. In the accompanying text of the meme, the author even notes how unaware their sister is in her support, reflecting the extreme ease some young people have with concepts of gender abstraction and problematization.



Figure 4-22 Comic about familial acceptance.

Figure 4-23 and **Error! Reference source not found.** take on a different flavor of family interaction, in which family is unaccepting of the transgender author. Figure 4-23 explicitly illustrates the moment of “coming out” to one’s parents and the disappointment of finding out your family will not (at least in that moment) support you. **Error! Reference source not found.** takes a different approach in discussing family: positioning them along with other stressors that impede and complicate transition. The family mentioned in **Error! Reference source not found.** exist outside of time, they are not a moment as in Figure 4-23, but just a fact of life; a constant reminder that you are not accepted. This statement of pain is perhaps exceptional compared to having little money

and mental health troubles, yet is downplayed by lumping the three together. This (perhaps unintentionally) touches on a common queer philosophy of the importance of found family over birth family, in which queers un/under-accepted by their birth family create and emphasize a new family of friends, lovers, and community members. By demonstrating that unaccepting family is just another road bump in the experience of being trans, the author suggests that if family is unaccepting, it might be best to leave them behind.



Figure 4-23 Comic about family rejection.

Figure 4-23 illustrates an alternative experience to Figure 4-21 and Figure 4-22, though it is important to note that these experiences are not mutually exclusive. In both Figure 4-21 and Figure 4-22 we see moments in time that occur sometime after the coming out process. Trans viewers of these memes might see all of these moments as potential futures they will encounter. One might think: “Even if my family does not accept me at first, maybe with time they will.”

Talking about being trans

A large part of being transgender - whether you want to or not - is talking about being transgender (or writing a thesis on it!). This can, depending on who you are speaking with, be very enlightening and informative, or can be painful and insulting. Having spent so much time thinking about gender, transgender people can find stimulating conversation within their community. Our shared experiences and philosophies have ignited what some even refer to as a gender revolution, which is made possible through the discussions we have together. Discussing gender with people who have never questioned their gender and who have never thought on how to be sensitive to the trans experience, however, can be quite difficult.

Figure 4-24 and Figure 4-25 show just how exhausting it can be to live in a world where you are constantly bombarded by cisnormative, patriarchal, binary views of gender. These memes also illustrate the ways in which capitalism is tied to binary notions of gender, and exploits people into spending more for explicitly gendered goods. Both of these memes also illustrate the commitment cisnormative culture has to remaining binary and cisnormative. Figure 4-24 includes an anecdote of a family member interpreting the meme above it as an attack on cis people, while Figure 4-25 illustrates the way some cis people will vehemently despise trans people's musings on gender while being committed to a fiercely gendered existence themselves, though ignorantly so.

Cis people: Why are trans people so obsessed with gender?
Also Cis People:



 rotppuppy

I shared this on facebook and my mom sent me like 8 texts about how she thinks it's so unfair that trans people are so *rude* about cis people

Source: ithelpstodream

79,740 notes Mar 15th, 2018



Figure 4-24 Tumblr post about gendered products.



Figure 4-25 Tweet about capitalism driving gender norms.

Figure 4-26 expresses a dissatisfaction that trans people experience when discussing gender with cis people. It also demonstrates a view that trans people are not just adequate at discussing gender, but actually excel at it. The meme illustrates the comradery that develops when transgender peers come together to intensely discuss gender. This experience can take place in support groups, hang-outs with fellow trans friends, or even through the sharing of memes, such as in Figure 4-27, Figure 4-28, and Figure 4-29. This meme also demonstrates the role that is often thrust upon trans people as educators of cis people, which, as shown in Figure 4-24 and Figure 4-25, can be a very frustrating task.



Figure 4-26 Meme about talking to cis people about gender.

Figure 4-27 and Figure 4-28 are examples of trans people discussing gender either narrowly (in the context of being transgender) or broadly (in the way society defines gender). Figure 4-27 illustrates the ways in which trans people open up with one another, and discuss feelings and experiences of gender. Figure 4-27 is not hyperbole. Discussions of this sort can be deep, and can include many people over time across social media (as seen in Figure 4-28). The major takeaway from Figure 4-27, however, is the way in which the author protects himself from the pain of discussing gender with cis people by dramatically dumbing down the conversation with someone who may not understand or be receptive to such a discussion. Figure 4-28 is an example of the deconstruction and abstraction of the ways in which society defines gender, piece by piece, as trans people on the social media website Tumblr fixate on a gender phenomenon and problematize it, exposing the strange underpinnings of a highly, and unnecessarily, gendered viewpoint.



Figure 4-27 Meme about having to avoid jargon when talking to cis people.



Figure 4-28 Meme about the problems of gendered binaries.

Identity

Trans people discuss their identity with one another in a similar way to how we discuss gender, but with important distinctions. Topics of identity certainly include discussions of gender, but also might include exploration, curiosity, or uncertainty. The process of learning about gender - especially one's own gender - is never-ending.

Figure 4-29 discusses explicitly the benefits of exploring one's own gender identity. It provides an example of what can occur when someone with a non-cis identity doesn't undergo self-exploration: confusion, pain, and an inability to articulate those feelings. We still live in a society in which there might not be language to adequately describe one's gender identity. Figure 4-30 and Figure 4-31 illustrate this point, demonstrating the ways words can fail to describe gender. They emphasize that the lack of appropriate language does not negate gendered feelings or identities. Figure 4-31 also provides insight into the nature of some identities as understandable through the process of elimination, rather than explicit association. The meme describes being "not cis" as a more meaningful identity than words such as nonbinary or queer.



Figure 4-29 Tumblr post about exploring one's gender.



Figure 4-30 Meme about the existence of things before they are name.

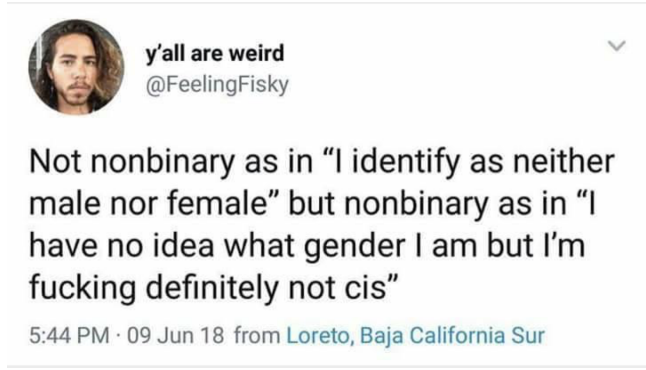


Figure 4-31 Tweet about identifying as not cis.

Figure 4-32 describes an experience that some genderfluid people have in which their gender is consistently hard to grasp or understand. Questioning your gender, only to find yourself with no certain identity can be a large part of exploring one's gender. Of course, some binary trans men and women, whose identities fit nicely into the gender language that already exists might not have this experience at all, but non-binary individuals are likely to struggle with this experience either while determining what their gender is and what language to use in defining it, and possibly for the rest of their lives.

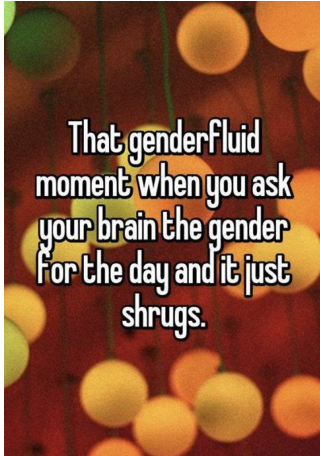


Figure 4-32 Meme about being genderfluid.

Figure 4-33 utilizes a meme format known as “expanding brain,” a format that demonstrates a progression of viewpoints from an early, uninformed position, through a process of exploration and ever-evolving understanding, until arriving at a place held up by the meme’s author as the ultimate position on a topic. The reader is taken through these stages as though watching a montage of growth. This meme in particular illustrates a path that trans women often take in exploring their gender, from wishing to be a girl, to understanding that being transgender is okay, and something they can identify as. The meme then takes a stance that ultimately, trans women might realize that they were never boys/men wanting to be female, but rather have always been female. The meme could end here and make an important statement about transgender identity, but goes further to impress that the ultimate revelation of being transgender is a rejection of capitalism. Capitalism, in this sense, is representative of the cis/heteronormative patriarchal capitalist systems that lead not only to the oppression of transgender people, but all people. Capitalism is seen as the system through which binary gender paradigms are perpetuated, as in the cases of Figure 4-24 and Figure 4-25. This is not an uncommon view, and indeed parallels much of the discussion of liberation seen in memes shared in trans spaces, be they about trans liberation, or liberation for other marginalized identities. Exploration of gender includes more than just what appearance and language works well

for someone, but also what barriers we need to break down, and what obstacles we need to overcome to live our authentic lives.



Figure 4-33 Meme about rejection of capitalism as a natural consequence of coming into a transgender identity.

Interpretation of Trans Experience Memes

Trans experience memes discuss events that are either explicitly or implicitly tethered in time. From memes that discuss moments in relation to the event of coming out, to memes that describe the process of gender exploration, these memes lend insight into the narrative of realizing you are transgender and the process of living a transgender life. These memes often illustrate moments that we can only understand in relation to other moments. For example, Figure 4-32 exists in a moment between the first time the author experienced the confusions of not knowing their gender, and the many future times the author assumes they will experience the phenomena again.

These memes could be read as the venting or discussion of these experiences for a sense of relation with/from other trans people who understand, and indeed that is likely why many of these memes were created. Figure 4-21, for example, explicitly speaks to the author's trans followers in an effort to provide a sense of security and understanding to a trans audience. Figure 4-28 is an active discussion that was screen-shotted and posted elsewhere to ignite further discussion, and Figure 4-30 is a call to create new language through exploration and discussion. These memes are very much meant to share and communicate trans experience amongst peers.

Powerfully, these memes also serve another purpose to the community besides conversing with people who know your struggle. These memes also serve as a guide to what one can expect when they begin the process of living life as a transgender person. Figure 4-24 shows how uncomfortable family members can become when confronted with conceptions of gender they have never considered. Figure 4-21 and Figure 4-22 illustrates that you might find support from youth rather than elders, though you might, in time, find that elders will come around.

Community

Memes exist on social media platforms, which serve as hosts to various communities. The very nature of meme sharing groups based on identities such as being queer or transgender is to create communities, e.g. the Tumblr trans community, or the reddit trans community. Together, along with non-digital trans spaces, exists the broader memes *about* the trans community. These memes are, as one would expect, very rich data for understanding the cultural praxis of the trans community as a group. Memes

describing discourse about Queer Pride events, or how trans people lift each other up are common examples of memes that describe community.

However, trans people are not one-dimensional, and experience transness in many ways. So too do trans people experience community beyond the trans community, but in manners made unique by being trans. Memes that discuss community outside of the trans community might deal with one's classmates, co-workers, or friend groups, or they might deal with broader, more nebulous communities, such as the video game community, or television show fandoms. The ways transgender people exist within those communities may seem highly individual, but speak volumes about the ways transgender people feel regarding their representation in large, non-queer groups. Regardless of whether a community is queer or not, trans people occupy space within those communities and express and experience their trans/queerness in specific ways.

Validation

Being transgender is filled with a great deal of uncertainty, from appearance, to pronoun choice, to decisions about medical transition; transgender people experience a lot of unease. Fortunately, there are many people who have either experienced the same situations, such as other members of the queer community, or at least are able to empathize and uplift the trans people in their communities. Memes about validation were some of the most prominent in this dataset, with ~40% of memes having a supportive affect. These memes usually explicitly illustrated forms of relationships or communities, though some were direct messages to other trans/queer people as words of encouragement. The depiction of validation and acts of validation might seem distinct,

but it's important to remember that the sharing of memes *depicting* acts of validation can be shared with qualifiers such as “us” or “my followers” therefore creating an act of validation between the poster and whomever is denoted in the post. Therefore, we can assume that any meme displaying acts of validation might be shared as its own act of recreating that validation.

Figure 4-34 depicts the experiences of a trans person navigating communities in digital and non-digital spaces (non-respectively). The meme very simply depicts the lack of gender recognition and the anti-trans sentiment they experience in “IRL” (“In Real Life,” as opposed to digital spaces) non-digital spaces, juxtaposed against the validation and support they receive for their gender (and status as a transgender person) in digital communities.

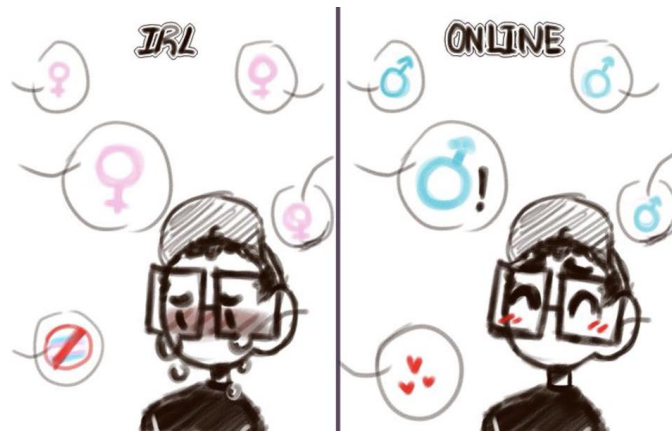


Figure 4-34 Comic about acceptance found in digital communities.



a-queer-seminarian

i love experiencing how my classmates work to avoid misgendering me. for instance, today one classmate greeted the rest of our small group:

“All right ladies and gentlemen – and Avery”

another time a classmate went:

“Pardon me, ma’am – uh, sir, uh....esteemed one”

and, my absolute fave:

“Hey ladies! – and gentleThem”

i love these moments both because they’re humorous and because they show how hard these folks are trying! it’s not about getting it right every time at first, but consistently correcting yourself!

Figure 4-35 Tumblr post about classmates adapting to new ways of conceptualizing gender.

Figure 4-35, Figure 4-36, and Figure 4-37 depict the support of non-trans specific communities including classmates, female friends (who could be trans, but the meme does not specify) and close friends. Figure 4-35 provides examples of how the author’s classmates have gone out of their way to create new language to address non-binary people, such as the author. The author also provides validation for those classmates, noting at the end of the meme that they acknowledge the effort their classmates are making, and the difficulty they are overcoming in doing so. Figure 4-36 is yet another example of memes that were not created with transgender contexts in mind being brought

into trans contexts, therefore giving them new meanings. The comic depicts a woman (who in trans contexts is read as transgender) experiencing doubt (dysphoria) about their appearance. Upon exclamation of their self-doubt, a cadre of female friends appears to (literally) uplift and compliment the woman until she ultimately accepts the praise and recognize herself as a beautiful person. Figure 4-37 depicts a spray bottle given to a transgender person by a friend who is having a difficult time correctly gendering their transgender friend. The point of the gift is made apparent by the labels reading “misgender corrector.” The friend, through this gift, is expressing their recognition that the gender and pronouns their friend identifies with are correct and valid, even if they fail to get them right in conversation. Giving their transgender friend the power to (lightly) punish them for their mistakes shows humility and support.

WHY FEMALE FRIENDSHIPS ARE IMPORTANT



© Sarah Andersen

Figure 4-36 Comic about female friendships.



Figure 4-37 Post about friends trying to be better friends.

Figure 4-38 is, like Figure 4-36, a meme that has been appropriated into a transgender context to give it new meaning. This popular meme format is used to depict (often explosive) conversations between two people with opposing views. In this context, two friends are subverting the typical usage of the meme by expressing dueling positive and uplifting descriptions of one another. This is exactly the sort of meme that might be shared with the qualifier “us” when sharing with another trans friend, as this would be a good depiction of the types of validation trans people experience in their communities.



Figure 4-38 Meme in which images of an arguing father and son are subverted such that they are supporting and uplifting each other.

Figure 4-39 is a direct act of validation, rather than a depiction of validation. The tweet expresses opposition to the idea that it is wrong to make being queer such an outwardly large part of one's identity (a criticism that is common from non-supportive cisgender/heterosexual people). The meme criticizes the hypocrisy of (presumably) cis/heteronormativity to allow traditional aspects of masculinity to be overt expressions of personality, while condemning expressions of non/anti-cis/heteronormative identities.



Figure 4-39 Tweet about reveling in trans identity.

These depictions of validation demonstrate two distinct experiences transgender people face in their communities: support and criticism. The support depicted in these memes are often (even if not explicitly demonstrated) in opposition to criticism and rejection. Figure 4-34 illustrates this point explicitly, but Figure 4-35 and Figure 4-37 also present *exceptional* acts of support, that are not always present in the lives of the authors. Supportive communities are a haven from people such as those providing the

criticism mentioned in Figure 4-39. Personal friendships, supportive classmates, or even strangers on the internet provide support and rebuke the (micro) aggressions trans people so frequently face.

Pop culture


Transgender memes frequently mention, react to, or appropriate popular culture, and incorporate it in overtly queer ways. Memes might also criticize not only specific instances of popular culture, but discuss popular culture trends or practices at large. Queer portrayal and representation in popular culture is often poorly executed, and problematic, leaving many queer people wanting more/better representation. Memes that discuss popular culture address this issue, and subvert poor representation by repackaging popular media as queer. Conversely, memes that discuss popular culture might demonstrate instances of successfully executed representation that is subsequently celebrated in the meme.

Figure 4-40, Figure 4-41, and Figure 1-1 describe queer representation in popular culture and media. Figure 4-40 depicts the reaction of one queer person (the author) to news from E3 (Electronic Entertainment Expo, a large and popular annually held event showcasing upcoming video games) that the incredibly successful video game series “Assassin’s Creed” and “The Last of Us” feature queer characters as main protagonists. The author expresses surprise and celebration at the news, which came during pride month, a month in which queer people celebrate queerness and being queer. Compared to the typical disappointment queer people face with popular representation, such news at such an auspicious time is unusual and exciting.

Me: "E3 is during pride month that means video games are gay"
Ubisoft: "No matter which gender you pick to be in the new Assassins Creed you can romance men and women"
Naughty Dog: "Ellie from The Last of Us has a girlfriend"
Me: I was just joking but like video game developers giving the gays what we deserve god bless happy pride games are gay"

Figure 4-40 Meme about queer representation in video games.

Figure 4-41 continues to describe representation in popular media, inferring a dearth of adequate representation by describing different ideas for how queer people could be depicted casually (and, implicitly, well) in media. The meme is a criticism of current media trends, including the comment "no tragic backstory" as a call-out of how the few instances of extant trans representation are often executed.

 lycisce

concept: casual lgbt+ representation

a man taking off his shirt to reveal a binder underneath. he settles down, has a beer, watches tv. no tragic backstory about his transition, no negativity. just a trans dude being a trans dude.

a businesswoman talking on her cellphone while she stops by the pharmacy to pick up her estrogen.

people asking for pronouns without a second thought, using they/them even when the person isn't in the room.

a woman getting hit on at a club, getting respectful responses when she says she's ace.

two men holding hands, three women in a healthy polyamorous relationship. a pan man living with his nonbinary datefriend.

romcoms, sitcoms, slice-of-life stories.

not everyone is cis het; media should represent that.

Source: lycisce

31,091 notes

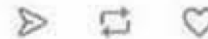


Figure 4-41 Meme conceptualizing potential casual queer representation in television and film.

Figure 1-1 describes, overtly, negative transgender representation in popular culture, and features four stills, and accompanying dialog from an interview conducted with Jamie Clayton, a transgender actress. In the meme, Clayton describes the way female transgender characters are often portrayed in media by cisgender men. The practice (notably seen in movies: “The Danish Girl,” “Dallas Buyers Club,” and “Anything”) is tremendously common, and is harshly criticized for its negative impact on public perceptions of transgender people (and women more specifically). As Clayton points out in the meme, the practice presents the idea that being transgender is something

one can “take off” like a costume at the end of the day, rather than a very real and deeply held identity.

Figure 4-42 and Figure 4-43 describe a common experience for transgender women, which is choosing to play female videogame characters instead of male characters to express/experience their gender identity. Both memes recognize that this practice might not be therapeutic or helpful, but Figure 4-43 suggests that the practice is a coping mechanism of avoidance to the painful process of directly confronting and dealing with dysphoria.



Figure 4-42 Meme about utilizing video games to “play” with gender.



Figure 4-43 Meme about living through fiction rather than working to improve the reality of one's situation through other means (hormone therapy, for example).

Figure 4-44 depicts the two main characters from the popular children's show "Star vs. The Forces of Evil" who are commonly read as queer by queer viewers. Though showrunners have not addressed the queer status of these characters, it is implied that one of the characters, an ostensibly cis male character named Marco, is actually a transgender girl in the process of self-discovery. The show itself features Marco as a "Boy Princess" and also features the first same-gender kiss seen in any Disney property. In addition to these overtly queer themes, the titular character, Star, is often read as bisexual by fans. The meme depicts Star in bisexual pride flag colors, alongside a femme-presenting (and transitioned) Marco, who is holding up the transgender pride flag. The slogan on Star's sign "It's not criminal to be an individual" is a call back to when the phrase was used in

the show by Marco as he is depicted as a princess. (Note: in the show, Marco uses he/him pronouns. In discussing him here, I have elected to use the pronouns used in the show, despite the fan reading of Marco as a transgender girl who would likely not use those pronouns.)



Figure 4-44 Meme depicting Star and Marco from the television show “Star vs. The Forces of Evil” as bisexual and transfeminine respectively.

Figure 4-45 includes the very commonly used imagery of Pokémon (originally from the videogame series of the same name, followed by the cartoon show, also of the same name) who are monsters that “evolve” and change dramatically as they progress in experience, as an allegory to transgender people. The concept of respecting trans people as though they were Pokémon is frequently presented in transgender memes, as gender transition and Pokémon evolution both occur as the life of the individual or Pokémon

progresses, there is a change in appearance and name, and you subsequently have to learn to appreciate the ways the person/Pokémon has changed for the better. Remembering a Pokémon's name after it evolves is most frequently brought up in memes as a way of expressing how easy it should be to do the same for people who have transitioned. This meme expands of the comparison of Pokémon and transgender people by suggesting that the ease with which people learn the many different types of Pokémon should continue into an ease of learning more than the 2 binary genders.



Figure 4-45 Meme showcasing (some of) the original 151 pokémon (from the video games Pokémon Red and Pokémon Blue) illustrating the ability of people to remember many different items in a typology.

Queer Pride and Power

Queer pride and queer power feature heavily in trans memes, depicting instances of queer people taking back power from the systems that marginalize them, and/or

celebrating their identity as people who exist outside of societal norms and have persevered through the marginalization that that existence has caused. Queer pride and queer power, in this context, are not necessarily separate, as being proud of being queer can be a form of reclaiming power from a cultural system that shames and marginalizes people for being queer. Disruption of the prevailing cultural systems that are systematically and culturally anti-queer is celebrated as a form of queer political praxis in these memes, and should be understood in terms of both pride and power.

Figure 4-46 is an affirmation of queer pride and power in how the author recognizes the utility of the word queer to express excitement and pride in difference. The word queer is not defined by this meme, and in fact it is the extreme difficulty of the word to be defined that gives it power in the mind of the author. The “fluid and encompassing” nature of the word makes it hard to pin down and for queer people being queer is an ineffable experience. Part of the pride in being queer is, for this author, being queer *with other people*. There is a power in community conveyed in this tweet. The author celebrates the ways queer people are distinct from one another while simultaneously similar in their difference from the status quo.



Figure 4-46 Tweet about the utility of the word “Queer.”

Figure 4-47 and Figure 4-48 are examples of using queer pride as a vehicle for asserting queer power. In Figure 4-47, an aged badge reads: “Don’t hide gay pride,” a call to be visibly queer in public spaces and to force non-queer people to observe and witness queerness. Figure 4-48, similarly, calls for queer people to take their pride and power to others in a vengeful way, recalling the harm and violence enacted on the queer community. While (ostensibly) in jest, the meme acts as a call to action, saying, essentially, “Now that we have celebrated our pride, let's take action.”



Figure 4-47 Button celebrating pride.



Figure 4-48 Tweet about pride and praxis.

Figure 4-49 might feel familiar to many millennials, as we witness an apparently unending number of headlines blaming us for the gradual destruction of western society (Boone 2019). In this meme, a headline accuses queer people of eroding American society through “gender magic,” which presumably refers to occultist practice conducted by queers who embrace gender expansive and liberating discourse. The headline, while dismissably silly, is appropriated by queer people in the comment section who think

using gender liberating occultist practice to erode American society is good praxis that queers should undertake. The queers in the comments recognize America as a toxic and systemically anti-queer entity in need of destruction through, fittingly, “gender magic.” (Note: there is an association between queer identity and occultism that is worth exploration, but such a discussion is outside the scope of this thesis. Suffice it to say, that memes involving occult practices often illustrate occultism as a normative way of obtaining agency/power that subverts the mainstream, systemic barriers that minorities face when seeking power, agency, and institutional capacity.)



Figure 4-49 News article headline posted on Tumblr about Queer magic.

Figure 4-50 enumerates upon a list of things that are okay for women to do or be, most of which are subversive of typical gender-role based expectations for women. The meme encourages women to be themselves, and to feel at ease with their gender expression and bodies (with language affirming women with hairy faces and/or penises). The meme features a woman holding a sword, and issues a call to action to overthrow the “patriarchal fascist state” through self-actualization and radicalization. (Note: like Figure

4-49, this meme explicitly references occult practice, and implies that its use is tied to revolutionary praxis.)



Figure 4-50 Meme about gender norms and fascism.

Figure 4-51 demonstrates queer power by assigning weapons to each of the identities in the common “LGBT” acronym. Below the original post, an artist replied with an illustration of characters of each identity, wielding those weapons. The characters are not posed as aggressors holding weapons seeking out violence, but are depicted as proud and present: the weapons are not meant to entice violence but instead to defend against it. The meme is in reference to the violence (often physical) that queer people face daily, and displays pride and power as ways to overcome said violence.



Figure 4-51 Tumblr post depicting queer power through the semiotic imagery of weaponry.

Figure 4-52 depicts heroes of the queer rights movement, Marsha P. Johnson and Sylvia Rivera, marching at a Gay Pride parade. The post calls viewers to remember the role that trans women of color had in the queer rights movement, as Marsha P. Johnson is said to have thrown a shot glass into and breaking a mirror during a police raid of the Stonewall Inn (a gay bar in NY, NY) sparking the historic Stonewall Riots (Duberman 1993). The meme calls upon queers to reject cissexism and racism by reminding viewers of the prominence people of color and transgender people have always had in the fight for queer liberation.

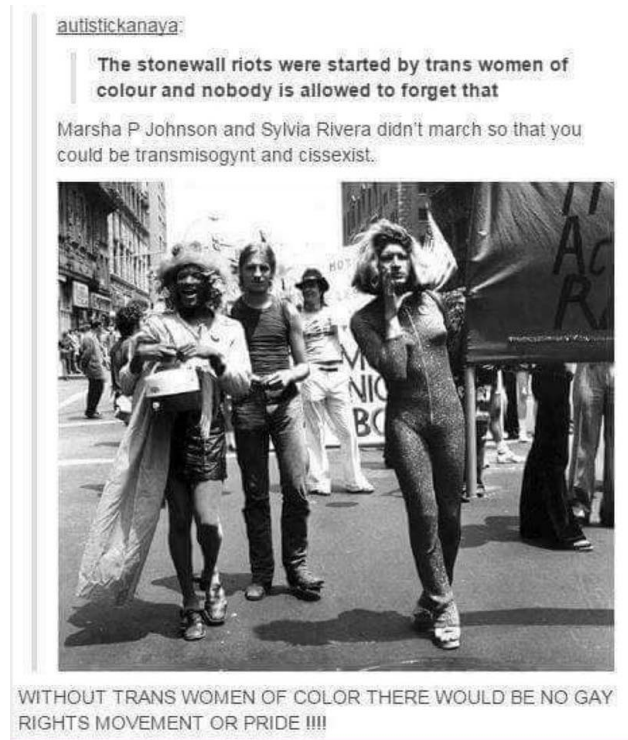


Figure 4-52 Tumblr post discussing the roles of Marsha P. Johnson and Sylvia Rivera in igniting the Stonewall riots.

Oppression

Many of the memes studied in this work discuss the struggles trans people face at the hands of others, including political and social systems. Oppression is a frequent part of meme dialog because it is a frequent part of the trans lived experience. Oppression comes in many forms, some of which are demonstrated below, but it is important to understand oppression in its multiple forms to fully understand trans experience. Active forms of oppression such as violence and discrimination may seem like obvious problems trans people face, but often oppression is more insidious. From fetishization, to being excluded from forums in which our rights are decided, trans people are mistreated constantly in ways that few would expect, or even recognize if confronted with the facts.

Figure 4-53 depicts an example of a commonly heard argument for queer people, that negative views of queer individuals should be excused as simply the fair and valid opinions of others. Of course, the rights of queer people are human rights, and those that choose to deny those rights are expressing more than simply an opinion, but are expressing oppressive views, as the meme describes. The meme draws a line between what are controversial opinions (by tapping into a popular and heated meme/debate on the internet regarding pineapple as a pizza topping) and what is oppressive ideology.



Figure 4-53 Tweet about the violence inherent in some debates.

Figure 4-54 touches on an unfortunate phenomenon in which cis people in public restrooms will attempt to spy on transgender people (or those they suspect of being transgender) in order to determine if their genitals match their own (and therefore belong in that restroom). Less oppressively is the very common experience of cis people asking

trans people about what genitals they have, or if they are planning on surgically changing their genitals. As the meme describes, despite a common expectation of privacy concerning genitals, that privacy is discarded when cis people are curious about trans people.



Figure 4-54 Tweet about cis hypocrisy.

Figure 4-55 and Figure 4-56 discuss the expectations of cis/het people that queer people be content with our current status and social position. Figure 4-55 encourages queer people to celebrate their queer identities prominently if that is what they want to do, and attempts to explain to cis/het people that they might not understand why this matters since they have not faced anti-queer sentiments. Figure 4-56 continues this discussion by attempting to explain to cis/het people why Pride is an event not just to celebrate identity, but to fight back against oppression. The author suggests that they would happily give up Pride, if it meant feeling safe in society the way cis/het people do.



Figure 4-55 Tweet about social media being an important outlet for queer people.

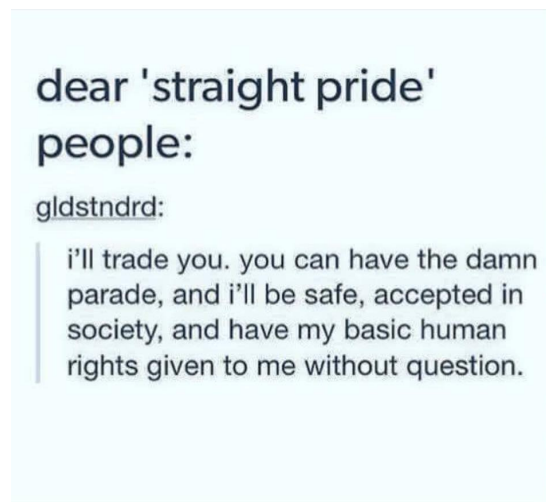


Figure 4-56 Text post discussing “Straight Pride.”

Figure 4-57 describes the ways in which queer people face discrimination from within the LGBT community. Figure 4-57 depicts the statement “There’s a huge amount of racism and discrimination within the LGBT community” as a “hard to swallow pill.” This meme is part of a dialogue within the LGBT community to recognize that while the gay/queer rights movement has been successful in many ways, the people who benefit

most are cis white homosexual people, while those who do not fit that category still face greater levels of discrimination. This is made worse by the ways in which queer people face discrimination from one another, such as transphobia on the part of cis queers, bisexual erasure, and (as the meme describes) racism on the part of white queers.



Figure 4-57 Meme about lateral oppression in the LGBTQIA+ community.

Figure 4-58 continues to express the erasure of non-cis gay male identities in the queer community by commenting on initiatives (both research and programing) that use the acronym “LGBT” when the only focus of the initiative is white cis MLM. This presents itself in many ways, such as studies that are entirely devoid of transgender

research but bill themselves as LGBT studies, or studies that don't investigate oppression along the axes of race and gender as well as queer status.



Figure 4-58 Meme about the co-opting of non-cis white gay identities in promoting cis white gay agendas.

Interpretation of Community Memes

Memes about community depict the stresses that individual trans people face, but recognize that we face them together. Memes that describe single conversations also enforce realizations that these conversations are experienced by many within the trans community. These memes also explicitly address larger issues that affect the transgender community as a whole, such as pitiful representation in film/television, ineffective and deceitful research and program design, and systemic violence inherent in a patriarchal late-stage capitalist society. These memes also describe ways in which queer people push back against these oppressive acts and stressors.

Notably, memes that validate and support other trans people are incredibly pervasive. Nearly half of the memes in this thesis's dataset were supportive, affirming, or otherwise validating. Some of these memes were directly validating, such as memes that verbally express to other trans people that their experiences are normal, and their feelings are reasonable. Others were less direct, but no less validating, such as those depicting

situations that are stressful, but common experiences. Others create a sense of powerfulness that trans people can rally behind, expressing that though trans people face incredible hardship, we persevere and have others in our community that understand our struggles and have our back.

Queer and trans specific pride and power also featured heavily in these memes. The queer community became galvanized during the Stonewall Riots, of which transgender women of color played an enormous role. Though the queer community left trans queers and queers of color behind over time in the battle for rights and recognition, modern queer pride celebrates the role of the trans queers of color in our struggle for equality. Celebration of these historic queers has led to great pride within the queer community, as we recognize that pride has, historically, meant more than community, but has also meant action and revolutionary praxis; queers have the power to change our situations, and trans people have always been catalysts for revolutionary change. Standing up for one's self, or being proud of one's identity are powerful acts that call out to that history, and are celebrated in these memes.

Gender is a Broken System

The system of "gender" as a social construct is being problematized and upheaved through the current gender renaissance, and this is both illustrated and partially achieved through memes. Memes discussing the ways that gender and gendered expectations have failed queer people deconstruct the elements of gender that many cis/het people take as immutable truths and turn them on their heads. Exposed, the flaws of these concepts are apparent, and we can see the ways in which gender is simply one part of a larger system

that stymies individual expression and actualization, often in conjunction with other oppressive systems, such as capitalist-driven consumer culture.

These memes fall into four categories, including memes about: gender philosophy, terminology, gender roles, and misgendering. Each of these memes complicate notions of gender, and the devotion many people hold to these concepts. In deconstructing these ideas, trans meme makers often present alternative systems that offer liberation not only for queer people, but to all people who are trapped in the oppressive gender system that permeates our culture.

Gender philosophy

These memes delve into alternative views of what gender is and can be, subverting expectations of participation in binary systems and bioessentialism. Many of these memes participate in post-structuralist critiques of dichotomous categorizations and present postmodern philosophies in their stead. Some alternatives to binary modes of thought express subversions of gender conceptions from within Eurocentric cultural norms, with the goal of demonstrating that the supposedly immutable pervasive nature of gender is actually a construction of colonial hegemony.

Figure 4-59 participates in an incredibly common meme convention, in which a third, absurd gender is presented in contrast to male and female. In this meme, the speaker (a well-known transgender youtuber known by her channel's name "ContraPoints") subverts expectations of masculinity or femininity with the reality that some trans people identify less with their gender than they do the reality of their situation as trans people, which is, as ContraPoints states, "shit[ty]." While many absurd third

gender memes simply poke fun at gender narratives, this meme takes it a step further by actively engaging the mental health stresses that transgender minority stress creates.



Figure 4-59 Image of popular youtuber ContraPoints discussing gender self-determination.

Figure 4-60 problematizes gender criteria, engaging with and subverting commonly held bioessentialist conceptions of gender. This meme could be read as creating a distinction between gender and sex, noting that there is no physiological basis for gender, but as a popular saying in the trans community goes: sex is just gender in doctor's clothing. The meme does not try to distinguish sex and gender, and can be read as an affirmation of transgender bodies as the sex with which they identify. Further, the meme describes gender as socially constructed by the culture one exists within, allowing for gender liberation across all cultures, rather than imposing Eurocentric transgender narratives as immutable truth. All of this is to the ends of discussing and dismantling the paradigm of cissexism.



Figure 4-60 Meme discussing the construction of gender as something not predicated upon the construction of sex.

Figure 4-61 continues to deconstruct Eurocentric views of gender by describing the ways in which many non-European cultures have more than two gender. The author describes the racism innate in not recognizing the traditional gender systems of non-western societies, but further touches on the colonial, imperial impact that has occurred in which the recognition of third genders has been largely destroyed and forgotten. The meme skirts around the use of the term Two-Spirit, which is an umbrella term for the many non-binary genders of American Indian and First Nations cultures. The term is a reclamation of the prevalent non-binary identities that were overlooked and essentially banned by colonizers enforcing their own cultural perceptions of gender.



Figure 4-61 Tumblr post about the existence of non-binary conceptions of gender in non-western societies.

Figure 4-62 continues to deconstruct the gender binary, as well as binary conceptions of sex, orientation, and biases towards dichotomies at large. This is far from the first meme we have seen in this work that criticizes the gender binary, but it is special in how it problematizes oppositional thinking in general. Not only are these views overly reductive, they fall short of being able to adequately interpret the realities of the world. While oppositional dichotomies are discussed in detail in social theories such as structuralism, post-structuralist thought enables us to better understand the realities of the world apart from biases towards binaries. The meme taps into post-structuralist thought further by critiquing biases towards binaries as simplistic and comfortable, but not accurate.



Shahem .
@pettyblackboy

There are more sexes than male and female. There are more genders than man and woman. There are more sexual orientations than gay and straight. There are more directions than up and down. Nature is a complex thing, please stop trying to simplify it to make yourself comfortable.

Figure 4-62 Post-structuralist tweet about deconstructing binaries.

Terminology

It is not uncommon for trans memes to touch on specifics about language germane to the modern gender renaissance. Many memes will, for example, address the common complaint that they/them pronouns are plural and therefore are grammatically incorrect to apply to a single person. Beyond this, however, a more complicated gender discourse has evolved in recent years. These discussions, and the terms they have spawned, are well represented in trans memes. These memes might address one issue, or several, but what they have in common is the way in which they document which terms or phrases have fallen out of favor, and with what they have been replaced.

Figure 4-63 (billing itself as a public service announcement) is a glossary of terms to use or avoid when talking about transgender people. The meme is presented in such a way that it could be shared with people who are not familiar with transgender topics and terminology outside of how they are discussed in mainstream media (which often fails to

use suitable language). The meme does not just provide a list of correct and incorrect terms, but briefly discusses these terms, educating the reader not only on terminology but gender philosophy. This meme is an example of the ways transgender people are not only discussing and developing gender philosophy in trans-specific spaces but are also disseminating that information to others. The meme likely would not tell a trans person anything new, but exists to be shared *by* trans people to others, disseminating the information outward.

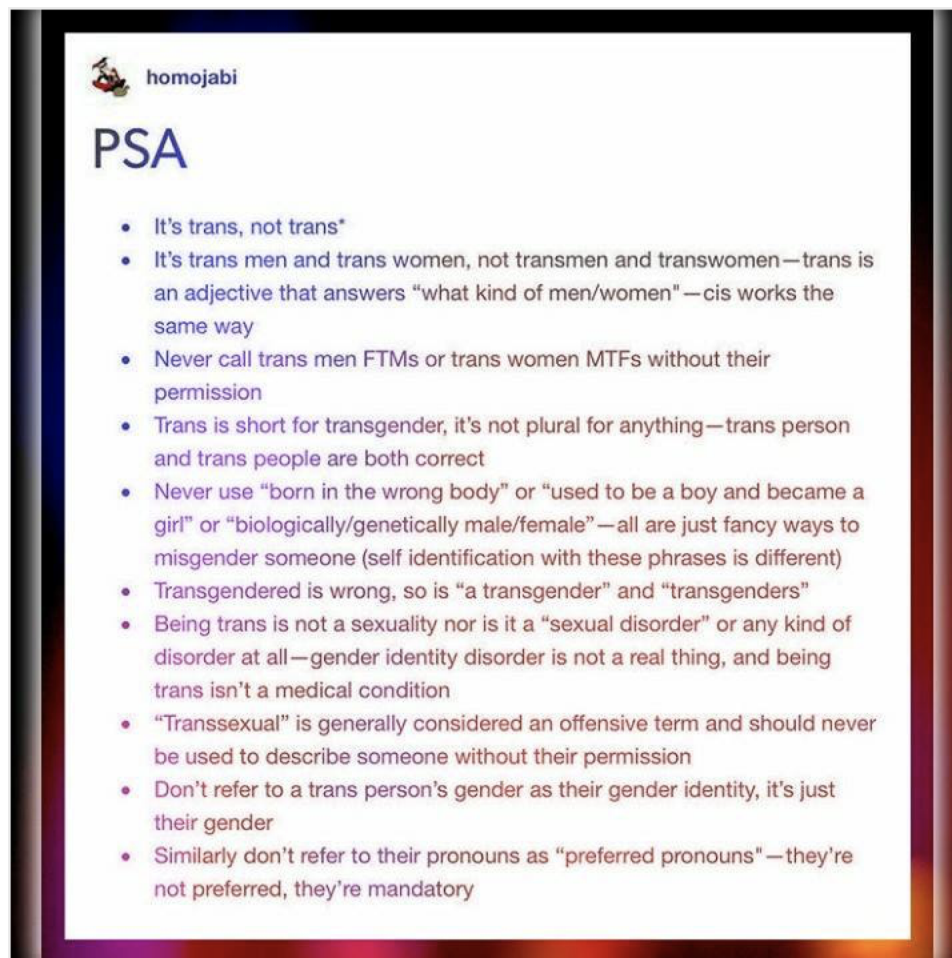
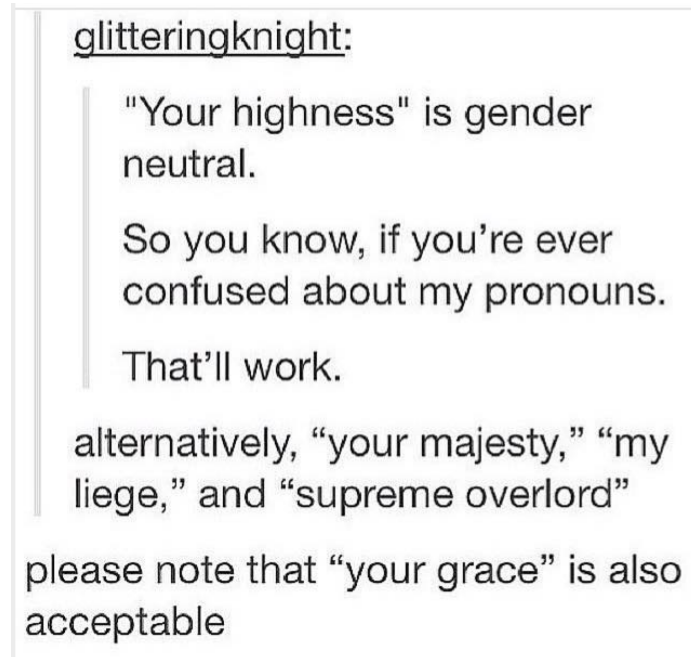


Figure 4-63 Stylized Tumblr post providing clarification on terminology.

Figure 4-64 is a tongue in cheek way of addressing terminology, asserting to people that if they forget your pronouns, it is fine to use gender neutral language, which in the case of the meme means highly deferential language meant for royalty. The meme is not simply about language, but is also an affirmation, stating that while this example is silly, trans people deserve to be treated exceptionally, as though we were royalty.



glitteringknight:
"Your highness" is gender neutral.
So you know, if you're ever confused about my pronouns.
That'll work.
alternatively, "your majesty," "my liege," and "supreme overlord"
please note that "your grace" is also acceptable

Figure 4-64 Tumblr post discussing some gender neutral language.

Figure 4-65, like Figure 4-63, acts as a way of challenging language that people might have become comfortable with and that needs updating. The meme addresses bioessentialist thought, noting that menstruation is not an exclusively female experience, and touches on the post-structuralist effort of the gender renaissance to remove biases towards oppositional binaries from thought and language. Like Figure 4-63, this meme is ready to be disseminated to spread new ideas about gender and how to discuss transgender topics.

*“menstrual hygiene” not “feminine hygiene”
“they” not “he or she” “he/she” “(s)he” etc
“different gender” not “opposite gender”
“what pronouns do you prefer?” not “so what
are you?”
“this is my friend, they like star wars” not
“this is my friend, they’re
transgender” (seriously why the fuck do you
keep doing this why)*

Figure 4-65 Text post about gender neutral language.

Figure 4-66 does not present new language for others the way Figure 4-63, Figure 4-64, and Figure 4-65 have, but describes a common experience that occurs when discussing new language with people who are not open to learning. The meme laments and mocks the attempt to dismiss new language as made-up, but rightly notes that all language was once new, and it is through usage that words are reified. The meme chose two identities as examples, pansexual and gender fluid, as they are often overlooked and mocked identities both within, and outside of the LGBT+ community.

pamoonblackbird

i love when new words like “genderfluid”
or “pansexual” are added to the dictionary,
ignorant people complain that they’re not *real*,
actual words because they’re “made up”
i don’t know how to tell you this but *all* words
are made up
that is how languages are developed

Figure 4-66 Tumblr post about the creation and reification of “new” terminology.

Figure 4-67 is another meme meant to be shared to cis people outside of trans circles, but takes a more aggressive tone than Figure 4-63, Figure 4-64, or Figure 4-65. The meme is clearly meant to act more as a reaction to cis people either referring to themselves as “normal” (as addressed in the meme) or more likely, expressing frustration for feeling slighted by being referred to as “cis” (which is a common occurrence). Unlike Figure 4-63, Figure 4-64, or Figure 4-65, this meme is not meant to be helpful, so much as it is meant to be used defensively to shut down an argument.



Figure 4-67 Tweet about the term “cis.”

Gender Roles

While some transgender people choose to engage with and enjoy traditional gender roles, many of the memes shared on transgender meme pages reject or mock gender roles. Sometimes these memes explicitly attack the concepts of gender roles and the staunch support cis people hold for these norms. Other memes on the topic discuss

ways in which trans people interact with gender roles, from conforming to them to experimenting with/breaking them. Often these memes incorporate an element of trans experience, which is to say that they are presented from a trans point of view. The subversion of gender roles especially is presented as an action under the scrutiny of cis people.

Figure 4-68 presents the mindset of cishet boys (or some of them, at least) that they live in a genderless existence, and the actions, mannerisms, and commodities they engage with are “normal” as opposed to “about their gender.” Gender roles to the boys described in the meme are not understood intellectually but are instead engaged with continuously and unknowingly. The meme also depicts (as we have seen elsewhere) the relationship between cis engagement with gender roles and consumerism/capitalism. The meme points to three popular products that have been marketed in ways to present them as hyper-masculine, and plays this marketing up by mocking the product’s overtly masculine names. While mocking the ways cis people engage in overt displays of gender performance, the author defends trans people for allowing ourselves to live gendered lives, even if the gender performances we engage in are highly visible to others due to the ways they differ from what cis people see as “normal.”



Figure 4-68 Tweet about gender performativity as it intersects capitalist consumerism.

Figure 4-69 continues to question traditional gender roles, asking why it is that gender must dictate which specific silhouettes or fabric types you can wear. The meme takes an existential view of gender, noting that bodies are just temporary physical prisons for our spirits, and asking why we should limit ourselves to prescribed gender roles instead of living life free of cultural constraints. The meme is not trans-centric, despite its participation in gender expansive thought, but certainly fits in with trans perspectives.



Figure 4-69 Stylized Tumblr post about gender roles and restrictions.

Figure 4-70 is a comic that asks menstrual product manufacturers to diversify their design choices to cater to different gender identities. The comic presents a case for branding and decoration that is not overtly gendered (although the decorations suggested would likely be seen as masculine to many, the artist presents them as gender neutral - after all, aside from sexism, why should sharks, scientist dinosaurs, and super heroes be just for men?). This meme also touches on the tie between consumerism and gender roles that Figure 4-68 and many other memes discuss. This meme might appear initially to be about making transgender men more comfortable using menstrual products that are typically decorated in very feminine ways, but really illustrates how gender liberation is not only for trans people, but benefits everyone. Sharks, superheroes, and scientist dinosaurs are powerful and empowering. Giving all period-having people options other than symbols of delicacy for their menstrual hygiene products is not something that only benefits trans people, as the author points out in the first panel.



Figure 4-70 Comic about expanding the decorations for menstrual products to include less (traditionally) feminine designs.

Figure 4-71 and Figure 4-72 discuss the scrutiny trans people face by cis people for breaking gender roles. The memes make it clear that when cis people discuss gender liberation, this does not include trans liberation. For example, a cis woman breaking gender roles might entail dressing in masculine clothing and eschewing makeup. When I have done the same, I have faced criticism for not being willing to put forth enough effort to perform feminine gender roles as a transgender woman. This is a common enough

phenomenon that it has a name: transmisogyny (Serano 2016). Of course, this is not limited to transgender women, but all trans people. As Figure 4-72 describes, transgender men that wear makeup (which is, of course, heavily associated with femininity) are met with confusion and skepticism, while cis men who wear makeup are celebrated for bucking gender roles that are seen in that context as restrictive and unnecessary. When trans people buck those same restrictive and unnecessary norms, however, we are not celebrated as empowered in the same way, if at all.

cis people: break gender roles!
 trans people: ok
 cis people: [SCREAMS] WHAT ARE YOU DOING OUTSIDE OF YOUR GENDER PRISON

Figure 4-71 Text post about cis impositions and gender being a prison.



Figure 4-72 Meme about the confusion cis people experience when trans people break gender roles.

Misgendering

It can be difficult for people (cis and trans alike) to relearn someone's pronouns and name after a gender transition. However, a common experience that trans people have is cis people making excuses for not putting in effort to overcome this difficulty and relearn a person's gender. Memes on the topic suggest a commonly held perception that many cis people feel entitled to special understanding and forgiveness for not making this effort. Of course, trans people who know other trans people also undergo the same process, but understand the importance of getting someone's name and pronouns correct. Trans memes on misgendering don't show comradery with cis people who make excuses for not correctly gendering trans people, further illustrating the view that cis people are asking for undue time and understanding for their failures to put in the work necessary to correctly gender trans people. This form of cissexism is part of a system of oppression in which the liberation of trans people is put second to the feelings, time, and effort of cis people. Memes on the topic express the frustration and exasperation that trans people feel in these scenarios. It is worth noting, of course, that not all cis people behave this way, though many do.

Figure 4-73 might seem as if it is a gross exaggeration of how cis people react to being called out for misgendering trans people, but it is not uncommon for cis people to take it pretty hard. The meme presents a cis person who feels strongly that they are a friend of the trans community, but who makes a trans person's transition about them and their feelings. Their discomfort with the transition is the focus of their energy in the exchange. The cis character makes the exchange about them by asking if the trans person

understands how uncomfortable they are, as though the trans person is unaffected by this. Putting the feelings of the cis person first, above those of the trans person who has been misgendered is a fine example of cissexism. Exchanges very similar to this are present in quite a few memes studied for this work.



Figure 4-73 Tweet about the way cis people sometimes act when they misgender trans people.

Figure 4-74 illustrates just how awful it is to hear from cis people that they believe they deserve special consideration and extra time in learning to gender you properly. The meme depicts Sigourney Weaver in the movie “Aliens” confronted with one of the titular creatures - horrible predators that kill humans violently and indiscriminately - juxtaposing her humanity against the cold, uncaring, and predatory monster who views her as prey. The text “you have to give me time with pronouns” echoes a phrase repeated (likely often verbatim) by cis people expressing their desire for special consideration. The text situates those cis people as the aliens, and trans people as

Sigourney Weaver's character - humans just trying to stay alive in a world full of predatory, uncaring monsters.



Figure 4-74 Meme positioning cis people demanding to be excused from gendering trans people correctly as monsters. Screen shot from the movie "Aliens" (1986).

Figure 4-75 depicts another way in which cis people will put their comfort over the comfort of trans people. The meme describes a person expressing discomfort with gender neutral pronouns for being something they consider grammatically incorrect (despite their presence in dictionaries). The trans character in the meme expresses that life can be difficult and uncomfortable for everyone, and in different ways, but we all have to live with that discomfort and deal with it as best as we can. The discomfort presented by the trans character is tremendous and marginalizing, demonstrating that the discomfort in the encounter is largely one-sided. The meme cleverly juxtaposes the burdens of trans people and the small concessions cis people can make for us, demonstrating that the two stresses are in no way equal, and the patience and effort trans people have to make to exist safely and sanely should be matched with effort and understanding on the part of cis people.

someone: saying "they" in a singular sentence just feels so uncomfortable

me: existing in this cissesexist and transphobic society that continues to gender my body without my permission according to their weird arbitrary binary system is also uncomfortable but I manage, Helen

Source: potato-chips-in-the-bath

Figure 4-75 Tumblr post about the use of the term “They” as a singular pronoun and the discomfort people feel when interacting with systems of gender.

Interpretation of Gender is a Broken System Memes

The study of memes about gendered systems of thought is a study of cissexism and trans and gender non-conforming people’s efforts to liberate ourselves from cissexism. Cissexism is, essentially, a paradigm of thought that posits the existence of TGNC people as abnormal, and that binary genders are the only real genders, informed by bioessentialist attitudes that run contrary to current understandings of sex (and gender) as a spectrum (Elizabeth 2018). Cissexism manifests in many ways, most often depicted here in consumerism. The fierce separation of the genders that cissexism encourages though its insistence on dichotomy lends itself well to companies looking to exploit cis people’s fear of performing aspects of “the other” gender. A cissexist world presents many challenges for people who do not identify as cisgender. Even those trans people who identify as one of the binary genders, the bioessentialist view of sex and gender excludes them from facilities, services, and even some goods that are explicitly gendered.

Memes about cissexism also deal with the language that enforces binary genders and the ways that language erases TGNC people. For example, Figure 4-65 and Figure 4-70 discuss menstrual hygiene, with emphasis on normalizing male experiences of menstruation. This practice does not erase female experiences of menstruation, but simply de-genders the experience for everyone, which Figure 4-70 postulates could be used to liberate period having women from patronizing and sexist products related to the supposed femininity of menstruation. Changes in language can lead to cultural shifts that benefit not just TGNC people, but everyone. Language problematized in transgender memes goes beyond de-gendering needlessly gendered aspects of life, but also challenges the gender binary by demonstrating language inclusive of more than two genders. For example, Figure 4-65 and Figure 4-66 both present language and words that demonstrate an understanding of non-dichotomous genders.

Memes that explore gender roles and misgendering also undermine cissexism through their demonstration of the staunch adherence many cis people have to the paradigm. Figure 4-71 is a great example of the push-back trans and gender non-conforming people receive when breaking with traditional gender roles; even though many cis people will espouse the virtue of non-traditional gender roles, they still only depart from them softly. Figure 4-72 illustrates the confusion some cis people experience when their notions of breaking gender roles are confronted with rejections of gender. For someone assigned female at birth to transition must surely mean they reject what society labels as feminine, yet a rejection of gender roles allows such a person to engage with “gendered” products and practices however they choose.

Intentional (and often, unknowingly, accidental) misgendering is part of the cissexist adherence to bioessentialism. Figure 4-73 illustrates the difficulty even well-meaning cis people have in challenging the way they view people through the lens of bioessentialism – relying more on physical and anatomical cues than self-determined identity. Even rejection of non-binary language and identity is a form of bioessentialism, even if it is presented as an issue of grammar, as is the case in Figure 4-75.

Cissexism is only one element of transphobia and transphobic oppression, but it is no less a major system of society that limits the ways transgender people fit into their communities. Through cissexist language, production of goods, attitudes, and philosophy, and specifically through the bioessentialist gatekeeping of gender, trans people are excluded from leading authentic meaningful lives. The ways cissexism influences the everyday thinking and biases of so many cis people leads to policies and decision making that, perhaps unintentionally, does not leave room for the existence of transgender people, and at worst actively works against us.

Chapter 5 Quantitative Analysis

The memes collected for this thesis discuss a large array of topics, from family relations, to medical transition, to the rights of oppressed peoples (including those who do not identify as transgender). As a dataset, these memes present many avenues for research. Their very open and expressive nature makes them useful artifacts for cultural analysis, acting as windows into the lives of anglophone transgender Facebook users. This chapter provides an analysis of this dataset, as well as an analysis of how these memes portray the minority stress and resiliency of meme creators and sharers on Facebook.

Memes by the numbers

While the true analytic power of memes comes from a qualitative approach, it is still helpful to understand this dataset quantitatively. It is important to consider that this thesis did not study all the memes shared by the selected Facebook pages, but rather the top 100 of every page, identified by number of reactions (likes, loves, laughs, wows, sad reacts, and angry reacts). In this way, the memes included in this dataset comprise the memes which spark the most engagement of each page. When we discuss these memes, and the themes and topics they present, we are investigating the ways in which transgender Facebook users identify with memes through demonstrating their shared

emotional response with the content of the meme (reacting Haha to a funny meme or Sad to a sad or depressing meme).

Overwhelmingly, the memes that expressed or demonstrated support for others resonated the most with meme page users, followed by frustration against the current systems of power that affect queer people (and to a lesser extent those that affect people of color) (Figure 5-1). Both supportive memes and frustrated memes have much to tell us about the present state of transgender rights and wellbeing, presenting information on what trans people need to hear from others for support, and what stressors cause them to need to find validation online.

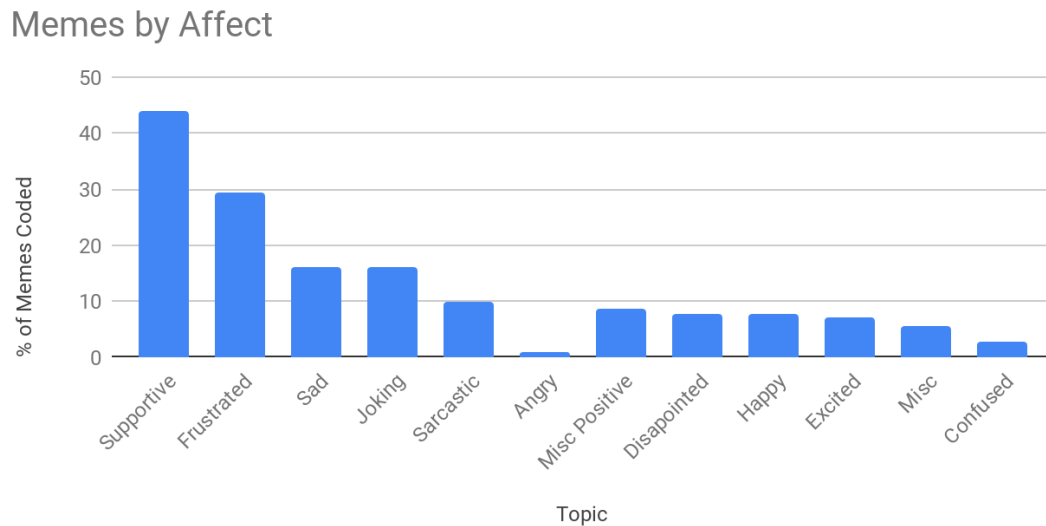


Figure 5-1 Frequency of affect codes used.

Because this thesis tried to study memes discussing the experiences of all trans people, it is not surprising that the specific genders discussed in memes do not demonstrate much of a disparity in representation. Transfeminine memes and non-binary

memes are almost equally represented, while transmasculine memes are less represented, but not to a statistically significant degree (Figure 5-2).

Memes by Specific Gender

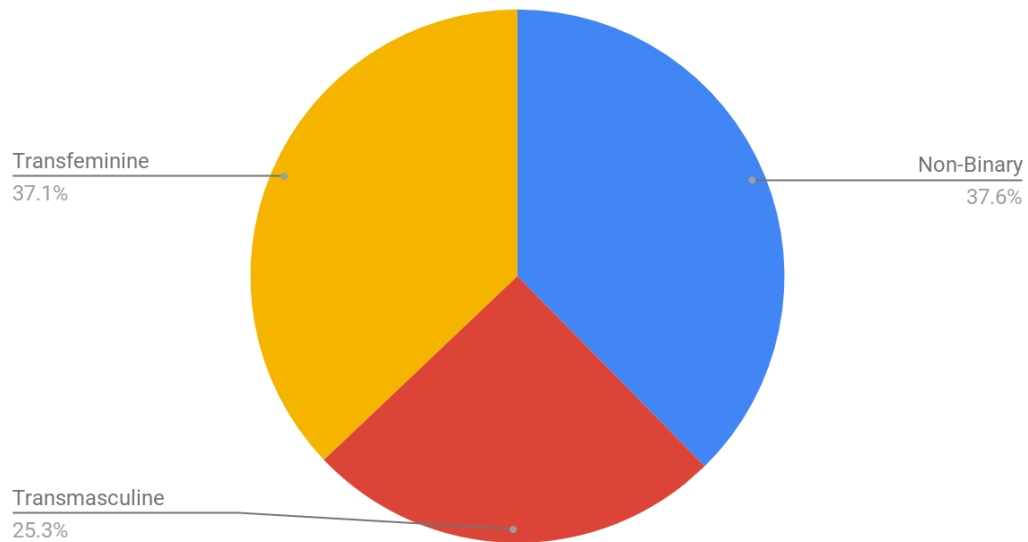


Figure 5-2 Memes by specific gender

While the memes in this dataset spanned many topics, two topics in particular stuck out as particularly prevalent: liberation (gaining rights, personal victories against adversity, historical events that led to increased rights or shifts towards acceptance, etc.) and oppression (attacks on transgender people, barriers to services or care, acts of discrimination, etc.) (Figure 5-3). These topics are statistically significantly more present than any other topics of discussion, illustrating the usefulness of this dataset for illuminating the degree to which minority stress and resiliency are topics of active interest for transgender people.

Though not outliers like oppression and liberation, memes discussing cis people, queer culture, discussions of gender, and trans representation were highly prevalent. Memes discussing cis people appear to tie in closely with memes discussing oppression, as frustrations with cis people are frequently discussed alongside experiences of stress and obstruction in this dataset. The queer culture memes referenced things like pride and queer history. They also included quirky cultural elements that queers associate with queerness, such as witchcraft, astrology, symbolic imagery (aliens, for example), and literary or film characters that have been read as queer/trans (such as Mulan from the Disney movie “Mulan”). This queering of popular, mainstream culture to create a version specific to queer/trans culture is a popular activity for meme creators, as demonstrated in this dataset. Trans representation memes often related to those for queer culture, as characters portrayed by trans people or as trans people are part of queer media. This code included not just fictional characters, but historic figures as well, such as Marsha P. Johnson. “Discussing Gender” was also a frequently used code in this work; many memes portrayed conversations trans people have, or are expected to have, in which they educate others (typically cis people) about gender.

Memes by Topic

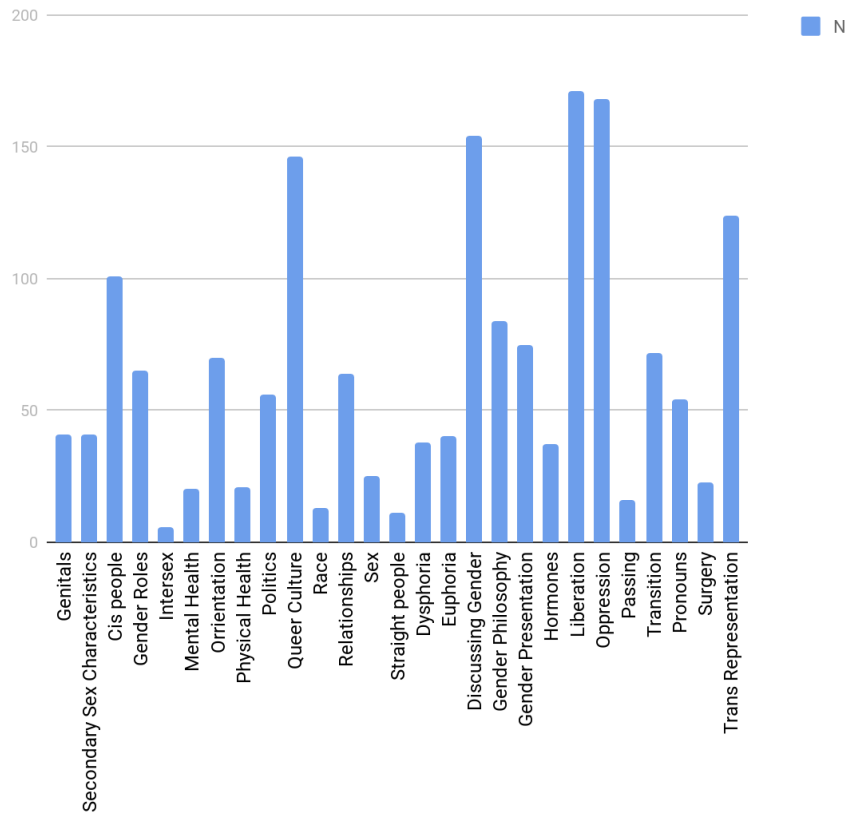


Figure 5-3 Frequency of topics coded.

Memes studied in this thesis were generally about transgender experiences.

Memes that discussed identities were overwhelmingly specifically transgender, while some memes were more broadly LGBT. Only a few lacked explicitly-LGBT identity in their content. Those that lacked an explicit queer identity often either were political or could be queered, which is to say read as though they were discussing queer topics/people. Memes about race were common in the set of memes that had no explicit LGBT identity present.

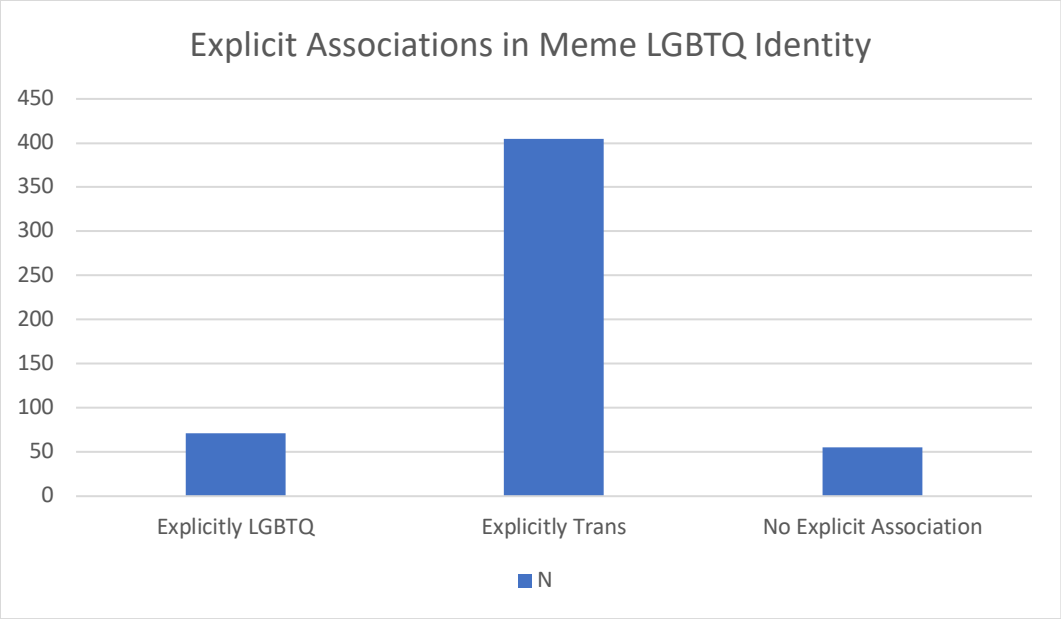


Figure 5-4 Memes by identities explicitly conveyed

Chapter 6 Transgender Memes to Understand Minority Stress and Resilience

Chapters Four and Five illustrated the diverse topics represented by the dataset collected for this thesis. While there are many research issues that this dataset could shed light on, this thesis is concerned with two topics that, incidentally, were the most prominent: Minority Stress and Resiliency, as represented by the codes Oppression and Liberation.

Minority stress

As discussed in Chapter Two, minority stress is a framework for understanding the impact that stressors have on minority populations, with the general flow being society impacting minorities, causing adverse (mental) health impacts and disrupting the behaviors and sense of self the minority group members feel, which further impacts (mental) health and wellness. Distal stressors (how society directly affects minorities) create proximal stressors (internal responses to distal stressors that in turn create greater stress) and both of these sets of stressors impact health. The original minority stress framework created by Meyers (1995, 2003) acted as a good template to expand upon for any given minority population, and was adapted for use with transgender populations by Testa et al. (2015) through the addition of the “non-affirmation” distal stressor. Each of the stressors discussed in Testa’s Gender Minority Stress and Resilience Measure were discussed by memes in this thesis.

Distal Stresses

The distal stressors described in the GMSR Measure include: discrimination, victimization, rejection, and non-affirmation. These stresses deal with the ways people outside the TGNC community interact with trans individuals or the community at large. In reading these memes, it is easy to see how these experiences inform the proximal stresses of negative expectations and nondisclosure. Less obvious is the connection to internalized transphobia (which was poorly represented in the memes collected for this project). The link to negative health outcomes that these stresses influence is also not difficult to understand and is clearly depicted in memes showing distal minority stress.

Discrimination

Discrimination is hard to define, as it can broadly encompass many aspects of TGNC minority stress. To narrow it in scope, we can understand discrimination as oppression that does not include the other distal stressors described in the GMSR Measure. For example, discrimination may look like being rejected for a job or housing on the basis of one's gender identity, or the inaccessibility of services, such as healthcare, due to intentional or incidental obstructions to access on the basis of TGNC status.

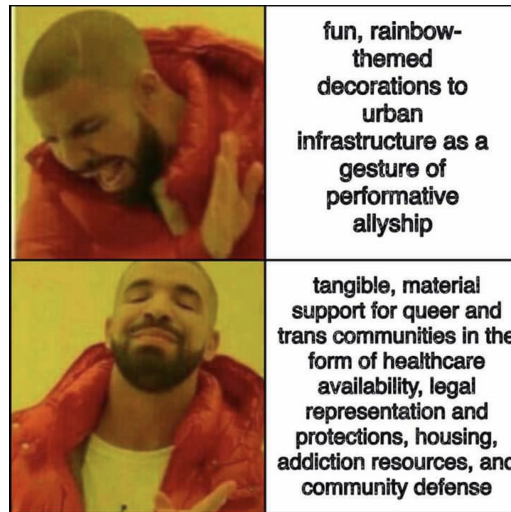


Figure 6-1 Meme about discrimination

Victimization

Physical violence against trans and gender non-conforming people is alarmingly prevalent (James et al. 2015). Articles about the deaths of trans people are commonly shared in trans meme spaces, keeping the topic (and the body count) fresh on the minds of those communities. One of the more commonly understood phenomenon in the trans community is that of intimate partner violence. Thanks to a legal defense known as the “Trans Panic Defense” those intimate partners who are violent to trans folks can claim that the disclosure of one’s gender identity was so shocking, that they were justified in reacting violently, sometimes to the end of killing their trans partners. The use of this legal defense is (at time of writing), permissible in 47 states in the US. Though depictions of the events leading up to the deaths of trans people are rare, transgender meme makers are aware of both this phenomenon and this legal defense, and reference both in their memes.

Dear cis people,

If you dont ever want to date or sleep with a trans person, it is ON YOU to disclose that deal breaker to all potential dates/sexual partners.

We aint mind readers! And it's not safe for us to disclose our status to every cis person we meet. It *is safe* for yall to disclose your shitty " no trans allowed" dating policy.

Trust me, we're not clamoring to date yall. Telling every potential partner that you dont want to date a trans person will definitely filter us out. We're not that desperate.

Signed,
Pissed off trans person sick of seeing cis people justify murdering us

Figure 6-2 Meme alluding to the murder of transgender people by their intimate/sexual partners.

Rejection

Memes about rejection discussed two groups who reject TGNC people: potential romantic/sexual partners and family members. Intimate partner rejection was commonly discussed in terms of non-affirmation (not seeing a trans person as being male or female enough), though also included descriptions of a general distaste for trans people without clear reasoning. Familial rejection memes described the shame, frustration, and lack of empathy held by family members. Acceptance by family members was discussed as though it were a rare and coveted thing, further emphasizing the potency of memes that discussed the ways family members, usually parents, rejected their trans family member(s).



Figure 6-3 Meme about invalidation

Non-Affirmation

Non-affirmation memes depicted two levels of interactions that TGNC people experience, casual and confused misgendering, and intense and deliberate misgendering. Though casual misgendering may sound less severe, its detrimental impact is clear in the memes that discuss it. It is presented as chronic, commonplace, and deeply frustrating to the point of agony. Deliberate misgendering is usually depicted in very straightforward ways, as these encounters themselves are straightforward. The person's gender is not questioned in these interactions, but rather is outright rejected clearly and to their face.

i'm a boy.
"but you have boo-"
i'm a boy.
"you don't loo-"
i'm a boy.
"but.."
I. AM. A. BOY.

Figure 6-4 Meme about non-affirmation.

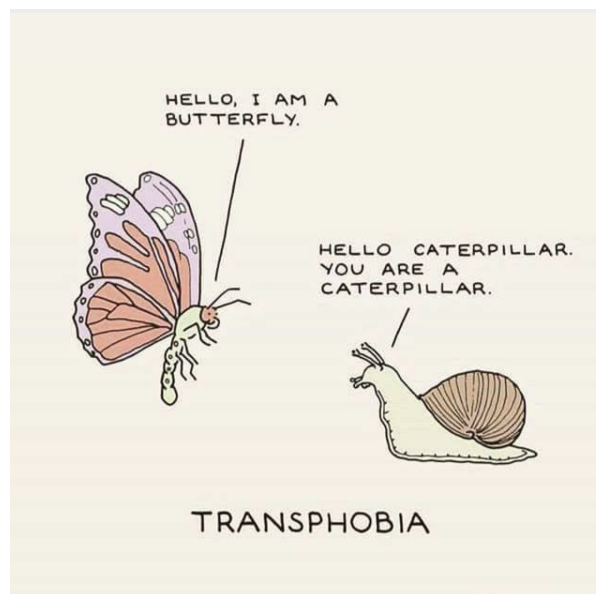


Figure 6-5 Meme about non-affirmation.

Fetishization

One distal stressor absent from current Gender Minority Stress models, but is present in the data collected for this thesis is that of Fetishization, or the view of transgender people as sexual objects, or as objects of sexual desire as a result of their being transgender. Transgender people face a number of challenges with intimate

partners, from finding partners who are willing to date/love/sleep with those who are transgender, to experiencing higher rates of abuse from domestic partners compared to others (James et al. 2015), and especially in having to worry that a potential partner is only interested in you for your transgender identity. To be seen as inherently sexual, and existing for the sexual pleasure of other is not unique to the transgender community, but is experienced by transgender people through the lens of our identity. The prevalence of this stress in the memes studied for this work make a strong case for Fetishization to be included as a distal stressor in this, and future works that use the Gender Minority Stress framework. See Figure 6-3.

Proximal Stresses

The proximal stresses of the GMSR Measure include: internalized transphobia, negative expectations, and non-disclosure. As noted above, it is difficult to see a link between the distal stressors and internalized transphobia, which was not as present in the dataset for this thesis as were the other stressors. However, the link between the distal stressors and the proximal stresses “negative expectations” and “non-disclosure” is clear: the chronic endurance of distal stress creates a wariness of interactions with cisgender people who are not known to be “safe,” leading to negative expectations and prompting non-disclosure.

Internalized Transphobia

The most common examples of internalized transphobia by far were memes depicting Caitlin Jenner, whose transphobic remarks have been fiercely criticized by the transgender community. The relative prevalence of memes rebuking her for her

association and alignment with right-wing politics and “fascism” demonstrates this critical attitude on the part of the trans and gender non-conforming community at large. It is important to note that memes discussing internalized transphobia were few and far between. Future research should investigate the relative paucity of this stressor in TGNC memes.



Figure 6-6 Meme about Caitlin Jenner's internalized transphobia and her rejection by the trans community.

- How not to be a shitty trans man (easy)
- don't make someone feel less than you or less trans or less man/ whatever for being on T a shorter amount of time than you
 - if you don't have dysphoria „ DO NOT make fun of people who do have dysphoria
 - but also don't be truscum
 - don't police how other trans men present themselves as man/trans enough or whatever
 - Dont make trans kids feel bad for not passing
 - Never tell a trans person how to pass better unless they've really specifically asked you
 - let someone newly transitioning enjoy it
 - don't say "I knew you were trans bc of your name"/"literally every trans guy picks that name"
 - dont be a dic k
 - e a s y !

Figure 6-7 Meme chastising the harmful and transphobic behaviors of some trans men.

Negative expectations

Many memes could be considered as expressions of negative expectations; hypothetical situations for example could be seen as the expectation of people to engage in harmful ways depicted in such memes. Other memes depicted negative expectations more directly, such as in Figure 6-8. Such memes illustrated preludes to interactions between the TGNC individual and cisnet people, portraying cisnet people as dangerous in some way.



Figure 6-8 Meme about the negative expectations trans people have when preparing to interact with cis people.

Non-disclosure

Memes about non-disclosure were tied with memes about negative expectations, in that expectations of a harmful experience often created the need for non-disclosure. Non-disclosure memes always addressed safety as a reason for hiding one's gender identity. Safety was a broadly used and undefined term in these memes. The notion of safety in digital and broadly leftist spaces includes not just physical safety, but emotional

safety as well, and it would be a fair assumption to understand “safety” in TGNC memes to mean the same.

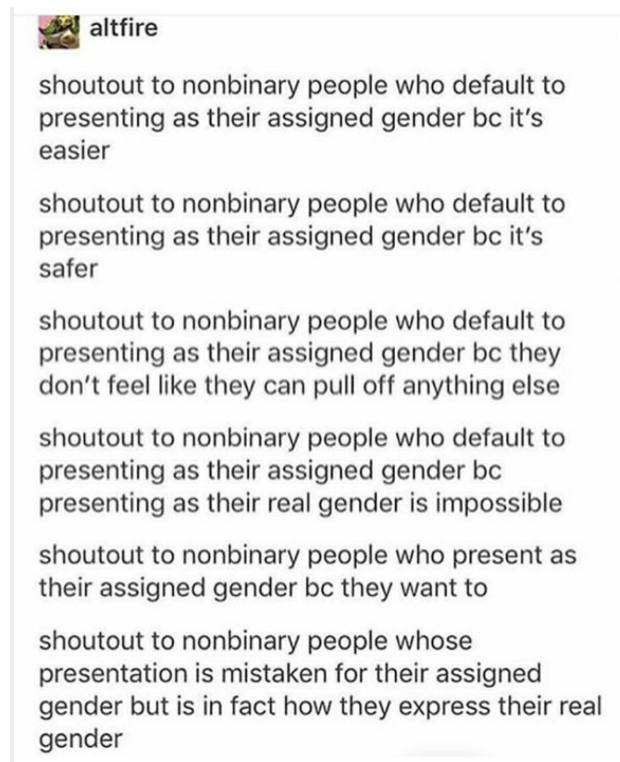


Figure 6-9 Meme about not disclosing your non-binary identity for safety and ease.

Resilience

As a resource for the trans community, trans memes act as a resilience process and foster group identity and solidarity by helping to create a sense of belonging for trans people by discussing relatable experiences, or life narratives. It is a powerful feeling to know that one is not alone in one's discomfort. Trans memes offer this relief to trans readers, which is especially important for those who are new to the experience of being trans or gender non-conforming. Meyer (2003) notes that “expressing emotions and sharing important aspects of one's self with others” contributes to mental well-being, therefore acting as a resilience process. Memes allow trans people easy access to those

conversations. In consuming and sharing memes, trans people engage with the struggles of others while sharing the difficulties they face themselves.

This is especially pertinent for trans people who are still closeted (concealing their identity) in non-digital spaces, allowing them to discuss their identity and experiences through meme consumption and sharing. Meyer (2003) notes that “In addition to suppressed emotions, concealment prevents LGB[T] people from identifying and affiliating with others who are gay.” Memes allow those who are concealed in non-digital spaces (or “IRL” - in real life) to connect with their community in digital spaces. Meyer summarizes Crocker & Major 1989, Jones 1984, and Postmes & Branscombe 2002, concluding that psychological literature affirms the positive effect that group membership with other, similarly stigmatized persons can have on marginalized individuals. In this way, the act of participation in meme consumption and sharing is a resilience process. See Figure 4-55.

Testa et al. (2015) describe resilience in terms of two factors, pride and community connectedness. Similarly, Meyer (2003) described resilience processes in terms of “group solidarity and cohesiveness” deliberately choosing to discuss only “group-level resources.” Despite the limitation of resilience processes described in these models to those that are explicitly group-level, this literature does include some discussion of other forms of resilience that are present in trans memes. Notably, family and peer-group support are discussed frequently in transgender memes, and have been identified as “protective factors” in LGBT health literature (Graham et al. 2011). These can be thought of as “peer” level resources – those that exist in interactions with others,

but not at a community level. Additionally, Graham et al. (2011) note that protective factors can occur on the individual level, where resilience comes from within much the same way proximal stresses might.

TGNC memes can be both depictions of resilience processes and instances of them. As depictions of resilience, memes document instances of resilience at each relational level: individual, interpersonal, and group or community. As instances of resilience, memes are a group-level resource that foster community connectedness, cohesion, and pride. In either case, these memes are a window into the protective actions TGNC people engage in to mitigate and/or avoid negative health outcomes.

Memes depicting resilience processes.

Memes that depict individual level resilience processes exhibit the ways trans people push back against the cissexist environments within which they exist. Memes of this sort show the affirmations trans people make to themselves in order to exist as trans people in a world that so often rebukes their existence. The recognition of the self as something worthwhile and important is present in these memes; trans people overcoming physical or social dysphoria are key examples of this.

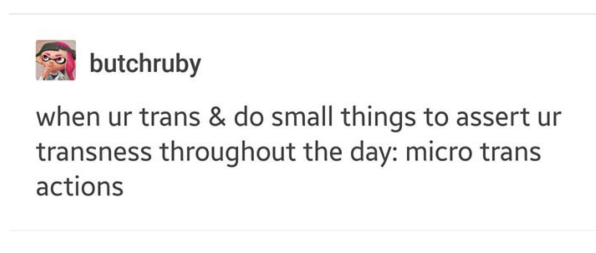


Figure 6-10 Meme about asserting your transness.

Interpersonal resilience processes demonstrate peer (including classmate), family, and friend support for transgender people. This also includes interactions and relationships TGNC people have with other transgender individuals (as opposed to interactions with large community groups). Having groups of people who do not enact distal stresses on TGNC individuals is a key part of their community connectedness, as well as a much-needed reprieve from such stresses. Familial support especially has been recognized as a key interpersonal process that promotes resiliency for transgender people (James et al. 2015:8). See Figure 6-11, Figure 4-35, and Figure 4-36.



Figure 6-11 Meme about the affects acceptance can have on trans mental health.

Connection to the TGNC community and more broadly to the queer community is a major aspect of trans and gender non-conforming resilience. Community connectedness is identified in both Meyer's and Testa's minority stress models as a resilience process, and is present in trans memes. Memes shared in TGNC meme spaces show

connectedness to the broad queer community in addition to individual identities within that community. These memes show the support that the community provides, as well as the sense of contentment provided by group membership. See Figure 4-34 and Figure 6-12.



Figure 6-12 Meme about feeling joy when confronted by other queers living their lives in the public sphere.

Memes as instances of resilience

Memes do not just illustrate acts of resilience, but are often themselves acts of resilience processes. As a community level resource, memes contribute to TGNC resilience in two ways: creating community cohesion and connectedness and fostering pride in one's queer identity. By sharing memes, TGNC people decide what ideas are worth stating/repeating. If a meme says something that resonates with the individual, they will share it again, furthering the idea's reach and longevity. Memes that are considered in poor taste, or that make a statement that is not agreed upon by the community, will not only not be shared, but often will be called out in comment sections, with the problematic elements of the meme being dissected and discussed by the audience. In this way we can

see how only memes that resonate with the community are sustained. Memes that describe the community in ways/terms that are offensive or unfitting are stifled, as are those that promote shame over pride.

The relatability of the memes that “make it” are the foundation of group identity formation in transgender meme pages. As Ask and Abidin (2018) point out, relatable content invites readers to experience the joke or statement personally, not just in a way that is accessible to anyone, but specifically to those the community posts content *for*. A meme that, for example, is not meant to be explicitly for the trans community but has a double meaning when considered in a trans context, invites trans readers to engage with the material *as trans people*, regardless of how the meme was originally meant to be received (Figure 4-36).

This is demonstrated in memes and symbolic imagery associating trans and often more specifically non-binary and gender non-conforming people with extraterrestrials. The literal alienation that TGNC people experience is coalesced into an identity defined in part by feelings of being distinct or different from the prevailing culture. This aspect of their identity can be seen in this portrayal of TGNC people as aliens - existing outside of normal conventions and seemingly foreign to those around us. While much of the imagery of extraterrestrials was not created for a trans audience, presenting it in a trans contexts creates extra meaning and a way for trans people to engage in a shared experience that defines group identity - feeling alienated and misunderstood for being trans (Figure 6-13).



Figure 6-13 Mood board associating being trans with being an alien. This is a common association in non-binary media.

In considering the group identity reification that memes foster, it is important to note that not all memes are positive or uplifting. In fact, a very large portion of the memes studied in this work had a negative affect. Memes that discuss the difficulties of being trans will often be depressing or express frustration. The inclusion of such memes illustrates how the TGNC community finds connection and cohesion through relatable negative experiences. The feeling of being misgendered, or the frustration of rejection or discrimination, or the fear of violence are all well understood by community members. In discussing those events, the experience of these feelings becomes part of what it means to be TGNC.

Along with community connectedness, pride in one's identity is recognized by Meyers (1995, 2003), Testa et al. (2015), and many others they both cite, as an important

resilience process in overcoming minority stress. The word pride, of course, has special meaning for the queer community, as “Gay Pride” is both a phrase denoting resilience as well as an annual event held across the world to celebrate the queer community. “Pride month” (the month of June, to honor the Stonewall Riots that occurred in June of 1969) itself is a time for queer people to reflect upon and celebrate their queerness. Memes studied for this thesis discussed all these forms of pride. Memes that discuss pride show the history of queer pride as a societal phenomenon, illustrate instances of pride, and evoke feelings of pridefulness. As a community level resource, these illustrations of the different ways queer/TGNC people experience pride help others consider ways they can find pride in their identity. Simultaneously, as instances of pride, these memes can be read as utterances of pridefulness in a moment in which a queer/TGNC person felt empowered.



Figure 6-14 Meme about pride month empowering queer people.



Figure 6-15 Meme identifying self-love/appreciation by trans people as a radical act in the face of social/political structures seeking to undermine transgender rights, happiness, and wellness.

Paucity of Memes Discussing HIV and Sex Work

It is worth noting a discrepancy between the experiences discussed in the memes studied for this work and the elevated rate of (James et al. 2015) experiences of sex work and living with HIV. Memes discuss, for example, the stress and discrimination of being transgender in traditional wage labor environments, but seldom discuss the exodus of trans people from traditional labor to grey/black market labor, including sex work (which is a much-discussed topic in academic literature on the subject of trans people). Similarly, there are many memes about the medicine used for transitioning, but not a single meme about HIV medication such as PEP (Post-Exposure Prophylaxis), PrEP (Pre-Exposure Prophylaxis), or any of the medications for these regimens was present in this dataset. Multiple memes argued for the free distribution of menstrual pads, but none advocated for the free distribution of condoms. The reason(s) why sex work and HIV were absent from the data collected for this thesis can, at this point, only be speculated. Future work

should endeavor to identify whether or not TGNC people with the experiences of sex work and/or HIV are part of meme sharing communities, and if so, why these experiences are absent from these communities despite being uncommon but not rare aspects of transgender life.

Impact of This Work on Future Minority Stress and Resilience Research

Minority stress and resilience research using memes as a dataset could take many avenues. A common approach in minority stress research is to understand health outcomes - e.g. given a certain set of stressors, what is a likely health/wellness result - but the work in this thesis is perhaps better suited to understanding *cultural* outcomes. The memes in this work demonstrate the responses the trans and gender non-conforming community has to oppression and minority stress, and through their popularity represent not just the meme creator's feelings, but the attitudes of the community as a whole. There is a community level, cultural response to stress that can be observed in memes. At times this response can look similar to any other group's responses to stress, such as depression, isolation, or conversely, seeking companionship with other group members. Other times, the response is uniquely trans, such as wearing clothing or makeup that helps alleviate the burden of dysphoria, obfuscating your gender to conceal your identity, or taking sometimes drastic steps to "pass" as one gender to avoid violence.

The stressors experienced by trans and gender non-conforming people are often uniquely trans as well. Testa et al. (2015) were right to include non-affirmation as a distal stressor, but even those stressors shared with other minority stress models are tinted through the lens of trans experience, and in turn shape trans culture. The fetishization that

trans people face, for example, is not necessarily unique to trans people. However, the experience of cis men who are unsure of their sexuality experimenting with trans women is certainly a uniquely trans experience that has its own vocabulary, memes, and very real and very violent consequences on the trans community (Lee and Kwan 2014) (Figure 6-16). The way trans people talk about this stress, the way we grapple with it, and the feelings associated with it are deeply personal, yet understandable to many if not most in the trans community, and likely few others.



Figure 6-16 Meme in which a (implied) trans character is torn between having sex with someone who fetishizes transgender people (referred to as a "chaser") in exchange for drugs and sex, or, conversely, having self-respect. The two options are presented as mutually exclusive.

Of course, research with the goal of understanding trans health outcomes specifically can still benefit from meme datasets. As illustrated in Figure 6-16, one health risk that trans people face, which is directly associated with trans fetishization, includes drug use and casual sex with (perhaps near) strangers. Another example is memes discussing the health risks of improperly binding one's breasts to conceal them and present a more typically male body type.

Summation of Discussion

The memes used here to demonstrate the ways in which trans and gender non-conforming individuals discuss minority stress and resilience are only a small sample from the dataset that was used in this thesis. With the exception of “internalized transphobia,” the stresses and resilience processes identified by Meyers, Testa, and others are well represented in memes. As stated elsewhere in this thesis, if something is part of transgender life, it is likely that someone has made a meme about it. As a dataset, TGNC memes can help researchers understand TGNC minority stress in very specific ways. Understanding the ways TGNC people enact resilience measures, for example, or the ways they are targeted and harassed, can be of great help to researchers.

Chapter 7 Conclusion

This ethnography explored the literary and semiotic content of transgender image memes shared on Facebook pages. Through this analysis, four main themes were discovered as especially pervasive in these communities: Bodies, Community, Trans Experience, and the Broken System of Gender. In addition to identifying these themes, this work demonstrated that a dataset comprised of memes could be used to inform work dealing with Gender Minority Stress and Resiliency, and recommended that such work include Fetishization as a distal stressor in future work.

Memes about bodies discussed topics ranging from medical transition, to dys/euphoria, and the cisgender gaze and how this perception of trans bodies is a prominent aspect of the transgender experience. While there was discussion and presentation of positive experiences of being transgender, especially insofar as gender and bodily euphoria were concerned, these memes primarily discussed frustrations, be they based in dysphoria, socioeconomic barriers to transition, or the way cis perceptions and assumptions about trans bodies impacted their lives. In this theme, frustration was the norm.

While most if not all of the memes studied in this work depict trans experiences, those identified for the category of “trans experiences” describe particular milestones or anticipated frequent events that are common for trans people to experience. In particular,

interacting with others in a trans context. This can look like having discussions with family, other queers, or even strangers, or it can take the form of exploring one's identity, for the first time, or any number of times after that. Having experiences with family in a trans/queer context (such as watching Queer Eye together, Figure 4-21) or discussing being trans with family were highly present memes in this dataset. Interestingly, discussions of cis-normativity intersecting with, or perhaps as a (partial) result of capitalism were also highly prevalent. Lastly, it is worth noting the dichotomy presented between discussing gender/trans topics with other trans people, as opposed to having these discussions with cis people. Frustration and avoidance of delving into these topics with cis people were well illustrated in these memes.

Community is a major aspect of the memes shared in this work, and the lens through which they are read as data informing us about minority stress and resiliency. They represent the views of a community, and they act to form and foster said community. They both reify community boundaries, and act as resources for those that identify with them and their messages. In discussing "community" memes, the most critical aspect to consider is that of validation. Validation is a key component of memes as resilience process and resource. Validation in memes could take the form of emphasizing that an experience is/has been shared by others, or can literally be kind words meant to uplift a reader. Importantly, from a research perspective, some of these memes depict instances of validation; we can come to understand how trans people experience resilience through specific, anecdotal examples.

In stark contrast to validation, oppression of the trans community was also predominant in this data set, as discussed in chapter 5 (Figure 5-3). Oppression took the form of non-validation, marginalization, and exclusion. One important example for researchers and interventions planes was Figure 4-58, which commented on the use of the acronym “LGBT” being used not to discuss all those whom the acronym represents, but only cis white gay men. Of course, community resilience in the face of oppression was also present, in what I termed memes about “Queer Pride and Power.” While these memes ostensibly demonstrated pride in one’s identity, it is interesting to observe the presence symbols of power in many of these memes. Two of the memes selected to demonstrate this portion of the dataset for this work include depictions of weapons, one included the use of magic to actively destroy conservative gender roles, one described the presence of LGBT “wrath,” and importantly, one pictured Marsha P. Johnson, whose aggressive act at the Stonewall Inn sparked the famous and important Stonewall riot. The depiction of defensive violence in reaction to oppression, while often purely hypothetical and symbolic (though not in the case of Marsha P. Johnson), inspires courage, agency, and potency in standing up to oppression.

The final category of memes studied in this theses were those that discussed the system of gender and how it fails queer people, imprisons cis-het people, and how these cultural systems can and should be improved. Gender philosophy is presented (perhaps in contrast to many “queer theory” works) in simple and intelligible ways, problematizing and criticizing traditional views of gender as reductionist to the end of oversimplifying a complex reality for the sake of comfort. The reality of gender, these memes argue, is far

more varied and nuanced than traditional views purport. Importantly, memes about systems of gender do not just present criticisms of traditional views of gender, but provide language and heuristic suggestions for how to improve these systems.

In studying these themes, it became apparent that struggle is a key aspect of transgender existence. Because of this, this work investigated “struggle” using the Minority Stress model and the Gender Minority Stress and Resiliency Measure frameworks. Each of the stresses and resilience factors expected (based on the above stated models) were present and discussed in this dataset. Additionally, meme sharing itself was discussed as a potential action of resiliency.

Every element of the Gender Minority Stress and Resilience measure was present in the dataset studied for this thesis, though some elements were more prominent than others. Least prominent were memes discussing internalized transphobia, while memes discussing/demonstrating negative expectations and non-affirmation were the very common. Though this work was a relatively small investigation into transgender memes, due to both its quantity of memes investigated and the narrow scope of where these memes were harvest from, there were ample data to explore how transgender people specifically experience each of the stressors present in the GMSR measure. Not only was the presence of these stressors confirmed, but how they occur and the impact they have on transgender people was expounded upon.

Resilience was discussed in a number of ways in the data collected for this work, including both descriptions of resilience resources and practices, as well as memes that enacted resilience practices in their creation and sharing. Community connectedness and

Pride, as identified in the GMSR measure, were abundantly apparent in the data as sources of resilience, lending credit to that aspect of the measure. Resilience was also observed in multiple relational levels, from individual, to interpersonal, and community relationships present in the data. Individual resilience often took the form of pride, or affirmation in one's self and the value one has as a human in the world. Interpersonal resilience often took the form of healthy and supportive relationships one has with others, such as family members or peers – a direct contrast to experiencing external stressors from others. Community resilience factors took the form of both pride and community connectedness, or in many ways, both at the same time. Pride in one's community, being present at events such as “pride” that were celebrations of the community, and recognitions of the community as unique and valid were all present and discussed in the data.

Importantly, the memes in this thesis dwell on things far beyond what one would find in more rigidly academic sources such as the U.S. Trans Survey. Experiences with gender roles, name choosing, gender expansive philosophy, and radical politics were all absent in the USTS, but were pervasive in this dataset. This is not to devalue the USTS, which was a critical step in understanding transgender people from a health and academic viewpoint, but is meant to demonstrate that there is still more to be understood about transgender lives and wellbeing beyond what is conventionally known and studied.

Recommendations for future work

This work, while gaining meaningful insight into the lives of transgender people, involved a relatively small dataset. The roughly 450 unique memes studied is only a

small fraction of the thousands harvested incidentally by NCapture, the software used to gather this data. A more exhaustive review of this data would allow for more deductive approaches to understanding specific topics, which could be explored more specifically if the number of memes captured were expanded. Similarly, a systematic review and harvesting of only memes related to certain topics may yield more targeted research results. In either case, the way memes are captured could be expanded to achieve different research goals.

This work only studied memes from five pages on Facebook, which presented certain limitations. More perspectives could be gleaned if more pages were studied. Each page only shares the memes that its admins chose to share, and while studying the most reacted to memes allows us to investigate those that resonate most with the audience, there is still a limitation on what is shared. By expanding the criteria by which meme pages are chosen for study, one could potentially harvest a more diverse and/or complete dataset. Further, deductive approaches could explore pertinent topics in queer theory (or, certainly, other areas of study). Donna Haraway's (2006) conceptions of transhumanism could (and should) be explored, as many memes discuss transhumanist experiences of becoming (often supernatural/mythical) creatures as an aspect of alienation and transition.

Beyond diversifying which pages are included in study, one could diversify which social media outlets one studies. The Reddit community r/EggIRL, for example, discusses the experience of wondering if you are transgender in a way that may be unique to the Reddit platform, by tagging the community in posts across the website that imply

one might be experiencing this questioning of one's gender. This practice, as well as the ways the affordances of the Reddit platform inform content sharing, make Reddit a distinct community from Facebook, and one that should be studied by future efforts.

Importantly, work involving transgender (or any minority, for that matter) should heavily lean on contributions made by transgender (or other appropriate identities) researchers who have a hand in research design. It is important to consider that even ostensibly public digital spaces are still curated to be safe spaces for the community, and as such might be suspicious of cis-led research. Research on marginalized groups can quickly become voyeuristic in a way, and the academic gaze, compounded by intersecting identities of privilege can be poorly received, and in fact may simply be inappropriate. In digital studies, it can be difficult if not impossible to obtain informed consent from all participants in a digital setting, indeed, there is truly no way to even identify the creators of memes, let alone receive their consent to have their work studied. In this work, my identity as a community member (as a transgender woman, and as a transgender meme page admin) allows me access to this space of research in a way that other are not afforded. In order to gain access, ethically, cisgender researchers should ask two questions: "How can I involve transgender researchers in the design, execution, and analysis of this work?"; and Am I the right person to conduct this work at all?"

Memes do not just discuss transgender lived experiences, but other topics relevant to health and anthropological inquiry as well. Mental health memes, for example, are very popular on social media. This author has identified, in her own life, several mental health communities on Facebook that communicate through memes. These communities

discuss many issues similar to those identified in this thesis, including struggle to conform/be accepted, issues dealing with family, the experience of stigmatization, and gatekeeping medical professionals. This author is also aware of meme communities for chronic illnesses, such as endometriosis, which could be an important research opportunity to better understand the experiences of those with such illnesses. The medical anthropology community would do well to consider these datasets when conducting inquiry. Memes are easy to manufacture and easily shared, making them a rich resource for understanding cultural and health processes.

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