REACTIONS OF THE TRANSGENDER COMMUNITY

REGARDING MEDIA REPRESENTATION

by

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Abstract

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Lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) issues have increasingly been focused on in society and also in communication media research. However, academic studies focusing on transgender reactions to recent representation developments of their community in the media world have not been done. The researcher conducted one-on-one interviews with those identifying as male to female (MtF) transgender in order to study their reactions to media coverage of the transgender community. Cultural studies and communication theories, as well as transgender and trans-identity theories provided a theoretical structure and basis for developing the study and interview questions. Qualitative methodology using an inductive grounded theory approach was performed with a thematic analysis to thoroughly evaluate interview responses. Findings included many subthemes underneath two broad themes: the lack of current media diversity and the idea of learning gender through the media.

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Chapter 1

Introduction

Media coverage and inclusion of lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender individuals (known as the LGBT community) has dramatically risen in recent years. GLAAD is a large nonprofit organization that "works with print, broadcast and online news sources to bring people powerful stories from the LGBT community that build support for equality" and has published a Network Responsibility Index (NRI) yearly since 2006 which evaluates television content including LGBT people ("About GLAAD"). Sarah Kate Ellis, President and CEO of GLAAD, describes the overwhelming increase in media showing LGBT people in their 2015 Network Responsibility Index (GLAAD, 2015):

> GLAAD's first NRI set a baseline that showed LGBT people were vastly underrepresented. These results were shared not only with the general public but also with the networks themselves in direct conversations that have continued year after year, and our efforts paid off. The majority of networks GLAAD has tracked since 2006 — on both broadcast and cable — showed significant increases in the rate of inclusion and quality of LGBT characters and stories, which mirrored increasing rates of acceptance toward LGBT people in the real world. We know that's not a coincidence. (6)

This increased coverage has paralleled recent social changes, where LGBT equality and transgender rights have been described in *Time Magazine* as the next civil rights frontier in the United States (Steinmetz, 2014). As of this writing in 2015, equality for the LGBT community is one of the most prominent and major social changes currently sweeping the country. Public opinion shifts and key political legislation changes have benefitted the LGBT community's struggle for equality over the last few years. This study looked into what this increased media

coverage has meant to the transgender community by going directly to the source and speaking with transgender women about their interpretations of transgender media representation. This research is specifically interested in how individuals within the transgender community feel their community is represented in the media and how this has influenced their lives.

Understanding Gender and Transgenderism

Recent studies have shown that the binary notion of gender being only male or female is changing, and that there are currently different views on how gender is experienced. Gender is seen as a "fluid, complex and questionable concept" (Connell, 2002). The term 'gender' is more recently being understood more as the social and cultural constructions of masculinities and femininities and not just as the state of being male or female (Fontanella, Maretti, & Sarra, 2013). Biological sex is generally determined at birth, except for cases where intersex babies are born with both male and female genitalia. Gender also includes the behavioral, psychological and social characteristics of men and women, and is therefore understood more as a social and cultural construction (Deutsch, 2007).

The "T" in LGBT, transgender, is usually considered to be an umbrella term for individuals whose gender identity, expression, or behavior does not match the biological sex that they were born with. The term cisgender is the term used to describe the opposite of transgender. Cisgender (often abbreviated to cis) is a term used to describe those who are not transgender because cis is the Latin prefix for "on the same side as." Cisgender individuals are, therefore, those whose gender self-categorization is the same label as their birth-assigned gender category (Tate, Youssef, & Bettergarcia, 2014). Sexual orientation is a person's sexual identity in relation to the gender to which they are attracted, while gender identity specifically refers to the "intrinsic

self-identification of personal femaleness and maleness" and "relies on a person's sense of self as male or female of feeling between sexes." (Fontanella, Maretti, & Sarra, 2013, p. 2553-2554).

While the "LGB" of lesbians, gays, and bisexuals in the LGBT acronym are each defined by sexual orientation, transgenderism does not deal explicitly with sexual orientation. The concept of overall gender identity that transgender individuals face is separate from their sexual orientation. Someone who is transgender may be gay, straight, bisexual, or asexual regardless of their gender identity. A 2012 study by Nagoshi, Brzuzy, and Terrell clarifies the transgender experience:

> Transgender individuals live with a gender identity different from traditional binary gender roles (Bornstein, 1994) and their gender identification either violates the heteronormative conceptualization of male or female or mixes different identity and role aspects of being male or female (Diamond & Butterworth, 2008). The term 'transgender' reflects the concept of breaking gender roles and gender identity and/or transcending the boundaries of one gender to another gender (Green, 2004).

Transgender individuals experience gender dysphoria, previously known as gender identity disorder which, "refers to discomfort or distress that is caused by a discrepancy between a person's gender identity and that person's sex assigned at birth (and the associated gender role and/or primary and secondary sex characteristics)" (Coleman, et all, 2011, p. 165). Therefore, transgender individuals do not identify as the sex into which they were biologically born.

Lambda Legal, a civil rights organization who works towards LGBT equality through impact litigation, gives detailed information on the Gender Dysphoria diagnosis in their "FAQ on Access to Transition-Related Care" (2015):

Gender Dysphoria is a medical diagnosis recognized by the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM), which is the American Psychiatric Association's (APA) encyclopedia of official diagnoses, as "[T]he distress that may accompany the incongruence between one's experienced or expressed gender and one's assigned gender." The World Health Organization's International Classification of Diseases (ICD) recognizes that Gender Dysphoria (formerly called Gender Identity Disorder, or GID) is "characterized by a persistent and intense distress about assigned sex, together with a desire to be, or insistence that one is, of the other sex." The American Medical Association (AMA) established in a 2008 resolution that Gender Dysphoria (then GID) is a "serious medical condition" with symptoms including "distress, dysfunction, debilitating depression and, for some people without access to appropriate medical care and treatment, suicidality and death."

In 2013, the Gender Dysphoria diagnosis replaced the diagnosis of Gender Identity Disorder in the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders. The APA explained that "Replacing 'disorder' with 'dysphoria' in the diagnostic label is not only more appropriate and consistent with familiar clinical sexology terminology, it also removes the connotation that the patient is 'disordered.'" The APA said it was concerned that completely 'removing the condition as a psychiatric diagnosis--as some had suggested--would jeopardize access to care... Many of the treatment options for this condition include counseling, cross-sex hormones, gender reassignment surgery, and

social and legal transition to the desired gender. To get insurance coverage for the

medical treatments, individuals need a diagnosis."

Transgenderism was previously known as a disorder, but this was fought against because it was

thought to pathologize gender variance, which can result in stigmatization (Fraser, Meyer, &

Wylie, 2010). Being transgender is now understood as a medical condition.

The most common examples of transgender experiences are someone born a biological

male who identifies as the female gender, who would then transition from male to female (MtF),

or someone born a biological female who identifies as the male gender, and would transition

from female to male (FtM). Some individuals undergo hormone replacement therapy (HRT) or

have gender reassignment related surgery, while others do not out of choice or limitations

(including monetary). Those who do decide to have gender reassignment surgery use terms like

pre-op and post-op to describe where they are in their transition. Some MtF transgender

individuals take estrogen, which helps them develop secondary female sexual characteristics like

breasts. Some FtM transgender individuals take testosterone, which lowers their voice and leads

to facial hair growth. It is important to note that no one's transition is the same. Also included

under the transgender umbrella are other non-binary gendered individuals who challenge

society's traditional male and female gender roles. These individuals may identify as gender

queer or gender fluid, among others. Saltzburg and Davis (2010) conducted a study on youth

identities that vary from traditional gender roles, and one of their interview participants defined

gender queer:

The [term] 'gender queer' is fairly accurate for me . . . I mean, one day I may feel like

being very feminine in the way I dress, the way I act. Another day I might feel like being

very masculine. Usually I feel like being sort of 'in-between androgynous' and just sort of mixing and matching gender. (96)

The labels in the LGBT acronym do not fit everyone who feels outside of the gender binary. Saltzburg and Davis (2010) explain further regarding a youth's newer ideas on identity:

For this young person, the gender binary and prevailing sexual discourse do not fit how s/he views self. Using words like "fluid" and "sexual" to describe sexual orientation rather than straight, gay, lesbian, or bisexual, is forging a different way of creating identity and meaning.

Existing research supports that gender is nonbinary and a fluid concept. This outlook guided the research contained herein.

The transgender population in the United States is not measured by the Census Bureau but has been estimated to be 0.3% of the population by the Williams Institute (Miller, 2015). The Williams Institute is "dedicated to conducting rigorous, independent research on sexual orientation and gender identity law and public policy ("Mission")." A national think tank at UCLA Law, The Williams Institute produces "high-quality research with real-world relevance and disseminates it to judges, legislators, policymakers, media and the public ("Mission"). The transgender community is a very vulnerable population that experiences transphobia and a disproportionate level of lifelong abuse and trauma than the cisgender community (Mizock & Lewis, 2008). Transphobia has been defined by Hill and Willoughby (2005) as an "emotional disgust toward individuals who do not conform to society's gender expectations (p. 533). Transphobia has been highly correlated with levels of homophobia, as defined as "the irrational fear, hatred, and intolerance of being in close quarters with homosexual men and women" (Nagoshi, et. all., 2008, p. 521).

The statistics on suicide and violence in the transgender community are also staggering. The Williams Institute has found that suicide attempts in the transgender and gender nonconforming community are at 40%, compared to under 5% of the overall population (Haas, Rogers, & Herman, 2014). Also, as noted by Lombardi, Wilchins, Priesing, and Malouf (2001), "there is a pervasive pattern of discrimination and prejudice against transgendered people within society." An article by Holman and Goldberg (2006) focused on transgender medical and social advocacy explained that an American study of transgender adults found approximately 50% of respondents were survivors of violence or abuse, and another found that 25% of transgender respondents had experienced hate-motivated physical/sexual assault or attempted assault. Grant, Mottet, and Tanis (2011) with the National Center for Transgender Equality conducted a survey of over 7,500 transgender participants and found that:

Sixty-three percent (63%) of our participants experienced serious acts of discrimination-events that would have a major impact on a person's quality of life and ability to sustain themselves financially or emotionally. Participants reported that they had faced:

- Loss of job due to bias
- Eviction due to bias
- School bullying/harassment so bad the respondent had to drop out
- Teacher bullying
- Physical assault due to bias
- Sexual assault due to bias
- Homelessness because of gender identity/expression
- Loss of relationship with partner or children due to gender identity/expression
- Denial of medical service due to bias
- Incarceration due to gender identity/expression

Furthermore, the Human Rights Campaign, a major LGBT rights advocacy group, makes it clear that transgender individuals face transphobia as well as a disproportionate amount of violence

and hate, even when compared to the non-trans LGBT community (Marzullo & Libman, 2009).

While speaking on the resubmission of Employment Non-Discrimination Act, U.S.

Representative Susan Davis stated on September 17, 2014 that, "Transgender people are among

the most marginalized and vulnerable groups within the LGBT community" (Johnson).

<div align="center">LGBT Legislation Changes and Public Opinion Shifts</div>

Public and political opinions are progressing towards equality on several issues the

LGBT community faces. Possibly because of this clear progression, lesbian, gay, bisexual and

specifically transgender media representation has dramatically risen in recent years. Recent

legislation changes regarding LGBT equality have occurred rapidly. In 2008, California passed

Constitutional Proposition 8, which eliminated the right of same-sex couples to marry ("Text of

Proposed Laws"). The U.S. Supreme Court struck down this law as unconstitutional in 2010 and

it went into effect after appeals in June 2013 in Hollingsworth, et al. vs. Perry, et al. (2013). In

1993, the military enacted a Don't Ask, Don't Tell policy, which banned openly gay, lesbian, or

bisexual members from serving in the armed forces ("Department of Defense," 1993). Congress

repealed the military's *Don't Ask, Don't Tell* policy in 2010, allowing these groups to serve by

2011 (Stolberg, 2010).Transgender individuals are still banned from openly serving in the United

States military, though as of July 2015 the Pentagon is moving toward lifting the ban

(Rosenberg, 2015).

In the 2000s some states chose to allow same-sex marriage, while others instituted

constitutional bans against it. The Defense of Marriage Act was enacted in by the U.S. Congress

and signed by President Clinton in 1996, defining marriage as between one man and one woman

("Civic Impulse"). DOMA prevented legally married same-sex couples from getting federal

marriage benefits. In 2013, the U.S. Supreme Court ruled that section 3 of the Defense of

Marriage Act (DOMA) was unconstitutional, striking down its effective ban on same-sex marriage in United States v. Windsor (Liptak, 2013). Opinion polls show approval of same-sex marriage steadily rose from 1988 through 2015, especially in the younger age bracket (Baunach, 2011). 2011 public opinion polls found that 70% of young Americans, ages 18-34, support same-sex marriage. (Gallup, U.S.A., 2011). These rapid opinion shifts culminated in the June 2015 ruling by the Supreme Court that same-sex marriage was legal throughout the country, overruling the bans in some states in Obergefell et al. v. Hodges, Director, Ohio Department of Health, et al. (2015). Gay members of the transgender community are now also allowed to marry. While the ruling on allowing same-sex marriage has been widely celebrated by supporters, it has also been criticized by opponents of marriage equality who have used legal arguments to circumvent the decision. These methods included some county clerk offices who chose to halt the issuance of all marriage certificates citing conscientious objection and religious freedom, such as Kim Davis' office in Kentucky (Blinder & Faussett, 2015).

Other rapid legislative changes in the 2000s have specifically affected the transgender community. Although laws on this topic in the United States vary from state to state, and even city to city, non-discrimination laws are starting to include gender identity in protected classes of individuals. For example, California has enacted laws protecting students from discrimination and hate violence based on gender identity and disability, which is defined under Cal Ed Code § 220 (Transgender Law and Policy Institute). Also, the Colorado Civil Rights Commission expressly defines gender identity and sexual orientation as protected from discrimination and harassment (Transgender Law and Policy Institute). According to the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU), who work to defend individual liberties, there are many state and local laws that prohibit discrimination against transgender individuals ("Transgender People and the Law"):

California, Colorado, Connecticut, Delaware, Hawaii, Illinois, Iowa, Maine, Maryland, Massachusetts, Minnesota, Nevada, New Jersey, New Mexico, Oregon, Rhode Island, Vermont, Washington, and the District of Columbia all have such laws. Their protections vary. For example, Nevada's law bans discrimination in employment, housing, and public accommodations like restaurants, hospitals, and retail stores; Maine's law covers those categories plus access to credit and education.

At least 200 cities and counties have banned gender identity discrimination, including Atlanta, Austin, Boise, Buffalo, Cincinnati, Dallas, El Paso, Indianapolis, Kansas City, Louisville, Milwaukee, New Orleans, New York City, Philadelphia, Phoenix, Pittsburgh, and San Antonio, as well as many smaller towns.

Legal protections are being passed to protect transgender individuals in the United States to varying degrees, even though it is clear they still suffer from transphobia and harassment. Clear strides have been made for the overall legislation towards the equality of the LGBT community, however the transgender community still faces more discrimination and violence than lesbian, gay, or bisexual communities.

<center>Transgender Media Representation</center>

An early study of minorities on television conducted by communication's scholar Cedric C. Clark found that minorities are often subjected to predictable stages of treatment in media depictions, particularly on television: non-recognition, ridicule, regulation, and finally respect (1969). Negative portrayals in the media in the mid-2000s provide indications that the transgender community moved out of the obscurity of the non-recognition stage and into the ridicule stage in the media around that time (GLAAD, 2008). The explosion of more recent positive media inclusion provides further indication that a transition past ridicule and toward

regulation may be occurring (GLAAD, 2015). Not only has there been an influx of transgender characters on television in the last few years, the topic has also been a more prevalent media topic in recent years.

New methods of media consumption have had a significant impact on the prevalence of transgender inclusion in the media as well, changing how we watch and produce television (Giuffre, 2014). Streaming services like Netflix, Hulu, and Amazon Prime produce shows directly, outside of historical syndication channels. These shows are only hosted online and are not shown on any major television network. Some of these deal with transgender issues that are unlikely to be seen on regular network television because of the overarching societal prejudices and advertisers' unwillingness to support such controversial content. Netflix and online streaming services have, "found a market where commercial broadcasters had previously dared not tread" (Giuffre, 2014).

Transparent is a 2014-released direct streaming show on Amazon Prime where transgender issues are discussed (Whitney, 2014). In *Transparent*, an adult MtF parent reveals herself to be transgender to her three adult children. *Transparent* has been very popular and won five Primetime Emmy awards in 2015, including Outstanding Lead Actor in a comedy series (Steele, 2015). Jeffrey Tambor, a cisgender male actor playing the MtF transgender parent, addressed the transgender community directly in his acceptance speech: "I'd like to dedicate my performance and this award to the transgender community… Thank you for your story. Thank you for your inspiration. Thank you for letting us be part of the change" (Carlson, 2015). *Orange is the New Black* is another direct streaming show on Netflix, entering its third season in 2015. Based in a women's prison, *Orange is the New Black* includes lesbian and transgendered women who have proven to be popular characters. *Orange Is the New Black* generated more viewers and

hours viewed in its first week than any other Netflix original series (Kafka, 2013). It has received multiple award nominations, winning three Primetime Emmy Awards out of its twelve nominations in 2014 and one Primetime Emmy Award out of its four nominations in 2015 (Hernandez, 2014; Schaefer, 2015).

Laverne Cox, a lead actress on *Orange Is the New Black,* identifies as MtF transgender. She was featured on the front cover of the July 7, 2014 issue of *Time Magazine* (Steinmetz), and is now known nationwide. Transgender issues are described in the *Time* article as the "next civil rights movement," and nine full pages are given to individual transgender stories. Sacks (2014) notes that things are definitely changing in our society: "times have changed - in no small part because Cox has emerged as a public face for a segment of the population in need of role models." The contemporary media landscape provides an opportunity to examine how the transgender community feels about Laverne being their representative to the world.

Recent media exposure has sparked a strong societal interest in learning about transgender youth. In October 2014, Katie Couric interviewed 14-year-old MtF author Jazz Jennings. In this interview, Jennings was presented as "the New Face of Transgender Youth" (Prowse-Gany, 2014). Jennings was voted one of the "25 Most Influential Teens of 2014" by *Time Magazine* (Prowse-Gany, 2014). She stars in a TLC reality show named *I Am Jazz* which premiered in June 2015, and TLC General Manager Nancy Daniels has stated that:

> Jazz's story is universal, yet unique, and we're proud to partner with her family to share it
> with TLC's audience. Jazz may be known as an author and activist, but she's first and
> foremost a teenage girl with a big, brave heart, living a remarkable life. (Grinberg, 2015)

Jennings is also the latest face of Clean & Clear's "See the Real Me" digital campaign talking about growing up transgender (Grinberg, 2015). Figures like Jazz Jennings have opened a

dialogue about the interest in young children knowing they are transgender, which has been widely discussed recently in the media

Caitlyn Jenner, formerly known as Bruce Jenner, came out as transgender very publically on the cover of *Vanity Fair* magazine in June 2015. She was previously very famous for winning Olympic medals in the 1970s for track and field and then later as being on the reality show *Keeping Up With the Kardashians*. In fact, "few recent stories have gripped the public imagination as much as Bruce Jenner's journey from Olympic icon to transgender woman (Bissinger, 2015)." Jenner's very public transition has caused much media attention and recognition, including her staring in her own reality television show called *I Am Cait*. Jenner was awarded the Arthur Ashe Courage Award in June 2015, which *ESPN* describes as honoring people "whose contributions transcend sports through courageous action" and that they "are proud to honor Caitlyn Jenner embracing her identity and doing so in a public way to help move forward a constructive dialogue about progress and acceptance (Butler, 2015)." She was also honored with an award at the *Glamour Magazine's* Women of the Year Awards in November 2015 (Bernstein, 2015).

The fight for LGBT rights is a highly contested ideological battle that is currently a very visible social movement in American society, as evidenced by the recent legislation changes and media coverage. The increased media representation indicates that the national audience is very interested in LGBT issues and equality–whether for or against it. Transphobia and homophobia are issues that the LGBT community face regularly. This ideological struggle is not only focused on gay, lesbian, and bisexual rights; the increase in transgender characters in the media, and Laverne Cox's cover story in *Time Magazine*. the interest in Caitlyn Jenner's transition, as well

as Jazz Jennings' rise to fame, show that some in society want to learn more about the transgender community.

This study fills an urgent need in learning more about transgender media representation. In light of an increased public interest in the transgender community through media, this timely study intends to fill a research gap on what this increased media exposure is doing for and to the transgender community. The study analyzes in-depth interviews with 15 transgender women focusing on their feelings of how the transgender community is represented in the media. The next chapter outlines the literature review and theoretical framework used as the basis of the research with chapter three outlining the methodology and qualitative analysis used by the researcher to understand the interview responses. Chapter four gives an in-depth analysis into the reactions of the interviewees to the transgender community media representation and the final chapter offers suggestions for further research.

Chapter 2

Literature Review and Theoretical Framework

Understanding how transgender individuals interact and relate to the media forms the focus of this thesis. This chapter will first discuss the theoretical framework of cultural and communication theories used to inform this research. It will then summarize the lack of historical media representation on the LGBT community and discuss how media researchers have studied the community's more recent media inclusion. Finally, it will discuss how media can impact self-esteem and the importance of role models in the media, especially to the LGBT community.

Theoretical Framework

Cultural studies and communication theories form the theoretical framework that guided this study. Cultural studies theories explain media influence from a cultural rather than individual perspective and offer an explanation for the power of media in a society. Cultivation theory suggests media effects with regard to television and offer an explanation for how media might influence those in the transgender community. Social cognitive theory offers additional means for understanding media's influence on individuals. Gender performance, transgender theory, and the relatively new trans-identity theory, provide a means for articulating how transgender identity is understood. These theories and how they inform this research are explicated below.

Cultural Studies Theories

Cultural studies theories look to explain media's influence on our society from an overarching cultural perspective where the media is a powerful influence in our cultural and social life, generally controlled in large part by those who are dominant in society. Therefore, marginalized groups who do not have this power are even further underrepresented and their marginalization is reinforced via the media. Hall (1982) links this concept of ideology to social

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practices, because he strongly believes that things and events do not contain meaning independently of language. Beyond that, ideologies are not single ideas but are connected with one idea setting off a ''chain of connotative associations'' (Hall, 1985, p. 104).

Looking at Gramsci's (1971) concept of hegemony, ideology can be understood. Hegemony explains the prominent values, attitudes, beliefs and morality that permeates society resulting in ideological and cultural power exerted by a dominant group (Gramsci, 1971). Because its infiltration is perceived as the norm, it becomes a part of what is considered common sense and the natural order of things, leading to the culture and morality of the ruling class to dictate normative philosophy, culture and morality (Boggs, 1976). Gramsci theorizes that hegemony is a, "process, a constant struggle to define common sense understandings within a culture" (Loke, Harp, & Bachmann, 2010). In fact, "hegemony, or any form of articulation, is never final or total'' which means that redefining the norm is a possibility (Carpentier & Cammaerts, 2006, p. 966). The ideology that is typically seen in the media about a marginalized group like the LGBT community is one that has illustrated the dominant group's ideas. However, hegemony is a process and ideas can constantly be redefined and modified.

Communication Media Effects Theories

Media has been defined as a tool for delivering information and includes mediums such as books, computers, radio, and television (Lembo, 2000). The internet, including social media sites, has been included in more recent definitions that move beyond mass media. Gerbner and Gross' cultivation theory examines the effects of television on viewers (Gerbner, 1976). Gerbner, Gross, Morgan, and Signorielli (1986) found that television can bring about a shared way of viewing the world by cultivating "common perspectives" (p. 31) because "television is the source of the most broadly shared images and messages in history" (p. 17). Continuing their

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discussion on cultivation ideas, Gerbner and his colleagues (1986) discussed the mainstreaming effect of television:

> Mainstreaming means that television viewing may absorb or override differences in perspectives and behavior that stem from other social, cultural, and demographic influences. It represents a homogenization of divergent views and a convergence of disparate viewers. Mainstreaming makes television the true 20th-century' melting pot of the American people. (31)

The primary proposition of cultivation theory states that the more time people spend in the television world, the more likely they are to believe social reality portrayed on television (Cohen & Weimann, 2000).

According to social cognitive theory, human behavior is caused by personal, behavioral, and also environmental influences where people learn by observing others (Bandura, 1986). Bringing the psychological theory to mass communication, Bandura adds that the theory can analyze how communication influences human thought, affect, and action by using it to study television effects (Bandura, 2001):

> Most psychological theories were cast long before the advent of enormous advances in the technology of communication. As a result, they give insufficient attention to the increasingly powerful role that the symbolic environment plays in present-day human lives. The video system has become the dominant vehicle for disseminating symbolic environments both within and across societies. Whereas previously, modeling influences were largely confined to the behavior patterns exhibited in one's immediate environment, television has vastly expanded the range of models to which members of society are exposed day in and day out. By drawing on these modeled patterns of thought and

behavior, observers can transcend the bounds of their immediate environment. New ideas

and social practices are now being rapidly diffused by symbolic modeling within a

society and from one society to another. Whether it be thought patterns, values, attitudes,

or styles of behavior, life increasingly models the media. (22)

One important way in which television influences viewers is by providing vicarious experiences

on which to model beliefs, attitudes, and behavior when real-life experiences are more limited

(Bandura, 2001; Pearl, Bouthilet, & Lazar, 1982). Television can help viewers learn about their

world and have experiences they would not otherwise encounter.

<div align="center">Gender Performativity, Transgender, and Trans-Identity Theory</div>

Judith Butler's (1990) work on gender performativity uses drag performances as an

example to offer an understanding of gender binaries in the emphasis on gender performance

(Butler, 1990). In drag shows, Butler (1990) points out that there are three contingent dimensions

of "anatomical sex, gender identity, and gender performance. If the anatomy of the performer is

already distinct from the gender of the performer, and both of those are distinct from the gender

of the performance, then the performance suggests a dissonance not only between sex and

performance, but sex and gender, and gender and performance (p. 175)." Therefore, Butler's idea

of gender performativity states that gender is a socially constructed phenomenon.

The idea of gender as a socially learned construct is used in this study. This study also

looks to transgender theory and trans-identity theory to move past the essentialism that can be

found in the structured gender binary of Feminist and Queer Theory and to provide a theoretical

structure and basis for this study.

Transgender theory, "encompasses the unique experiences" of transgender individuals,

whereas, "previous essentialist approaches viewed social identities as fixed within the person"

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(Nagoshi & Brzuzy, 2010, p. 431). Bernice Hausman (2001) notes that, "Since 1995, scholarship on transsexualism & transgenderism has become increasingly "queer" & more apt to encompass advocacy" (p. 465). The theory therefore moves beyond the structured binary of the male/female gender model. Transgender theory suggests "the lived experiences of individuals, including their negotiations of multiple intersectional identities, may empower them without confining them to any particular identity category" (Nagoshi & Brzuzy, 2010, p. 439).

Trans-identity theory, proposed by Nagoshi, Nagoshi and Brzuzy (2013) moves further beyond transgender theory to understand the true identities of transgender individuals. Nagoshi, Nagoshi and Brzuzy's 2013 book *Gender and Sexual Identity* discusses trans-identity theory, providing further refinement of Shotwell and Sangrey's (2009) model of identity in which a person's identity is an interaction between three sources. In trans-identity theory, the first source of identity is the embodied aspect of the self, "recognizing that embodied experiences are also partially understood through socially constructed processes" (Nagoshi, Nagoshi, & Brzuzy, p. 87). The second source of identity is the self-constructed aspect of identity that derives meaning from the "narrative of lived experiences." The third source is the autonomous self which "exists only in relationship to and interactions with these embodied, self-constructed, and socially constructed aspects of identity" (Nagoshi, et. al., 2013, p. 87). Trans-identity theory therefore, "emphasizes other sources of identity–embodiment, self-construction, and the narrative of lived experiences—that not only explain the diversity and fluidity of social identities, but can also act as sources of personal empowerment to recognize and resist oppression" (Nagoshi, et. al., 2013, p. 3). It is made clear that trans-identity theory, "is consistent with Johnson's (2012) idea that transgender identity is an "embodied subjectivity" that should be looked at as an ongoing process of becoming male or female." (Nagoshi, et. al., 2013, p. 87)

The theoretical approaches of transgender theory and trans-identity theory move beyond the male/female gendered binary and focus on individual life experience and identities. Because of this individualized, empowering approach, reactions and interpretations can be studied from specific individuals in the transgender community about their community's media representation and the effects it has on their identities. These theories lend themselves to gathering personal narratives and conducting in depth interviews as a vehicle for data collection. This study looks to these theories to provide a context in which transgender identity can be understood as a continual process, one that does not essentialize gender as only male or female, and is the standpoint from which the author approached this research.

LGBT Media Representation

Major news stories in the LGBT community like the Stonewall rebellion in 1969 and the mass murder at New York's Ramrod bar in 1980 received little attention in the mainstream news media at the time and many gay journalists stayed closeted so as not to jeopardize their careers (Atwood, 1996). As discussed in Chapter 1, Cedric C. Clark's (1969) early study of minorities in media proposed that they moved through stages in the media of non-recognition, ridicule, regulation, and then respect. This can be applied to the LGBT community, because LGBT characters in the television media have historically been extremely limited and almost nonexistent (Gross, 1994, 2001; Hart, 2000). Once recognized, they were shown as immoral, ill, pathetic, and dangerous (Pearce, 1973). In the early days of film, gay characters were shown only as comic devices or deviants (Fejes & Petrich, 1993):

> In the silent era and early years of talkies…homoerotic images and behavior were used as comic devices…or to depict deviance, perversion, and decadence. With the strengthening of the Production Code in 1934 and the injection of Catholic-based morality into

Hollywood movie content, however, portrayals of explicit homosexual or homoerotic

material…were highly censored, although highly sanitized comic episodes of cross

dressing (for example, Cary Grant in *Bringing Up Baby*, 1938)…were allowed. (397)

Larry Gross (1994) expands on the idea that once recognized in the media gays were ridiculed,

using television as an example:

As with many other minorities, gay people have almost always seen themselves reflected

in the media in one of two roles: as victim (of ridicule or violence, or both) or as villain.

AIDS stories have featured both of these stereotypes… Programs that are less family-

centered…show us the AIDS carrier as villain, threatening the health of innocent victims.

(146-147)

In 2001, Gross noted a historic turning point in the representation of lesbian and gay television

characters:

Lesbian and gay men are usually ignored altogether; but when they do appear, it is in

roles that support the "natural" order and they are thus narrowly drawn. The stereotypic

images are always present, if only implicitly… Prior to Ellen Morgan's much publicized

coming out (along with her real-life counterpart, Ellen DeGeneres) in 1997, and the

following year's Will Truman of NBC's *Will & Grace*, no major network television

program had a lesbian of gay lead character. Gay roles are no longer scorned as the kiss

of death for movie stars. (p. 14)

More recently many media studies have investigated these newly included gay and

lesbian characters and the LGBT community's increased representation and respect on television

(Dow, 2001; Tropiano, 2002; Harrington 2003; Mitchell, 2005; Becker, 2006). Becker's 2006

book *Gay TV and Straight America* addressed the fact that, after decades of silence, 1990s

television in the United States saw an increase in programming that included gay and lesbian characters and themes. Becker's 2006 article links the success of this gay-themed programming in the 1990s to the emerging class of socially liberal professionals in the United States. Television programs representing the LGBT community have definitely increased dramatically in the last two decades (Ragusa, 2005) and the portrayal of the LGBT community has changed from overwhelmingly negative to more positive in the media (Raley & Lucas, 2006). Raley and Lucas (2006) performed a content analysis of prime-time network television showing gay, lesbian, and bisexual characters, which showed "the findings of the study support the premise that gay males and lesbians have passed Clark's stage of non-representation …and some are moving into the stages of regulation and respect" (p. 19).

Because the acronym LGBT includes gays, lesbians, bisexuals, and transgender individuals it is important to know how they have been historically portrayed in the media. The transgender community's path towards media acceptance echoes the gay and lesbian community's history of erasure in media, and long period of gradual progress towards acceptance. Few published studies exist exclusively on the representation of the transgender community in the media. One likely reason that studies are lacking in this area is because this community's marginalization makes it difficult to study. The lack of published academic media studies indicates that a research gap exists in this area. The scant media research completed shows that male to female (MtF) transgender women have been depicted in advertising media negatively, often as deceptive and dangerous sexual predators attempting to trick innocent straight men into sex with them (Tsai, 2010). At the time of this writing, no other relevant transgender academic research regarding media representation was widely available.

Self-Esteem, Role Models and Media Effects on the LGBT Community

Many marginalized groups suffer negative effects of societal stigmatization, including stereotypes, prejudice, and discrimination. Research studies have provided evidence that this form of societal stigmatization reduces self-esteem in individuals, where self-esteem is understood as the evaluation and perceptions of the self (Rosenberg, Schooler, Schoenbach, & Rosenberg, 1995). Research has also shown that having an association with someone in the media can build the self-esteem of stigmatized groups. Ward's (2004) study found that television impacted black youth's self-esteem positively when they identified with black characters on television. Findings such as this one suggest that the self-esteem from marginalized groups could be linked to identification with similar characters found in the media (Koch, 2013). Koch's study researched the self-esteem of gay and lesbian young adults based upon their media exposure. Her overall findings "show that viewers identify more with television characters who are from their own gender and sexual orientation" (Koch, p. 2). Not only does seeing similar characters lead to self-esteem within the gay and lesbian community, it also leads to understanding from allies in the straight community, defined as those who support the LGBT community but who are not within it. Koch's study demonstrates:

> The need for a greater presence of gay and lesbian characters on television so that there are characters with whom gay and lesbian people can identify. This study … [shows] that gay characters on television provide a vehicle for straight viewers to see other sexual orientations and reduces their connection to the straight majority. This distance from the straight community could indicate a greater acceptance and understanding of the gay and lesbian community for straight participants who identify with gay characters. (p. 22)

Television viewing provided positive self-esteem to gay and lesbian viewers and understanding of their lifestyles to the straight community, both through relatable gay and lesbian characters. Further study is needed to determine whether these results can be extended to include the transgender community. Extrapolating from the results observed with the gay and lesbian community, theoretically, transgender representation in the media can raise transgender youth's self-esteem and bring understanding from those outside the transgender community.

Belonging to a stigmatized minority community, LGBT youth have a different experience than other minorities because they are usually not born into a family where any family members also identify with their minority status (Gross, 2001). In fact, because LGBT youth usually do not have familial role models at home who also identify as LGBT, they may look to the media and rely on it more heavily than other marginalized groups (Raley & Lucas, 2006). Both Bringaze and White (2001) and Nauta et al. (2001) established that role models, including media role models, may be important resources for LGBT individuals. With this observation in mind, this research on transgender individual's interactions and reactions to media seeks to understand how and to what degree media serve as a resource for the transgender community.

Unfortunately, there has so far been "little research specifically focusing on the influence of media figures on GLB [gay, lesbian, and bisexual] individuals' identity" (Gomillion & Giuliano, 2011, p. 333). Gomillion and Giuliano's 2011 research study looked to Gerbner and Gross' media effects and cultivation theory and used Gross' further research on how LGBT role models in the television media have historically been very limited (Gross, 1994, 2001; Hart, 2000). They conducted individual interviews within the LGBT community and discovered:

> A prominent theme that emerged from respondents' interviews was the
> importance of media role models to their identities… which included being an

inspiration or fostering a sense of pride, being a source of comfort, and making

respondents feel more positively about their GLB identities. (p. 342-343)

For example, one of their interview respondents named Megan found that the positive lesbian

role models in the media helped with viewing her own identity in a positive light. Because

Megan experiences validation from seeing lesbians on television, she:

…didn't feel like I was weird or abnormal. I felt like I had enough positive, I

guess, role models in the media that I didn't, you know, I didn't feel like it wasn't

something I could express or that it was a negative thing. (p. 346)

The media had helped Megan identify herself as being normal and therefore helped her express a

positive and health self-identity.

Participants in the 2011 Gomillion and Giuliano study saw acceptance of gays and

lesbians in the media, which helped them feel like their own reception in the outside world

would be more tolerant than hostile. The presence of openly accepted gay characters on

television made participants view their gay identities as more socially acceptable. For example,

Ted's experience is recounted below after he began watching *Will and Grace*, a sitcom with

openly gay characters:

I had never really been around gay people then, and so seeing like straight people

all over thinking that show was funny was really helpful in terms of like that they

weren't freaked out by it. So I was like, oh well, if they can deal with a sitcom

where people are unapologetically gay, then that's a good sign and that calms me

a little. (p. 346)

Ted realized that others might accept his gay identity in real life because of the popularity of a

television show with openly gay characters.

Gomillion and Giuliano's study also explored the negative impact of limited and stereotypical representation in the media:

> In contrast to these positive effects, participants also discussed the negative impact of the limited and stereotypical representation of GLB individuals in the media, which they reported made them feel excluded from society and limited their identity expression. (p. 343)

Some participants discussed the fact that not seeing themselves represented on television while growing up made them feel that they were excluded from traditional families and society. For example, interview participant Rick remembered seeing depictions on television of families. He was struck by the fact that he was "not included in that", leading him to have negative emotions about his self-concept as a result (Gomillion & Giuliano, 2011, p. 347).

Both the positive and negative findings of this study suggest that increasing the availability and diversity of role models in the media may "positively influence GLB identity" (Gomillion & Giuliano, 2011, p. 330). Therefore, it seems to follow that media role models would be important for the entire LGBT community, including transgender people. Available research has investigated gay, lesbian, and bisexual media portrayal without including transgender portrayals. While Gomillion and Giuliano's study offers insight into the reaction of the gay, lesbian, and bisexual (GLB) community's media portrayal, the transgender community was not addressed or interviewed. This project, focusing on interviews with individuals in the transgender community, serves to fill this gap in the research.

Together these previous studies of ways in which the LGBT community is depicted in media help to form a context for this research. Understanding the historical and recent progression of images of this marginalized community provides a critical backdrop from which

to approach this research on transgender individuals. Informed by the theoretical framework outlined above and previously published literature about the relationships and interactions of the LGBT community and media content, the following overarching research question guided this study:

RQ: How do female transgender individuals understand and interpret the images of transgender media representation within the context of their real life identities and experiences?

Chapter 3

Methodology

Following IRB approval of a recruitment email (see Appendix A for text), a sample of

transgender women participants responded and volunteered to be interviewed. In a short

demographic questionnaire to prescreen participants, all interviewees were verified to be over

eighteen years of age and self-identified as fitting under the transgender umbrella. Fourteen

participants identified as male to female transgender (MtF), and one identified as gender queer.

Participants were informed of the nature of the research prior to each interview using an emailed

consent form. They were informed that interviewing was entirely voluntary, and chose to

participate in the study. All interviews were audio recorded to ensure accurate transcription.

Because of the marginalization of the transgender community, anonymity was paramount to

achieve open discussion in the interviews. To assure the anonymity of each participant,

recordings consisted exclusively of audio with no video and pseudonyms were used.

Interviews were selected as the best course of data collection due to their open-ended

nature. The interview format used yields more depth and detail of data than other comparable

research methods such as surveys or focus groups. Grant McCracken (1998) wrote *The Long*

Interview which provides a systematic guide to the theory and methods of the long qualitative

interview. McCracken describes the long interview as, "one of the most powerful methods in the

qualitative armory. For certain descriptive and analytic purposes, no instrument is more

revealing" (p. 9). Proper application of this methodology involves building trust and rapport with

interviewees in order to maximize both quantity and quality of data collected. Jorgenson states

that:

> Rapport is a valued aspect in research settings because it is assumed to further the
>
> investigatory purposes of the researcher. In interviews, which constitute a basic

tool of data collection in communication research, the establishment of rapport is

conceived as an aid in the elicitation of "candid" and full disclosures of

information from the research participants. (p. 148)

In order to build trust and rapport with participants, data collection relied exclusively on face to

face meetings in person or via video chat. In person interviews were preferred, followed by a

video chat options using Skype or Google Hangouts for participants unable to accommodate an

in person meeting. Each interview lasted between 45 minutes and 120 minutes. McNamara's

(2006) general guidelines to prepare for research interviews were used:

1. Choose a setting with little distraction.
2. Explain the purpose of the interview.
3. Address terms of confidentiality.
4. Explain the format of the interview. Explain the type of interview you are conducting and its nature. If you want them to ask questions, specify if they're to do so as they have them or wait until the end of the interview.
5. Indicate how long the interview usually takes.
6. Tell them how to get in touch with you later if they want to.
7. Ask them if they have any questions before starting
8. Don't count on your memory to recall their answers. Ask for permission to record the interview.

The in person interviews were all conducted in study rooms of public libraries, which

offered a private place with a minimum of noise or distraction. Online video chats were

performed wherever the interviewee felt comfortable. The informed consent form was reviewed

again together at the start of the interview before questions were asked, guaranteeing anonymity,

confidentiality, and reiterating that the interviews were voluntary. Exclusive use of standardized,

open ended questions allowed respondents to elaborate and choose how to answer the questions

(listed in Appendix B). This type of question allows for natural elaboration of the material. The

same general questions were asked of each interviewee to decrease effort and increase relevance

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in analysis and comparison. These qualitative questions were designed to be open-ended and serve as guidelines for the researcher to obtain roughly the same information from each interviewee. For example, respondents were asked to discuss how they felt about transgender representation in the media. Media was defined to the interviewees as including multiple mediums such as books, computers, radio, television and the internet, including social media sites. See interview questions in Appendix B, which were influenced by the interviews performed by Gomillion and Giuliano (2011).Participants were selected and interviewed until saturation had been reached, with fifteen individuals ultimately being interviewed.

Interviewees were primarily recruited through two personal contacts. One contact helped connect the researcher to a transgender support group. The researcher emailed the organizer of the support group who then emailed out a description of the research to those in the group, with contact information for the researcher if they were interested in participating. Through this group, seven individuals were interviewed: five in person and two through online video chats. The second contact helped connect the researcher to an LGBT email list in a large company. For this contact, the researcher emailed the employee who then emailed out a description of the research to those in the email list, with contact information for the researcher if they were interested in participating. Through this connection, six individuals were interviewed: one in person and five online video chats. Both of these contacts vetted the researcher as trustworthy, and so were able to help provide participants for this research. The researcher was also able to attend the local pride parade and recruited one woman directly, leading to two more in person interviews.

Another method used to recruit was snowball sampling, in which participants provide additional contacts for the interviews. A few women from the support group, the major company,

and the pride parade suggested the interviewer to other transgender friends who then also interviewed. Two women even brought a friend with them to interview together. Using snowball sampling vetted the researcher as trustworthy. Snowball sampling is often used when a researcher wants to study a rare population, as outlined in the *Encyclopedia of Survey Research Methods* ("Snowball Sampling"):

> The general objective is to identify members of the rare population. It involves identifying one or more members of a rare population and asking them to name other members of the same population. These additional persons are then contacted and asked to name additional persons in the rare population; and so forth. The process continues until an adequate sample size has been obtained or until no new names are elicited from the process. (823)

Furthermore, beyond reaching a rare population, snowball sampling is also used to connect with vulnerable populations, as Sadler (2010) outlines:

> Adaptations of snowball sampling can be used effectively in the recruitment of members of traditionally underserved or vulnerable populations. The adaptation of snowball sampling techniques, as described in this article, helped the authors to gain access to each of the more-vulnerable population groups of interest. The use of culturally sensitive recruitment strategies is both appropriate and effective in enlisting the involvement of members of vulnerable populations. Adaptations of snowball sampling strategies should be considered when recruiting participants for education programs or for research studies when the recruitment of a population-based sample is not essential. (p. 369)

Established in chapter one, the transgender population is rare and vulnerable, therefore,using a

sampling method that involved vetting and trust like snowball sampling was appropriate to find

interview participants.

The interviews were conducted in May and July of 2015. Eight were in person interviews

and seven were through online video chats. Eleven were one on one interviews. Two were

double interviews where a participant brought a friend to be interviewed with them. Interviewees

ranged from their early twenties to mid-sixties, with seven interviewees in their 20s, two in their

30s, one in her 40s, three in their 50s, and two in their 60s. Refer to Appendix C to see a

breakdown of interviewee ages, self-identification as MtF or gender queer, and interview types.

Transcription of the recorded interviews was performed by a professional transcription

service. The transcripts were checked for accuracy against the recordings, ensuring reliable

transmission of data from audio to textual format. Final transcripts were then analyzed. A

thematic analysis was performed throughout data collection and transcription correction,

listening to the 16 hours of audio recordings generated from interviews and reading the 138,448

words (approximately 372 pages) of transcriptions. Conducting the interviews and reviewing the

recordings, as well as reading the transcriptions let the information soak deeply. The analysis

revealed patterns and meaning within the data using grounded theory, which is a flexible

inductive research methodology used in qualitative research. Grounded theory investigates the

actualities in the real world and analyses the data with no preconceived ideas or hypotheses

(Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Belgrave (2014) defines grounded theory in *The SAGE Encyclopedia*

of Action Research:

> Grounded theory is a living, growing, adaptable methodology for generating theoretical
>
> understanding of social phenomena. Its approaches are sufficiently varied for use by

researchers from many orientations and fields…Fundamental strategies used by grounded

theorists consist of simultaneous data collection/construction and analysis, constant

comparative techniques, data coding, memo writing and theoretical sampling. (p. 389-

390)

Qualitative methodology using an inductive grounded theory approach and thematic analysis was

performed to thoroughly evaluate interview responses, deriving trends in the data into themes

found in the interviews.

Open coding was used during the thematic analysis, forming initial categories of information

from the data gathered by looking for repeated themes. Strauss and Corbin (1990) describe the

open coding of data which is the "process of breaking down, examining, comparing,

conceptualizing, and categorizing data" when engaging in a Grounded Theory analysis (p. 61).

While carefully reviewing the interview data collected, consistently repeated ideas and concepts

were extracted from the data in order to find themes. Looking to Braun and Clarke's (2006)

research to define a theme, a theme "captures something important about the data in relation to

the research question, and represents some level of patterned response or meaning within the

data set" (p. 82). The researcher extracted specific themes and subthemes from the interview data

using Braun and Clarke's (2006) six specific steps of thematic analysis:

1. Familiarizing yourself with your data: Transcribing data (if necessary), reading and re-

reading the data, noting down initial ideas.

2. Generating initial codes: Coding interesting features of the data in a systematic fashion

across the entire data set, collating data relevant to each code.

3. Searching for themes: Collating codes into potential themes, gathering all data relevant

to each potential theme.

4. Reviewing themes: Checking if the themes work in relation to the coded extracts

(Level 1) and the entire data set (Level 2), generating a thematic 'map' of the analysis.

5. Defining and naming themes: Ongoing analysis to refine the specifics of each theme,

and the overall story the analysis tells, generating clear definitions and names for each

theme.

6. Producing the report: The final opportunity for analysis. Selection of vivid, compelling

extract examples, final analysis of selected extracts, relating back of the analysis to

research question and literature, producing a scholarly report of the analysis. (p. 87)

Patterns were identified and the two broad themes of lack of diversity and learning gender were derived by reading and analyzing the transcriptions. Additional examination of the data in these themes lead to the discovery of many subthemes. Lack of diversity found in the mass media portrayal of transgender characters was the first broad theme identified. The primary subthemes found within it are the use of transgender characters as comic relief or as people to be feared, the desire for normalization of media representation, and the problems with the media's focus on the transition narrative. Other subthemes include the transgender communities' desire for more complex media representations, the belief that no one person can represent the whole community and the existence of a hierarchy of media representation of LGBT subgroups. The second broad theme focused on how media shapes transgender lives and identities and focused on learning gender. Subthemes identified from it include the performance of masculinity, unrealistic feminine beauty expectations, positive female role models found in the media, and a

distinct hope for the future. What follows in chapter four is a detailed breakdown of these broad

themes and the specific subthemes that were revealed within interviews.

Chapter 4

Analysis

The interviews shine a light on a broad research question: How do transgender women understand and interpret the images of transgender media representation with their real life identities and experiences? After analyzing transcripts from interviews conducted with fifteen transgender women, two distinct broad and pervasive themes emerged: lack of diversity and learning gender. Throughout the conversations ideas about diversity were present in terms of the media representation of the transgender community including the lack of diversity within media portrayals and the inherent problematic nature of that lack of diversity. The recent broadening of media images allowing for more transgender diversity was appreciated. However, there was also the problematic nature of more recent portrayals that still, while more diverse, run the risk of stereotyping and narrowing the definition of being transgender. The media focuses too heavily on the transition story and only on the transgender female, several respondents noted. A second broad theme encountered throughout the interviews related to ways in which these individuals relied and still rely on media to learn about their true identities of being transgender women. This includes learning gender normative behaviors from the media. For example, while they presented as young men they looked to the media to understand how to perform masculinity. As grown women, they still often rely on media for cues on how to be a woman, or at times are bombarded by gendered expectations from media. What follows is a detailed analysis of these two broad themes, the subthemes found within each of them, and the various ways in which they occurred in the conversations and addressed this study's overarching research question.

Lack of Diversity of the Mass Media Portrayal of Transgender Characters

Within the mass media portrayals, many interviewees discussed a lack of current diversity. Even though more recent representation of the transgender community in the media

was welcomed, diversity is still lacking. This theme of lack of diversity in the media was found woven throughout discussions. Subthemes that came out of this theme include that the media uses transgender women as fear tactics or as comic relief. These women desired normalization in the media portrayals and did not want to appear a fringe group of society. Many discussed the hyper focus of the media on the area of transition being the most prevalent narrative told. More complexity of media representation was clearly desired. Also apparent was the feeling that there is no one face or representative of the transgender community in the media. Interviewees perceived a hierarchy of LGT subgroups in the media, with transgender representation taking a subordinate role to lesbian or gay representation. These subthemes are discussed below in detail.

Comic Relief and the Cultivation of Fear

When discussing how transgender individuals are portrayed in the mass media, the women interviewed said that media portrayals of the transgender community are neither entirely negative nor positive. There has also been a big shift in recent years, showing more portrayals and making the community more visible, several noted. One problematic aspect of mass media portrayals is casting the transgender character as a joke or the horror story. Transgender characters were often used as the butt of jokes or portrayed very negatively and as people to be feared. Some portrayals characterize transgender women as a trap for straight men, other participants pointed out. Participants cited examples of negative portrayal from popular movies such as *Silence of the Lambs*, *Ted*, and *Ted 2*. Vanessa says that in *Ted* and *Ted 2*, "we have transgenders being used as a punchline." Further examples were given from popular television shows such as *NCIS*, *Law and Order*, and *Family Guy*. Leah elaborated on transgender being used as a negative plot device in many of these shows:

NCIS did one show where they were doing a background search on somebody on a cold

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case. The agent who started researching it died, got killed, because of something he

swallowed. The person that killed him gutted him and pulled it out of his internals to get

back that data. They followed up on the death of the agent to find out that this was going

back to investigating a person who had stolen a whole bunch of money, and was a

military officer. Yet when they went looking for this officer, they couldn't find him, but

they found her. She was two months short of having her surgery date ready to go... The

gal that does the lab testing, Abby, was pulling DNA off of things that were being

brought back from the scene, and she found the guy who stole the money's DNA all over

everything that had come back from the murder scene of this agent. All the sudden,

things clicked. The guy's DNA is her DNA. Then, boom. She killed, because she didn't

want to go to prison. They did that same thing on *Law & Order*. They had a gal who was

literally totally female and on the way to transition for surgery. I guess she was at a party,

and somebody found out about her, had sex with her or tried to. When they found out,

they were going to tell, and so she killed...So they don't show the portrayal of a positive

thing.

Leah's point: these shows rarely show transgender characters, and when they do it's been as

murderers. Transgender women are portrayed as if they should be feared and as if they are not

really women. They are portrayed as being abhorrent and as evoking a visceral sickening

reaction in men. Christal stated that there are issues in modern media portrayals where:

Not only the idea that trans women aren't women, but that it's disgusting. If you were to

sleep with even a post-op trans woman, it's still disgusting...The whole idea of being a

trap...That's a slur often used. Yeah. There was one episode of *Family Guy* where Brian

... Quagmire's dad comes out as trans, and Brian, the dog, ends up sleeping with

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Quagmire's dad. As soon as Brian finds out that he slept with a trans woman, you have

this whole bit of excessive vomiting scene.

Beyond the idea that these are problematic portrayals of trans women, some of the women

interviewed had problems accepting their true identities because of these negative media

portrayals. In the *Silence of the Lambs* the serial killer, Buffalo Bill, is portrayed as a psychotic

transvestite who wants to kill women for their skins. Even though the interviewees understood

Buffalo Bill was not transgender, this representation was the closest they saw to a transgender

character while growing up. Erica had problems accepting herself because her, "first exposure to

somebody that was trans, and not actually trans, of course, but that's the whole point of the

movie in *Silence of the Lambs*...That scared me because I didn't want to be associated with the

kind of person who tends to portray trans women as what they did." Understandably Erica did

not want to be associated with such a horrifically negative portrayal.

Tracy thinks that these negative portrayals in the mainstream media have cultivated fear

surrounding the transgender community in the real world:

> There is even an assumption of deception that goes back to why are people afraid of us.
>
> They think it's a ruse but I'm not trying to confuse or trick anybody...I think the
>
> mainstream media looks at us with a lot of fear, a lot of misunderstanding and a lot of
>
> assumptions about our character and who we are and what we do that is very inaccurate
>
> and I think the general consensus or feeling that I get based on how others who don't
>
> know trans people necessarily specifically or personally is that we're a danger.

Alleviation of this fearmongering could be accomplished in the media if those producing content

learned more about actual transgender experiences and issues, several respondents noted. Lauren

wants those producing and creating mass media to learn more about real transgender women so

content can accurately portray their experiences. Lauren says that because, "people don't like what they don't know, and people fear the unknown and because everyone's had the icky heebie-jeebies about us for so long, no one's wanted to study us or really learn anything about us or talk to us or anything like that."

Desire for Normalization

In order to combat these societal ideas of fear and danger, interviewees wanted the media to portray them as the real people they are. The strong desire for the media to portray transgender women as regular, normal people was prevalent in over half of the conversations. Vanessa says:

> I think what would make media better would be an understanding that we are people...
> It's so difficult for the media to get it into their heads that you need to give us the
> opportunity to be us. Good, bad, indifferent, don't paint us to be criminals. Don't paint us
> to be fringe individuals. There are so many more of us out there than they realize. Hey,
> treat us correctly. Treat us right... being more open to showing us as trans individuals as
> real people. We're not going to be the boy or girl next door, but we can be. We can be the
> person sitting next to you on the bus. We can be your best friend out of high school. It's
> that realization that we can be all of these people and that's how we need to be
> represented... The media needs to, like I said, they need to understand that we're people.
> If they wouldn't portray the cisgendered woman in a particular situation, it's not okay to
> portray a transgender woman in that situation.

For too long, transgender women have been portrayed in the media as an odd fringe group in society, which can be broken out of in the future. Lynne said, "Hopefully, having more visible trans people will help reinforce that trans people are normal people and that it is possible for us to be successful rather than having us be this really niche, fringe thing that kind of exists on the

Internet." Lauren wants the media to show, "day-to-day stuff. Most of my trans friends, they spend their days on Facebook or working." Tracy agrees that transgender women should be portrayed in the media as being normal women, "I would like to see more of that, just more showing us as who we really are. Which is just like anyone else. Like everybody else. Our daily lives are pretty boring." Tracy continues and talks about how she is glad to represent a normalized portrayal of the transgender community to people she knows:

> I'm stealth and because I am who I am people do come talk to me and they do learn a lot from me and they really appreciate being able to talk to me and have that openness and so I get to change a lot of people's preconceptions and I get to really show that we're really normal and so I become a representation of a normalcy of trans life.

The simple idea that the media should portray these women as normal and that they should portray the everyday transgender life as conventional was highly desired by interviewees. Being transgender should be no more of a plot point than being any racial, religious, or cultural minority, the respondents said.

Problems with the Transition Narrative

Further, at least a third of interview respondents said that even in media portrayals that are not inherently negative, they need to move past focusing only on the transition story of transgender characters. Only focusing on the transition story of moving from male to female gives a very narrow presentation and definition of transgenderism and risks stereotyping transgender characters. Lynne says that when movies focus on transgender characters that, "Most of the time, those movies are about transitioning… whereas most movies with LBG characters are not about coming out." Current gay and lesbian character representations aren't hyper focused on the coming out story, so transgender characters should be portrayed beyond their

transition narrative. Lynne continued to speak on the way the media could get the transgender story correct:

> One of the good ways to get it right, at this point, would be to not necessarily focus on transition narratives because it feels to me like being trans is not necessarily about transitioning. The incentives are to create drama, but I think it unduly biases people towards assuming that being transgender is primarily about transitioning. It would be nice if it were not a big deal.

Allison continues to explain the way the media hyper focuses on only the transition story and says:

> I do think that there is some resentment, over what people rightly see as the media, choosing incorrectly how and what stories to tell and how. One criticism that I see a lot I very much agree with is, there's often a tendency to over focus on transition, I think. Whenever you see a movie about transgender people, almost as a rule. We will always see a scene, where you have somebody putting on a wig and putting on make-up. It's sending the message that transgender is merely an act and we're fooling people. That we have to go through an effort. We're hiding who we really are, which is the gender that we're born with, to present this image that's tricking people. It's not even that they're overtly saying that. It's the subtlety of it. It's the subtlety of saying, "This is the important part."

Tracy agrees that the media has only a very specific story to tell about transgender characters which over focuses on transitioning:

> It's a little frustrating that especially with the focus on the media and types of stories that they're trying to tell which is a very specific trans narrative, they're trying to use the trans

story and transition as the model to explain what a trans person is to people. It's never, "oh here's a person and they're trans". It's "we're going to watch the whole process. We're going to be with them as they go through this thing" because I'm sure that's what most interesting to most people that don't know anything about it. It's also one of the briefest moments of a trans person's life. Then we just go on living...So all of the focus seems to be on that one particular aspect shows that where people are looking and the mainstream media is looking isn't where trans people are and isn't an accurate representation of who we are and of our lives. I realize that there is a place for it that there is a need to have the transition stories so the people can see kind of how that works, but it's all about that and it needs to move away from it. It needs to show more representation.

Lauren elaborated on the idea of breaking away from the transition narrative stating that even if the media is, "...trying very, very hard to be inclusive and be honest and realistic...Every trans person's transition I've known and every trans person I know is totally different...It'll be great to see more of the breaking away from the stereotypical story of boy grows up, plays with dolls, wants to be a girl, becomes girl, end of story." These stereotypical media portrayals show transgender women as all fitting into one narrative, and isn't reflective of the reality that they live, Lauren pointed out.

Being transgender isn't the most important facet of many transgender women's identities, so the hyper-focus of the media on just the transition narrative was frustrating to many. Emily stated that being young and transgender is "just not a big enough thing to need a support group. It's just a facet of your identity. It's not like an identity defining thing where you announce it and then everything is different about your entire life. It's more like this is a fact about you, right?" In fact, many younger interviewees made the point that since most of their life comes after

transition, they wish the media showed people where being LGBT wasn't their defining characteristic. Allison stated that:

> I would like to see people who are casually LGBT, by which I mean, it's not that they're coming out, or their transition is the story of them... The fact that they're LGBT is just one detail of the complex part, of who they are. The same way that straight people are not defined by their straightness. Same way that men are not defined by their maleness. I want to see this for women too. I want to see this for people of color... I don't want to see so much media, where you just have the token black, or token Hispanic, or token women... I want to see stories that look like what you actually see. What are the diversity of the world and as a country... Just have somebody who just is transgender. The same way they would be in real life.

Interviewees had a strong desire for the media to show the fact that they were normal, real people. Erica mentioned that while "fictionalized trans people are all well and good, but… it would do more for spreading awareness of trans issues to be normal if there were more real people in the media." By moving past the hyper focus of the transition narrative, and portraying real transgender women living their lives, the media can accomplish this.

Desire for More Complex Representations

More recently there has been both more variety and more positive or "normalized" portrayals of transgender individuals in the media. These specific positive mass media portrayals bring awareness that being transgender is a real thing. They help the transgender community by highlighting transgender characters in more everyday relatable situations. Vanessa noted that these representations bring the idea that transgender women exist to the forefront. She states, "It's that conversation that's more important than the actual content of the show. My point was

that the shows themselves are less important than the conversation." The awareness of their existence is critical. For example, the movies *Transamerica* and *Boy Meets Girl* and shows such as *Orange is the New Black, Transparent*, and *Sense8* were discussed as positive modern representations of transgender women. Angela says that these examples can be educational: "*Boy Meets Girl*...teaches about transphobic issues that she had to go through and how she dealt with it and the struggles, everything, all the ingredients right in that movie...it has a lot of teaching in it. It's a movie but it's also educational as well as personalized of what trans girls go through." Educating the cisgender public about transgender issues in a relatable way is essential for gaining wider acceptance and understanding for the community, which Angela strongly desires.

With more media representation can come more complex character presentations. The transgender community wants these complex and realistic characters. Allison was excited that, "we're finally at the point where you have transgender characters, who can play roles that are complex. Laverne Cox's role on *Orange is the New Black* is complex. She is sympathetic, but she made mistakes and she has character flaws. They are connected to, but they are not part of her being transgender." Moving beyond having a token transgender character who only explains simple transgender issues is ideal. Katie mentions that she was excited about having a transgender character in *Sense8* but that there are still,

> A lot of these moments that come up that are like dealing with the fact that she's trans and it still sort of feels like this very trans 101 like representation where it's like "oh we should like write in these very basic issues" that happen to these people. It's not like it's poorly written. It's just that sometimes it feels like it's uncreative characters, right? Where they're focusing on ... I don't know more about ... It's hard to describe I guess. We're just getting into starting to have the characters. Characters that are getting somewhat decent

representation ... I think we're just starting to barely get going.

More realistic portrayals beyond Trans 101 education would be nice in the media. Also, the idea

that the transgender story is just now starting to be told stood out. Vanessa also noted that

recently, "even though we've made all of these strides, *Orange Is the New Black* or *Transparent*

or *Boy Meets Girl*, all of these positives, we still have way too many negative representations of

transgender individuals." So although participants acknowledged that there have recently been

more positive representations of transgender characters, the transgender community desires more

realistic and complex representation in media.

No One Person Can Represent the Whole Community

Laverne Cox, an actress from *Orange is the New Black,* is spoken of in many media

sources as being the face of the transgender community. She is internationally known by both the

transgender community and wider public. The interviewees had overwhelmingly positive things

to say about Cox's visibility for transgender women, but warned that no one can be the one face

of their community. Jessica related that Cox is "very human and somebody that anybody could

identify with" which "helps make transgender people seem less like freaks" to the wider public.

Others elaborate the idea that Cox is very visible and has shown herself to be very

knowledgeable of transgender issues in the media. Tracy expresses her thoughts on Cox:

> I think it's amazing. I think she's incredible. I think what's really cool about her being the
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> face of the trans community and I wouldn't say that she is, and I don't think she says that
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> she is, but what's cool about it is that she's at a particular intersection of society that faces
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> a lot of discrimination and she brings up some interesting points I think about that, that I
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> think it'd be harder to start that conversation if, say, it was me, just because I'm white.
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> Not to turn this into a racial thing, but there are things that affect our community, things

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like violence and sexual harassment that it's actually hard to start that conversation but that conversation's kind of already happening in the racial communities and so when you have somebody who is the face or is upfront and is the most well know, and she happens to be a trans woman of color...That is part of the reason why I think it's so amazing that she is.

The other reason why I think it's amazing is just because she's incredible as a person. She really is. She has an incredible personality and she's gorgeous and she's talented and she's out there and she's taking what for most of us believe is unattainable for us. It might be attainable for cisgendered people, it might attainable even for gay people, but it is not attainable for trans people and she's out there proving that wrong... Most trans people are trying to keep their lives together. They're trying to raise kids. They're trying to find work, which is incredibly difficult. A lot of them are homeless because they get kicked out of their families. They don't have support and here's somebody that's kind of way above that. She's achieved national stardom. That's something I don't think a lot of people who are cisgender realize because even if you don't have idols, even if you don't idolize celebrities, you can still look to them and say, well why not me? We don't have that, but now we do because she's put in that hard work and she's put in that effort and she's attained something that we thought we'd never have. That represents a dream beyond a dream for any trans people and I think that's huge, especially right now for all the trans teens who are struggling with trying to stay in school and trying to keep their heads afloat, to know that not only can you be okay, but you could achieve something great.

The transgender community has only dreamt of having role models to look up to until recently. As they are portrayed more positively in the media, the newer generation have heroes they can relate to. Lauren speaks to the relatability and hero status of Laverne Cox:

> She's a really nice breath of fresh air. She just seems like a very down to earth, very normal trans person. Of the numerous, of the plethora of trans people I have met, she's just smack dab in the middle there. She's just like anyone else. It's really great to see someone who is so identifiable… like we really have now kind of a hero to look up to, like okay I could be in her place...She's really humble, too, which I really like about her and she's been really using her fame not to promote herself so much as trying to promote awareness of transgender issues and trans people, so she's just scores cool points with me for that.

Participants spoke of Cox with definite respect, and her representation of the community and promotion of the issues that transgender women face was truly appreciated.

For all the good Laverne Cox represents, however, many participants made the point that no one face can represent an entire community. In Gwen's view, the idea that Cox is the face of the community is "more society's thinking," rather than the belief of the actual transgender community. Emily echoed similar sentiments saying, "I don't think that there's a unitary trans experience" that one person could represent. Vanessa said that:

> She is a face… Everybody's experience is different... Is she the face? No. No more than anybody else could be the face. There is no one spokesman… being transgender, because gender is such a fluid thing, there's no way to say that this person is the embodiment of what it means to be transgender.

Many agreed that even though Cox is one of the most well-known representatives of the

transgender community, she shouldn't be the only one representing them. Katie points out that:

> I think it's hard to say that anyone is the face of a community, saying one person is, kind
> of points out how few prominent figures there are. This is kind of highlighting that people
> don't know that many trans people, or if they do they're not in roles that are well
> known… but it's like it's kind of frustrating that people think the stuff she's doing is the
> only stuff that's happening in the community... There shouldn't just be one, but if there
> are very few figures, then [the media's] going to latch onto them. If there's only a couple
> then they're going to gravitate towards the most well-known.

Allison doesn't think anyone in the transgender community feels that Laverne Cox is the one
true face of the community. She does feel that Cox has put a face to the community's movement
for equality:

> I think that she has helped to put a face on a movement, that for so long was told that it
> wasn't allowed to have faces. That it had to go into hiding. That you had to go and
> become stealth, if you had any hope of leading a non-stigmatized normal existence. I
> don't think she's the head of the movement. I don't think she's the spokesperson for it, but
> I think she has helped a lot, to help show other people of the humanity of transgender
> people.

It appears that the media and articles presenting Laverne Cox as the face of the transgender
community have it partially correct. She is a face bringing humanity and awareness to the
general public of a community that has long desired representation. However, more accurate and
thorough representation is desired. A major issue with society and the media presenting Laverne
Cox as the face of the community comes from the fact that people outside the community may
think that just one person is representative of the entire group. Emily points out:

I think that mainstream culture is really prone to being satisfied with having a token character from a particular group. People will tend to be like oh, there's a trans character in *Orange is the New Black*. Trans people are represented in media because that one character in *Orange is the New Black* encapsulates all trans people's stories everywhere. You tend to, if you're not a member of a group yourself, you tend to homogenize that group in your mind. They're other from you and you look at them and you're like, you know you homogenize them like I said. You tend to treat individual people as being sort of exemplars for the entire group, and I think that mainstream culture is currently busy patting mainstream media on the back for having the courage to represent trans people. Which is fantastic, I'm glad that they're doing it, while papering over the fact that representing one or two trans people doesn't mean that every trans woman is Laverne Cox, like it's not really the same.

This lack of diversity in representations can do damage and have repercussions on the group at large if the actresses or actors act in a way that is considered not favorable. Megan makes the point that she has to deal with the world that the media creates around her:

Okay, if people are saying she's a spokesman, I might want to look at what she had to say and see whether she's a complete idiot or not because a lot of spokespeople are. I have to deal with the world that these media people create around me. I may not know who she is in depth, but the people I work with probably do. If they're aware that I'm transgender and this person is speaking for all transgender people, they might get mistaken impressions about what was okay and what was not okay.

Those that are out as transgender in the media can have a direct effect on what society thinks about those that are transgender, and could change how they interact with transgender peers.

When Caitlyn Jenner came out, there was also an element of fear about her coming out story because it wasn't clear at first if Jenner was going to represent transgender women well to the wider public. Jenner was well known for her participation in the Olympics and roles in shows such as *Keeping up With the Kardashians*. Interviewees were afraid her coming out might become a spectacle, creating a backlash against the transgender community. Interviews were conducted in May and July of 2015, when Jenner did interviews and released her coming out story. As the news exploded in the media, interviewees talked about their trepidation that Jenner's coming out would hold the community back rather than helping it progress. Tracy says that when anyone famous comes out, "[the individual] becomes a representative of the community. If someone comes out and is an ass, then they ruin things for a lot of people." Gwen also spoke to this:

> When Caitlyn came out, a lot of girls were like: God, I hope she doesn't make us look bad. A lot of transgender girls felt that way because....Yeah. It was an all of a sudden thing that was just put in everybody's face. Now she's going to possibly be coming out with this reality show. Now everyone is sort of wondering, well, how is this reality show going to go? Because the thing is the media will see her, not us. Everyone is like, we just hope she's going to make a good impression for us because we feel like she's going to be out there representing us, not just herself but trans as a whole...Is she going to make us go backwards instead of forward? Because she's got the money. She can do anything she wants.

The community hoped that Caitlyn would represent them well. Younger interviewees discussed not knowing much about Caitlyn Jenner, yet feeling that her coming out story would be a bridge for older generations to understand what they're going through. Lauren explains:

My mom had been commenting about Bruce Jenner over the years, for years and years and always said, "He looks like woman. What do you think of that? God, he looks like a woman." Then I came out and a couple of years later [Caitlyn] Jenner came out and though it was then huge, as she pointed out to me that she was saying, your older relatives are going to be watching this and a lot of older people are going to watching this and so that was huge to have someone from that generation who was in that spotlight that came out. That was a major, major turning point. Yeah, that was huge.

Caitlyn Jenner's coming out story is an important turning point in the visibility of the transgender community, especially for the older generation.

Hierarchy of LGBT Subgroups

Many interviewees believed there was a hierarchy in the way the different subgroups of the LGBT are presented in the media, which directly relates to the subgroups' acceptance in the public eye and real world. For instance, gay white males were said to be represented more often and more positively, lesbians were represented fairly often in positive ways, but bisexual individuals were often erased and not present at all in mainstream media. Bisexual and transgender character representation were considered at the bottom of the hierarchy, they explained. Stephanie said, "I think society in general and media in particular are more comfortable with the LGB story and they're more accepting now of LGB portions of it." Tracy also spoke of this media hierarchy phenomenon following society:

I think part of why you might see some more positive representation of others is just due to those movements and how they've come about and the fact that gay men have been fighting probably longer than almost anyone else. Because they're men, they've gotten more attention and they have more money and they're more stable and so they've made it

further along. That means there's more education and there's more awareness. There's

more visibility and I think that has led to the lowering of a lot of that tension that anxiety

from people and so now it's more positive. I think that's why you see things. Obviously

gay men are represented a lot more than lesbian women. Bisexual people are not

represented at all and trans people are kind of getting there, but only one in particular

type of trans person is making it there. It's a really mixed bag. I would say that that is

kind of part of the natural evolution of why it seems that there is more positive affect on

everything. It's huge. It goes right to the heart of so many of our societal problems.

Sexism, patriarchy, all that stuff, and racism. That's kind of the crappy thing about being

sort of one of the last civil rights movement is that we span everything, which means we

get the hate.

Katie agreed that the way groups are presented in the mass media is directly related to their

acceptance by the general public and the amount of privilege members of the group experience:

I think the different subgroups within the LGBT community... the quality and diversity of

their portrayals coincides with their privilege in the real world, so gay men are the most

privileged group in the LGBT community, and they have lots of diverse representations

in the media, not as many as you might want necessarily, but the amount of TV shows,

movies, general media about gay men compared to say trans women is orders of

magnitude higher. There's way more of them right? I think if you go down the scale and

look at this hierarchy in terms of privilege of different groups within the community. I

think that would kind of fall in line with media quality or representation.

The trend of lesbian and gay acceptance in the media is clear now, but bisexual and transgender portrayals are still sorely lacking. Better representation in the media is needed to foster better societal understanding, allowing the whole LGBT spectrum to be seen.

Interviewees also used the LGBT representational media hierarchy to explain how the transgender community is portrayed in relation to other subgroups. The current representation of transgender female characters was associated with how gay male characters had only just started being represented in the 1990s mainstream media, but are now seen all the time. Katie stated:

> Even in like the 90s you had mainstream shows like *Will and Grace* or something, where gay men were getting inclusion, and maybe *Will and Grace* was a stereotypical representation of gay men ..., well you still have a many season popular show on network television, years and years and years of it. Whereas, lesbians, bisexual people, pansexual people, trans people, like any walk of life, people of color... their representation is not as significant...it's like things grow and we're just now getting representation that is on the right track even.

Tracy elaborated on the fact that having gay characters is completely normalized now, and how transgender representation is starting to rapidly expand:

> On the gay side I'd say, pretty much after 2005-ish, it was pretty much everywhere. It was ubiquitous. It wasn't really as big of an issue. It wasn't contentious to have gay characters in TV shows. They were moving out of the sidekick role and into more mainstream roles and it really wasn't, their sexuality wasn't an issue or anymore, it was more based on their character. It's really only been since about 2009, 2010 that trans people have entered that too and it has moved so fast that even *Magic the Gathering*, a trading card game, this year introduced their first trans character.

Though things are ramping up with transgender media representation, as Christal said, "[the community is] 20 years behind the rest of the LGBT community when it comes to our representation."

Even though general transgender representation in the past few years has grown significantly, certain subgroups of the transgender community itself have not been seen in the media, interviewees pointed out. Groups such as the intersex community, gender fluid and gender queer communities were discussed as not being represented at all in the media. Stephanie brought this up:

When you get into the transgender part you do get a lot more negative stuff and then when you get even into the subgroups of the transgender, it's acceptable to be a drag king or a drag queen. It's okay to be a crossdresser. When you're a transsexual they're like, "What? Really?" That's a subgroup of the transgender that isn't understood and it's feared. It's like, "You're not a woman." I get told that, "You're not a woman." It's like, "Yeah, I am." ...and then if you get into the gender fluid or gender queer or the queer community … nobody really wants to understand that and it's even hard within the community, within the transgender community, there are fights. I mean, RuPaul, he's a drag queen and he hates ... he calls us trannies and he hates the rest of the community. Yeah. You talked about somebody who's intersex and they're like ... people don't understand it.

Another subgroup that has no media representation is female to male transgender men. Transgender men's erasure by the media was talked about in interviews multiple times. Lauren observed that in media when, "you have trans people portrayed on TV it's mostly trans women. Trans men are pretty much just, God they're non-existent." Erica spoke to this trans men erasure, " I think trans men aren't really shown at all for better or worse. I think that's a failure of the

media. I don't like that all the trans people that you see are trans women, with the exception of Chaz Bono, who I'm not sure the extent of his media exposure. I can't name a single famous trans guy in the media, whereas I can name a number of trans women." Chaz Bono was the only transgender man in the media that interviewees could identify by name. This point illustrates how the media is only telling a small part of a much larger transgender story.

The mass media is focusing a lot of attention on only transgender women and their transition stories, to the exclusion of others that fall under the umbrella of transgenderism. Despite this specific lack of diversity in the portrayal of transgender issues, interviewees felt that the media is at a turning point in representing the transgender community. Many interviewees note that a "transgender tipping point" is happening in the media, and interviewees hope it continues. Lauren stated:

> I spent over 20 years listening attentively on the TV and the radio for anything. Whenever I would hear someone say transgender or something like that, I'd feel like an icicle ran down my back or whatever. Now, God, I hear it like every day. It was only just a couple of years ago that I didn't hear it at all and I've been following for decades.

New mass media exposure has made the transgender community more comfortable being themselves. As Vanessa noted, "I've got to say, I'm a lot more comfortable being trans now, with the representation of LGBT individuals on the media now, than I would've been five years ago or six years ago because just over the last couple of years, it's really, really improved dramatically." Despite this dramatic improvement, interviewees made it clear that more well-rounded diversity within transgender portrayals is necessary to show the public and mainstream culture all the diverse facets of transgender issues. Increasing diverse portrayals in the mass media will push the transgender tipping point in the direction of more realistic representation for the community,

increasing the normalization and awareness to the point of widespread understanding and acceptance, they argued.

How does Media Shape Transgender Lives and Identities? Learning Gender and Growing up Transgender with the Media

Another broad theme found within the discussions revolved around learning gender from the media. Subthemes that emerged from this theme included that these transgender women felt they needed to perform masculinity, especially when growing up. The media offered a way to learn how to present as men. The group felt unrealistic beauty expectations for women were apparent in the media. They did not appreciate advertising pressure towards female beauty standards. They related positively to positive female role models in the media, whether from female characters seen in the media while growing up to real transgender women who are relatable. Social media was used by some interviewees to help form their identities. There was also a clear subtheme of hope for future generations of transgender children who will grow up in a world where media representation exists and who will be able to come out earlier as transgender not need to perform as the gender with which they do not identify. These subthemes are discussed in detail below.

Performance of Masculinity

Transgender women feel negative pressure when navigating a very gendered cultural landscape, whether in online media and offline social interactions. Some interviewees tried desperately to be the boys and men that society and their families expected of them, like Angela who came out as female in her early 40s:

In kindergarten, I started to paint my nails before I went to school. I thought it was really nice and right and then I got in trouble and then I got sent home and they said, "oh, wait a

minute. This is not right...Yeah, you got to do something with your grandchild because this is not normal" back then. My grandmother says, "if you're going to do this, do it at home"...my family was deeply conservative, very religious family and they didn't tolerate this kind of behavior. I had to keep it in. I had to be in butch mode basically. It's my way of saying guy mode but I always referred to that as butch mode. I butched up very much and I even had my head shaved and the whole thing. It just didn't register with me. I looked in the mirror. I'm thinking, "my god, what did I do?"

Growing up she never felt male and had to learn what it was to be male, which included learning some of her gender expectations from the media. Angela continued and described growing up and trying to live as a male:

I was in hiding for most of my life. I watched a lot of action movies and tried to put myself in there… I knew what I was but I was trying to see if I can fight it and be somehow… But I could not do it and it just wasn't me. Like Rambo and all those action genre. We have to know how to pretend to be male. It just didn't sink in.

Some other interviewees used the media to learn to perform maleness when younger, while others described never getting the script or handbook on maleness so relied on media. Allison described her youth and not understanding society's expectations on how to be male:

When I'm a kid, I'm in middle school, or high school, or whatever. Dating did not really make sense to me. It was, there were certain ways boys are supposed to act and roles they were supposed to play. Some people either they learn this script or it comes in their head, or their genetic code. I don't even know where it comes from, but I never got the script. It didn't make sense to me, and I didn't know what I was supposed to do.

Allison brought up the fact that "A lot of transgender people almost act in hyper-masculine ways

sometimes, because they think that's going to help them hide and that's going to stop them asking questions." This heavy societal pressure caused some interviewees to purge the feminine from their lives for a few years up to entire decades. Leah, who is in her mid-sixties and came out later in life, talked about the concept of purging:

> Purging is a concept of trying to fit into the outside world, society, way of life. I cross-dressed. I say that loosely, not as a label but as a mode of something that I was doing, to express myself, to feel better about myself... To purge, you have to stop what you're doing and go back to presenting yourself the way society sees you. You learn to do that, but you can't get rid of it.

A common thread was that these women knew from an early age that they were different. However, they had to keep that difference in check as it was not welcome in their households growing up or in the jobs they held, which for some included branches of the armed services. Media helped teach them how to perform their lives as men, even though they knew they were women.

Unrealistic Feminine Beauty Expectations

During and after their transition from male to female, transgender women noted how they also experienced the negative pressure of unrealistic feminine beauty expectations that are reinforced and heavily promoted in our media. Many transgender women have a strong desire to pass as female by looking as feminine as they can. Unfortunately, society has hard to achieve beauty expectations for all women. These impossible to achieve expectations, combined with gender dysphoria, can be especially hard to navigate for transgender women. Emily spoke about the difficulties of navigating these unrealistic expectations:

> The media set me up for a lot of drama around my coming up and it definitely set me up

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with a lot of body anxiety. In some sense you receive a lot of your ideas of what it means to be feminine or masculine from the media. Even if you're not trans, you know, if you don't fit into those models then that can be really uncomfortable. For me in particular it caused me a lot of consternation earlier in my transition because I have this media image of femininity. I know what that is and I don't fit into that well because I know I'm a lady internally. I don't like wearing heels and I don't like doing my hair. I don't feel like I fit into that mold which as, I said was really troubling for me.

The stereotypes of feminine beauty often don't fit the average transgender women, and many did not expect that advertising and media would bombard them with such unrealistic feminine images that they should attain. There is also the reality that transgender women face hardship when moving from a more privileged group when presenting male to an underprivileged group as female. Christal talked in depth about the phenomenon of losing privilege and experiencing unrealistic beauty expectations in advertising from the female gaze instead of the male one:

There's a lot of expectations that you're supposed to live up to. If I don't act femme enough, then I have my identity called into question. I have to think about all these things, and I did not realize. Male privilege is a funny thing because all trans women had male privilege. Then you stop and realize once you start transitioning, and instead of getting penis enlargement emails, you're getting all this other stuff. I made a comment on Facebook one time. I like to work out, and at that time I was really working on it. I was really trying to lose weight and such. I noticed something interesting about the advertisements. I had two Facebook profiles, one male one female, that way I could keep people a little bit more separate. I've moved to just one profile now though, but back then I had two profiles. My male profile, it had a lot of the workout ads with these big,

muscular guys and all that, but the one I got on my female profile, the ads on there were just so dramatically different.

That was when I first truly appreciated what male gaze really was because I was like, "Yeah. There's this big, bulky man, but no one has that expectation." That's not who you see as playing dad on *Modern Family* or anything like that. That's not who you're seeing playing those characters. You might have them on occasions: Arnold Schwarzenegger, big muscular guy, but by and large that's not what we consider normal. It's what we consider as extraordinary. The ads for women though, they were so targeted on expectations, "This is how you should be." It was just so different looking at those two, seeing them side-by-side. That's been a huge negative impact I've seen in media for me ... it is coming mostly from the perspective of feminism of just women are just put down so much.

This negative impact was felt by many interviewees who were frustrated with unrealistic images that they are now expected to live up to. This was the most common negative issue brought up about the media.

Famous transgender actresses like Laverne Cox and Caitlyn Jenner are able to attain this level of societally acceptable femininity since they have the money to afford many surgeries. Katie said:

It is also kind of unfortunate that it's like Caitlyn Jenner is this very rich powerful white woman who can afford to do all these types of surgeries and also is a very normative stance on beauty and how she presents herself which is fine, but not true in many trans people's lives.

Some interviewees wanted more realistic portrayals of transgender women in the media who

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don't pass as well, and don't exhibit all the stereotypical desirable female characteristics. Allison spoke in depth about the pressure of feminine beauty standards and how she'd like more media representation for transgender women who do not fit the mold:

I've never met a transgender person who is completely happy with their body, and not just because of this in any way. I wish my voice was different. I've thought about going in and doing voice surgery. I have tried really hard to get rid of all my facial hair. I've gotten rid of most of it, but there's still a little bit left. There is just all kinds of various little things. When you spend 10 years looking at the internet and looking at different pictures and faces and trying to convince yourself that you're really going to be passable. You get this hyper-focus way. You can look at anybody and say, "Oh this little detail, you can make the person look more feminine, make myself look more feminine, like what is wrong with me?"...

I do think there's something to be said for, having actual people who are transgender in real life, play transgender people in the movies, or in TV. Part of what I want to see is normalization of people who have certain features, that don't necessarily match. Sort of, biologically features because they don't necessarily match your gender. People who have a gender role, that's outside of the norm. You can absolutely... You can fake it to some degree. If you take somebody who is born with XY chromosomes and had male hormones through their body for the first few years. Then they switch and they go and start going on estrogen. They're going to look a certain way. You can fake that with makeup, but that actually is... that's a person you're going to see in the street. I want to see that accepted. I want to see people... I want to see media representation for where we say, "The fact that this person has a voice that's lower than most people. The fact that

they have shoulders that are broader than people, or if they're a trans man. The fact that

they have a rounder face than other people. That doesn't mean they're still not women, or

still men. They are the way they should portray themselves. I would like to see that being

an acceptable thing to show in the media.

Unrealistic feminine beauty standards affect the male to female transgender community very

strongly, according to women interviewed. The inaccuracies and pressure to fit gendered media

roles have also been observed in the cisgender community. This common negative experience

should be taken into account by the media, because it is necessary to show more diversity in all

female portrayals.

Positive Female Role Models in the Media

Despite feeling intense negative pressure from certain types of media, such as

advertising, to conform to beauty standards, many conversations focused on how important the

media was to discovering their true transgender identities. Many of the women also looked to the

media as children for positive role models in female characters such as Xena (*Xena: Warrior

Princess)*, Wonder Woman (*Wonder Woman),* and Ariel (Disney's *The Little Mermaid)*. Angela

said she "always knew that [she] was different because Wonder Woman was [her] main

character, the Bionic Woman and Barbie." Emily's experience with gender roles in a particular

poignant children's story demonstrates how gender identity is stereotyped through our earliest

role models:

There are a couple of archetypes that really appealed to me when I was little. I think

made me feel more comfortable with the female gender role, but there has never been a

particular character that I identified with very strongly. For example the classic story of

the knight and the lady, the knight has this one role and the lady has this other role and

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they're relatively divided and the knight saves the lady from the dragon or the evil suitor or whatever villain. When I was relatively young my dad he used to read stories to me and he read me a gender swap version of that story, where ...it was a female knight and a male lady in the story. That really stuck with me that gender swap version of that story because it told me at a very young age that those roles aren't as rigid as they look like at first. The roles we tend to slot male and female people into aren't actually as rigid as they seem. That was a big deal for me.

Having identifiable role models is crucial in adolescent development, and teens increasingly look to the media for positive transgender figures they can identify with.

Interviewees discussed many transgender role models in depth, including Jazz Jennings, Janet Mock, Kristen Beck, Andrea James, Calpernia Addams, and Caitlyn Jenner. Interviewees expressed concern that the voices of these role models may be lost if the media only focuses on Laverne Cox. The transgender community is a diverse group who desire diverse representation in the mass media. Angela said that, "to bring up the public awareness like Caitlyn Jenner, Kristin Beck, people like Laverne Cox, Janet Mock are all out there on the frontlines. Those are the main people right now. They're doing phenomenally well to get it out there more or less. They're my heroes, so is Jazz [Jennings]." These strong famous examples of transgender women are helping give a voice to the underrepresented transgender community.

As media outlets have changed over the years, these women also found role models from social media sources such as YouTube, Reddit, and Facebook. These outlets provided real-world examples of other transgender women lacking mainstream media's cisgender bias. These sources provided a sense of guidance and support by providing real life transgender stories that were relatable. Gwen is a 58 year-old transgender woman who came out recently. She described the

excitement of using Facebook and connecting with friends who gave her a new way to describe her identity:

> I've been on Facebook the last three years as myself. I've gotten more in touch with myself, finding out more about transgender, because I had no clue what that was because I didn't have any transgender friends or anyone really in all the years to talk to. The people I did talk to were cis girls and they didn't know about any of this either so I never had anyone to talk to. A friend of mine, a pretty good friend on Facebook for the last few years, she's the one who actually explained to me that I was transgender because she was asking me, "are you transgender, a cross-dresser, what are you?" We're on Facebook. I said, "I don't know what I am." She's going, "you don't know?" Not really. I told her, even when I dress like this, I don't consider myself as a cross-dresser because this is more how I feel and stuff. Telling her about me and stuff, and she goes, "oh, you're transgender." No, I'm not. We went back and forth on that a few times. Then, she actually came out and explained what transgender was. When she did that, a lot of what she was saying was a lot of my feelings and how I grew up. Oh, damn, I must be transgender. Okay, that's what I am. It really is what I am.

This was a revelation that would not have been possible for Gwen without social media, a newer form of user created media that allowed many of the women interviewed to figure out who they are and where they belong. It provides comfort and relief to know that they are not alone. Many interviewed didn't know any transgender women in real life through their transition journeys, and these media outlets became critical to learning about and shaping their identities. Some interviewees felt they needed to give back and tell their stories to continue the cycle and help others who were just starting on their transition path. They did this by making their own videos,

contributing to Reddit or other internet forums, or writing blog posts about their journey. Angela talked about writing her story:

> If it can help somebody, if they can read my story, if they can read my life, and if they can get anything out of it, if anything, they can apply something to their lives to better understand and know that, hey, look. I'm probably going through the same thing and thanks. You really helped me out a lot and this is what you've done and this and that... That you're not alone... Reading other people's stories and learning from other people that I found out, you can apply it to you. You can relate to it. You can know what the person did and how they did it and to get where they want and this and that. It's just amazing.

These women want to inspire other transgender women and let them know that they are not alone and are doing this through media.

Hope for the Future

Throughout the conversations, there was an overwhelming positive outlook for future generations of transgender kids who are growing up now with more media representation. Jazz Jennings has been successful as an author, speaker, activist, and television star, while also being a young, confident female transgender teen. Participants felt such positive representation will create ripple effects into the future. Erica stated:

> I'm happy that Jazz is also leading the media now, it's important to make people realize that trans people are trans people and that it isn't something that they will pick up in college. It's an inherent aspect of who they are. It's inborn. It's good to know that there is someone that young to show the world that trans people can be sure of their identity at that age. If there were more people like her perhaps I wouldn't have had to wait until I

was 20 to get on hormones, or at least to come out acceptably….I honestly a decade ago wouldn't have believed you if you told me that there was a young trans woman Jazz's age that was published … I could not have imagined that happening a decade ago. And to see that is indicative of incredible progress. I think that a lot more LGBT people as kids will find the courage to come out younger because of the portrayal of LGBT people in the media now.

The hope of progress for the future, as well as the tinge of regret that they did not have the same opportunities, cropped up in many conversations. Lynne gave an incredible description about what Jazz Jennings coming out so young means to her:

As far as Jazz, she's incredible that at such a young age that not only did she take on the incredibly difficult task of fighting against her own family to have herself acknowledged, she went above and beyond and has taken on the cause for others. This is somebody who is still in high school and she's out there fighting for equal rights and she's educating and it's absolutely incredible. It's a little painful to watch honestly, seeing somebody get the life that you couldn't have. Here's someone who's just like you, who won't have to deal with as much trauma and pain in growing up because they won't have to go through as many years of confusion, and depression and never had to hit the wrong puberty and never have to go through any of that or become suicidal, so it's kind of crappy in that sense to watch someone else have what you know you'll never get back, but that is kind of the hope and the dream is that no one has to go through what I did. So to see that and to see her then take it as an even larger cause and to fight for others so that they can have it is huge and, of course, trans teens are so vulnerable and trans rates of suicide are astronomically high anyway and teen suicides are astronomically high and it's an

incredibly difficult emotional time for anybody and so to have someone like her as a

representative for other trans teens I think is probably even more important than having

Laverne Cox as the spokesperson for the trans community as is because I think a lot of

the trans movement now is moving towards looking at the younger kids, trying to prevent

this damage from occurring rather than how do we fix it after it's already happened. I

think for me she represents a lot of that.

The idea of mitigating damage and helping children and younger people, brought many

conversations around to bringing up media articles of younger transgender or gender fluid

children. For example, as seen in various media outlets, Brad Pitt and Angelina Jolie let their 8

yea- old daughter wear typical boy's clothing and identify as John for now. Other parents are

allowing their kids to express themselves and express their preferred gender at a younger age.

Participants suggested that media coverage on these issues would bring positive awareness. The

hope was that younger children would have more parental awareness and outright acceptance as

a result of these stories. More media coverage on young transgender runaways and suicides is

highlighting a crucial issue, giving a face to the tragedy, and educating parents to support their

children. Vanessa said, "We're putting a face to what's going on. We're putting a face to the

potential tragedy out there. That makes parents more aware, that makes school administrators

and teachers more aware of what to look for in their own students, and hopefully provide help

and support for them." Kids knowing and expressing a gender preference at a young age gives

credence to the idea that being transgender is a natural part of self-identity, not a voluntary

choice. Puberty blocking drugs can be administered to these children to give them a chance for

much more normal and adjusted life as the gender they identify with. Allison spoke in depth of

the positive effect of the media to educate parents and the desirable reasons for parents to allow

their kids to take puberty blockers:

I think it's going to have hugely, hugely positive effect. For one reason more than anything else, which is if you're starting puberty, or you haven't started yet. You know that you may be transgender. You can go and you can say, "I want puberty blockers." Your parents having seen the same media as you do, won't see this as a problem. They'll see this as, "Okay. This is a much better thing that we can do for you. Save reversible changes for when you turn 18 and you can decide what you really want." If I had that option when I was 14, hell yes I would've taken them. This is the kind of thing that can give people a body, that they're ... Nobody is ever going to be completely happy with their body. It gives them a body that you're by and large happy with, it can save them from the need for incredibly difficult and invasive surgeries later. It can basically let them live as a pretty darn normal life. It's amazing how much hormones can do, even for somebody older. Yeah, it's just to give people that option and to avoid the whole thing. To avoid thousands of dollars on facial hair removal and voice surgery or face feminization or ... On vasectomy or whatever. Whatever you happen to need. To avoid that hassle, to avoid all that trauma to your body, that's huge and it's absolutely huge…

I say more general is in that I think the more that people see the media and see portrayals of people. They can recognize themselves in this and they can say, "Oh, there's a name for this. I can be who I am and not be ostracized and not ..." Not just that, but that their parents can think so too. They make decisions. When I grew up, I knew what I knew about being transgender from the internet. My parents knew nothing. They knew absolutely nothing. If they found anything at all ... My dad was like, "I'll just ..." They could look in the DSM and they could find, transgender is listed as… it's listed as like a

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mental disorder. Anyone that age, they were not going to have any healthy, positive role

models for being transgender. As you start to get to an age, where both kids and their

parents are aware that you can be transgender and not be a freak. That's just a really

positive thing for those kids.

The desire for future transgender children to be thought of as normal, to fit in, and not be judged

as freaks were very pervasive ideas in conversations. The women interviewed hope that more

parental awareness of transgender issues will help parents accept their transgender children, and

believe that the media will be crucial in educating these parents. Every interviewee spoke

passionately with hope for the next generation.

Chapter 5

Discussion & Conclusion

There exists a dearth of media research focusing specifically on the transgender community. Before this study, there has been no previous academic research that examines the responses of transgender individuals to their community's media representation or addresses the relationship between media and transgender identity. This research endeavors to ameliorate the paucity of knowledge in these particular areas by filling this gap. By reviewing previous literature focusing on LGBT media representation, as well as literature focusing on self-esteem, role models and media effects on the LGBT Community, this study developed interview questions for the purpose of talking to the marginalized transgender community. This study was guided by the question of how female transgender individuals understand and interpret the images of transgender media representation within the context of their real life identities and experiences. Interviews revealed broad themes of the lack of media diversity and ways transgender people use media to learn gender, each with significant implications for how the media can represent transgender reality more broadly and with more diversity.

Research has demonstrated that the media plays a central role in determining societal norms from the perspective of those in power, and cultural studies theories explains that this influence can change over time. Strides in LGBT equality in recent years show that the hegemonic dominant ideologies related to the LGBT community are changing in society. As Sarah Kate Ellis, President and CEO of GLAAD stated, "Television has always had a reciprocal relationship with the society watching it – reflecting social attitudes while also shaping them – and that relationship has without a doubt helped the country move closer to full equality and accelerate acceptance for all its citizens (GLAAD, 2015, 6)." This relationship between society and television is reflected in the concept of cultivation theory, which states that time spent in the

television world reflects viewer's social reality (Cohen & Weimann, 2000). According to social cognitive theory, television influences viewers by providing vicarious experiences on which to model beliefs, attitudes, and behavior when real-life experiences are more limited. These theories connect television's transgender media representation to society. The transgender community makes up a small and often hidden segment of the population, such that many people do not know someone who is transgender. Because these people lack first-hand experience with transgender individuals, they often rely (consciously or unconsciously) to transgender portrayals in the media to form their attitudes toward themselves and the transgender community. Negative media portrayals can lead to transphobia and the marginalization of the transgender community. More realistic and diverse transgender portrayals on television and in the media could directly impact society's attitudes toward the transgender community by promoting empathy and humanizing transgender individuals.

The first of two broad themes discussed by interviewees was the lack of diversity in current media representations. While interviewees showed a pervasively positive attitude toward the fact that more transgender characters were in the media, they critiqued the media on the use of transgender characters as comic relief or embodying the fear element in media narratives. Gerbner and Gross' cultivation theory examines television effect on viewers and how it can cultivate a common perspective amongst regular viewers. If the media is portraying transgender women as the butt of jokes (*Ted* and *Ted 2*), disgusting (*Family Guy*), or extremely fringe individuals like murderers (*NCIS, Law and Order*), that could become the dominant thinking of the audience and lead to more transphobia, which is already very prevalent in the real world. As Christal stated, sometimes women are being portrayed as a trap, "There was one episode of *Family Guy* where Brian…finds out he slept with a trans woman, you have this whole bit of

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excessive vomiting scene." These types of media representations can cultivate fear and misunderstanding of the transgender community. In fact, the idea that these media images are cultivating real attitudes was further supported by Christal:

> The people I've had the most issues with have been men of 20s, 30s, and a little bit into their 40s. Those are the people who should be most accepting in a lot of ways because you look at how LGBT rights are coming along and everything. Granted, long ways to go. Just at a point where… Yeah. Sixty percent of America favors legalizing same-sex marriage and a lot of that coming from the younger demographics, but that's where I have the issues. That's where I get the whole "ughhhh" and all that.

Christal specifically thought media content the younger demographic was watching contributed to and "definitely" helped cultivate their negative attitudes of transgender women and disgust toward her.

Interviewees did not want to be portrayed as a fringe group and desired more normalization in their representations in the media. They also felt that the way different subgroups in the LGBT community are portrayed in media content is directly related to the privilege members of the group experience in the real world, gay males are portrayed much differently than transgender characters. Portraying the transgender community as regular people on television could normalize the group, which could cultivate more understanding from the audience of the real transgender experience. More positive portrayals were welcomed in recent media for the awareness they bring to the transgender experience. Shows like *Orange is the New Black*, *Transparent*, and *Sense8* and women like Laverne Cox, Jazz Jennings, and Caitlyn Jenner were discussed as bringing in more positive and diverse modern representations to the media. However, it was made clear that there cannot be one face of the transgender movement and more

complexity and diversity is still desired in the media representations of transgender women. While these media portrayals have been a milestone step on the road to acceptance, they were often criticized for being too focused on the transition narrative and showing extremely feminized transgender women. The reality of life in the transgender community is that transition can be a very brief period, and there exists a wide spectrum of feminization for transgender women. Interviewees hope that more positive media representations will normalize being transgender and ameliorating pervasive fear and transphobia historically shown in mainstream society.

Learning gender was another broad theme found in this research. Cultivation theory and social cognitive theory reflect the dramatic impact of the media on the creation of transgender identities and provide a means of understanding the community from outsiders. From the point of view of the interviewees negative aspects of the media included learning gender normative behaviors, both while they were presenting as young men by using the media to help them learn the performance of masculinity and further by providing positive female role models. Positive media portrayals wherein transgender women and actresses such as Laverne Cox and Caitlyn Jenner represented the community were generally welcomed by interviewees as normalizing and bringing awareness to the transgender experience. However, the unrealistic feminine beauty expectations found in the media including advertising were especially hard to navigate. Many transgender women interviewees used social media outlets such as Youtube or Facebook to help discover their true identities, connecting with supportive communities and individuals for a sense of belonging they were unable to find in daily life. Since these women had limited interaction with others that were transgender in real life, they used the media to observe other transgender experiences. As predicted by social cognitive theory, this helped shape their immediate behavior.

Society strongly views gender as a binary, but recent theory including transgender theory and trans-identity theory redefines gender as a spectrum. Breaking the dichotomy of having only two genders could be essential to social acceptance of the transgender community. As interviewees confirmed, the media focuses primarily on the male-to-female transgender story. Positive media representations showing everyday life for a more full range of those under the transgender umbrella is key to changing commonly held beliefs about the gender binary. Regardless of how society sees gender, moving past stereotypical representations could help the marginalization and stigma for transgender individuals in society. By showing accurate portrayals, media could show those who do not know transgender people that they are not to be feared or ridiculed. The interviewees all spoke with hope for the future generations of transgender children who with more media representation and societal understanding, would have a much easier time growing up. The transgender community deserves respect and dignity--just like everyone else. Understanding what the transgender community wants is as simple as seeing them as everyday people. They want to be seen as real, normal people who are neither a plot point nor a spectacle on display. The community's desires are as simple as acceptance and equality.

Strengths and Limitations

A main strength of this study is filling the current research gap in the lack of academic studies on the effects and perceptions of media representation of transgender women from the perspective of the transgender community. The exploratory nature of this first data collection lent itself to the interviewing methodology. Interviews allow further depth and detail of data collection that other comparable research methods such as surveys or focus groups could not provide, as suggested by McCracken (1988). By asking open-ended questions, participants were

encouraged to speak at length about their perceptions and experiences. This study provides context for future research and a window into how those in the transgender community perceive the media. Outsiders get a glimpse into the life of a transgender woman and see how media has affected her identity growth. By providing these insights beyond the transgender community, this study promotes greater dialogue and understanding surrounding transgender issues.

This study provides a tool to promote change in media representation, asking for more realistic, diverse, and naturalized portrayals of the transgender community. It also provides feedback for media outlets on their representation of transgender characters from a transgender perspective, offering constructive suggestions for an increasingly transgender-supportive future. With a better understanding of the transgender community, the media can continue to include transgender characters in story lines and encourage realistic depictions in place of stereotypes. This research has the potential to bring more positivity and realism to media portrayals of the transgender community. According to the interviewees, it is important for the media to stop focusing on the transition story. Transitioning involves many phases and steps and is not an overnight change. By moving past this transition story, the media can include other realities of the multifaceted transgender experience. The study provides an amplifier for the transgender community to make their voices heard on what they think about media.

While this research provides important insights, it was limited by a lack of prior research or more longitudinal data collection. Lack of prior academic research studies on the topic severely limited the ability to build on known research. Although there have been media studies focusing on coverage of gay, lesbian, and bisexuals in the media, research into transgender representation is severely lacking. Without existing research on the transgender community and media studies, it

is hard to know where to focus hypotheses, which led this research to be an initial exploration of a broad research question.

Fifteen in depth interviews were conducted for this research and a great deal of data was collected. The research focused on male-to-female transgender women, and did not include female-to-male transgender men or other types of gender variant individuals. This subset of the population limits the diversity of responses and qualitative research is always more thorough with more participants. The transgender population is incredibly diverse, both ideologically and geographically, and this research shows opinions from a small sample of the community. Gaining access and building trust within severely marginalized communities can be difficult to gain and was limited in this study. Participants were recruited through a small set of vetted transgender community connections, which limited the sample size and diversity. Constraints of the researcher necessitated a small sample as well. More research of this kind with a larger group of participants will only add to our knowledge on the intersection of media and the transgender community.

This study was conducted by a cisgender heterosexual researcher who considers herself part of the LGBT community in the form of an ally. The researcher does not have first-hand knowledge of LGBT marginalization.

Future Research

There are many opportunities for further research involving the media representation of the transgender community. The lack of media studies focusing on transgender communities should be addressed with ongoing research in this area. While this research contacted fourteen male-to-female transgender women and one gender queer woman, future studies should include female-to-male transgender men and those who identify as gender fluid or other types of gender variant individuals. Additional research focusing on more groups included under the transgender

umbrella will further help researchers understand their viewpoints. This research approached women who grew up in the United States. Another area for future research would be delving into and discovering an international perspective on the issue of transgender media representation.

These personal narratives offer a starting point for future studies. The qualitative data gathered from this study should be supplemented with quantitative data regarding reactions to media coverage to provide a more comprehensive understanding of how the transgender community relates to the media. A methodology such as surveys could be used to further discover how the transgender community feels about media representation and how this has related to their identity creation. More research in this area is critically needed in order to reflect the reality and diversity of the transgender experience in the media.

Appendix A

Recruitment Email

Subject: Seeking MTF Transgender Participants for Media Study

Hello,

My name is Chani Wellborn and I am obtaining my master's degree in Communication from the University of Texas at Arlington. I am writing my master's thesis on the transgender community's perceptions on how the media represents their community. I am specifically looking for MTF transgender participants for a roughly hour long interview, in person or over Skype. Participation is voluntary, and will be anonymous.

If you know anyone who may be interested in participating in the study, please forward this email or send the blurb on to them, and they can contact me at chani.wellborn@mavs.uta.edu to arrange a time to interview on May 21st or 22nd, or on Skype.

Thank you,
Chani Wellborn

Appendix B

Interview Guide & Sample Interview Questions

Transgender Identity	
	First, tell me a little bit about yourself? Where did you grow up? How old are you? Are you in a relationship? Kids? Etc.
	At what age did you start to realize you were transgender?
	Tell me about your coming-out story, or, if you have not, by your definition come out, why?
	Do you consider telling people about your gender identity "coming out" or define it differently?
	Probe about self-realization process if not mentioned.
	What role did the media—and by media I mean TV, movies, the Internet, books, magazines, etc. - play in your coming-out process? Were there other forms of media that were important to you at this time?
Alright, now I'm going to and ask more specific questions about the media in relation to your personal identity.	
The Media and Transgender Identity	
	In terms of your exposure to the media, was there a specific portrayal, story, image, etc. that you remember being particularly influential to your identity while you were growing up? Tell me about it. *Doesn't need to be LGBT related*
	Tell me about some of your favorite media sources. If they talk about media sources growing up: What about your favorite media sources now?
	How do you feel about Laverne Cox and Jazz Jennings being spoken of as the "faces of the transgender community?"
	Do you identify with any other transgender actresses or non-transgender actresses and actors who have portrayed transgender roles?

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	Overall, do you think the media has had a positive or negative effect on your life? Both?

The Media and the LGBT and Transgender Community	
	Do you participate in the LGBT community? How do you participate? How often?
	Tell me about the relationship between the media and the LGBT community. Do you think the LGBT community regards the media as a positive or negative influence on their community?
	How do you think "mainstream" culture perceives portrayals of LGBT individuals in the media?
	How do you think "mainstream" culture perceives portrayals of transgender individuals in the media?

Opinions on the portrayal of LGBT and Transgender individuals in the media	
	What would you like to see more of in the media in terms of LGBT portrayals?
	What would you like to see more of in the media of specifically transgender portrayals?
	Let's keep talking about how the media portrays specific LGBT subgroups: ● Tell me about how you think the media portrays gay men? Lesbians? Bisexual men and women? Older vs. younger gay men and lesbians? ● How is this different from their portrayal of transgender community? ● Which group is portrayed most positively? Negatively? Are there any other differences that you've noticed in the portrayals of these groups?

	What differences have you noticed in the way that different media sources, like TV, movies, the Internet, the news, portray the community?
	Tell me about some differences you have noticed in portrayals of the LGBT community in the media over time.
	How were the portrayals differently when you were younger?
	How do you think the current generation of LGBT teenagers will be affected by the media?
	Do you think this influence will change in the future?
	Is there anything else about this topic that you want to add?

Thank you so much for agreeing to talk to me. You have been so helpful.

Appendix C

Interviewee Information Table

Interviewee Number	Name*	Age	Self-Identification	Interview Type
1	Christal	30	Gender queer	In Person
2	Lauren	26	MtF transgender	In Person
3	Tracy	30	MtF transgender	In Person
4	Jessica	27	MtF transgender	In Person
5	Leah	65	MtF transgender	In Person
6	Stephanie	60s	MtF transgender	Online Video Chat
7	Vanessa	55	MtF transgender	Online Video Chat
8	Gwen	58	MtF transgender	In Person
9	Angela	43	MtF transgender	In Person
10	Katie	24	MtF transgender	Online Video Chat
11	Allison	28	MtF transgender	In Person
12	Megan	52	MtF transgender	Online Video Chat
13	Lynne	28	MtF transgender	Online Video Chat
14	Emily	26	MtF transgender	Online Video Chat
15	Erica	22	MtF transgender	Online Video Chat

*All names have been changed within this document to protect anonymity.

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