Spaces of Possibility:

Transmasculine Representation in Contemporary Media

by

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Abstract

This thesis is a qualitative multi-case study of three contemporary media spaces: Reddit's r/ftm subreddit, YouTube's Jammidodger channel and Dimensions 20: *The Unsleeping City* (Mulligan, 2019) as sites of public pedagogy. I examined transmasculine representation in these spaces through the lens of critical social justice, specifically with an emphasis on queer and intersectional feminist theories. Two research questions guided this study: 1. How or to what extent do the case studies from YouTube, Reddit and Dimension 20 challenge and/or reinforce the hegemonic forces of cisnormativity? 2. How or to what extent do the YouTube, Reddit and Dimension 20 case studies function as a liberatory space for transmasculine individuals? Data was collected for three weeks in September 2024. Content and thematic analysis revealed that these cases could, in fact, function as liberatory space sites for transmasculine individuals and effectively challenge cisnormativity. These spaces had many positive aspects, such as the ability to provide representation, community, information, and advice and bring levity to complex matters. However, these spaces are imperfect and can be homogeneous, missing intersectional representation and overemphasizing binary notions of gender. Nevertheless, the findings showed that these contemporary media spaces were significant sites for identity formation, learning and support for queer folks and newly transitioning or questioning transmasculine individuals. In addition, these spaces became a haven and an invaluable resource for the loved ones of these individuals.

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Chapter One: Introduction

A note on terminology

Throughout this thesis, the term Gender and Sexual minorities (GSM), queer, and rainbow community will sometimes be used to represent the entirety of the 2SLGBTQQIAP+ (Two-spirit, Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer, Questioning, Intersex, Asexual, Pansexual, Plus) spectrum. Depending on the references, a shortened variation of the 2SLGBTQQIAP+ abbreviation will occasionally be used. When I am referring to a specific identity, such as transgender (sometimes shortened to trans), Non-binary (NB) or Gender Non-Conforming (GNC), I will explicitly name them. In addition, I will use the identified pronouns of the individuals I cite. Finally, it is important to note that the 2SLGBTQQIAP+ abbreviation includes sexual orientations, gender identities, and sex characteristics that interact but are quite distinct (American Psychological Association, 2024).

Researcher position and reflexivity

When I decided to come back to school after a long break from academia, I knew that I wanted to do research in the social justice space, particularly focusing on marginalized queer identities. I had always felt unmoored, uncertain, and alone in my youth. Immigrating to Canada in 2001 landed me straight into grade nine, which was a universally heteronormative and queerphobic experience. Health class mentioned queer people (specifically, gay men) only in the context of HIV transmission. Identities like asexual, pansexual, and non-binary simply did not exist in that world. I did not have any role models in the form of queer educators or peers I could relate to or learn from. There was extraordinarily little 2SLGBTQQIAP+ representation in the media, and what was there was stereotypical or downright hateful (Capuzza & Spencer, 2016; McLaren et al., 2021). In high school, saying "That's so gay" was trendy. I said it, too, not knowing any better. Queerphobia was simply the norm; we said queerphobic things because popular characters in TV shows and movies said them.

Despite living in such an environment, with the consequent mental health challenges, I somehow made it out with only a couple of mental health crises under my belt. I met queer people for the first time in my life when I attended York University in 2006. It was a revelation. I learned about sexual and gender diversity from professors who did not shy away from questions or discussions. I also got to read research and stories by 2SLGBTQQIAP+ individuals and have conversations with students that were queer. I left school in early 2009 due to yet another mental health crisis. However, when I returned in 2011, Dr. Jean Saindon, an incredible, now-retired professor who taught the 'Philosophy of Sex and Gender' course, ignited my lifelong passion for the topic. It allowed me to start examining my own identity more closely. York University, being in Toronto and having a student population of over fifty thousand, brought incredible diversity. There were many clubs with a queer focus and so many students who wanted to find community. While I will admit that there was queerphobia in certain situations, there was an open attitude towards queerness, especially in the social sciences. Professors and students would speak up when someone said something bigoted in class; this is not something I experienced in high school. It felt like the university had a protective forcefield that shielded us from the discourse of the "outside" world. That felt safe and supportive.

With time - taking courses and talking to friends, professors, and therapists - and engaging in newfound social media platforms initiated a renaissance of self-discovery. This is how I found my queer identity as a pansexual woman. During this time, my best friend - my chosen brother, came out as a gay trans man. This transition, alongside the insights and experiences I drew from a multitude of close queer friends, led me to experience a myriad of rainbow identities. Unfortunately, during this time of growth and discovery, I was also diagnosed with Complex Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (C-PTSD) due to adverse childhood experiences, which can develop from prolonged or repeated trauma, often due to interpersonal abuse or neglect. For me, it manifested as depression, anxiety, and panic disorder. Later, I was also diagnosed with Sensory Processing Sensitivity, a condition which makes me extremely

sensitive to sounds, temperatures and smells. Through the lens of my newfound self-knowledge, my school challenges finally made sense. I carried this knowledge to my postgraduate human resources management program at Seneca College, where Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity (SOGI) matters were made invisible again. Seeing the lack of representation in a heteronormative business curriculum - in the course material, in readings, and discussions - was disheartening.

When I re-entered the workforce, landing in the tech industry, I spent the next four years closeted again. That environment was also heteronormative, misogynistic and queerphobic. I was subjected to discriminatory views regularly. After I could not weather it any longer, I started to miss academia, where I had first found a community and identity. Having a protective environment enables scholarship and reasonable discourse. Most of all, I missed learning about SOGI matters. After deciding to return to school in 2023, I found an accessible online program where I could control my environment so I could manage my sensitivities and mental health better. This helped me excel in my studies without burning out.

As discussed above, it is clear now that this research comes from a very personal place. My affinity for social justice is why my research focus is and will always be situated within critical theory, intersectional feminism, and queer theoretical interpretive frameworks. I am intensely sensitive to specific topics because of my social location. As an immigrant, queer, neurodiverse woman with a myriad of mental health challenges, topics like ableism, racism, misogyny and queerphobia, even as they are deeply integral to my studies, are also especially triggering to me. Nevertheless, being triggered can also be a strength, as it allows my passion and curiosity for the topics to carry me forward in this project. This personal difficulty is described well by Mao et al. (2016) when they say: "critical research demands so much more of us. It demands that we interrogate our own positionality and social location, power, and privilege" (p. 6). Thus, it is my obligation to own my privilege and power as a white cisgender woman, which means I have to be intentional when examining my data and ensure I am not

letting implicit biases affect my perception of the material but allowing my life experiences guide and colour my understanding of the issues.

Description of Research Study

I have chosen to investigate a mix of contemporary and social media for transmasculine representation for a couple of reasons. First, I believe in the potential of new media as a liberatory space for identity formation, learning, and support (Fox & Ralston, 2016; Hiebert & Kortes-Miller, 2021; Miller, 2018; Michaelsen, 2017), particularly for queer folks. YouTube, Reddit, and Dimension 20 (D20) are three spaces I have personally used to explore my identity over the years. Second, despite progress in queer representation across public spaces, transmasculine and gender non-conforming (GNC) individuals still face marginalization and lack of visibility (Capuzza & Spencer, 2016; McLaren et al., 2021). This invisibility of identities can have significant impacts on marginalized populations, such as perpetuating stereotypes in ways that result in a lack of understanding and empathy. Research has shown that a lack of diversity in media and stereotypical or inaccurate portrayals can reinforce existing power structures and further inequalities (Ardent, 2023; Appel & Weber, 2021).

Research Questions

With the above in mind, the following questions guide this study:

1. How or to what extent do the case studies from YouTube, Reddit and Dimension 20 challenge and/or reinforce the hegemonic forces of cisnormativity?

2. How or to what extent do the YouTube, Reddit and Dimension 20 case studies function as a liberatory space for transmasculine individuals?

Chapter Two: Literature Review

Contemporary media as public pedagogy

In North America, we live in a hyper-networked society. For many of us, media is now accessed and offered through digital and online platforms such as social media, websites, podcasts, and streaming services, which have caused significant disruption to traditional media environments (Ismail, 2020; McMullan, 2020; Zhang, 2024). boyd (2012) sums it up perfectly when she asserts that; "It's about living in a world where being networked to people and information wherever and whenever you need it is just assumed" (p. 71). In contrast, traditional media is offered through well-established communication channels such as television, radio, newspapers, and magazines and has been the primary means of circulating information for the last century (Fotopoulos, 2023). Young people, in particular, are growing up expecting that using contemporary or new media is a normal condition of life and are more likely to use internet-based media over traditional forms (Manafy, 2022; Silver, 2019).

In the recent past, traditional mass media was often used as a site of learning and identity formation, and scholarship around informal learning exploded around the 1990s when researchers grew increasingly interested in the educational influence of popular culture. In their paper, Hickey-Moody et al. (2010) discuss Giroux's (1998, 2000, 2004a, 2004b) influential and prolific works in popularizing the term "public pedagogy" in education and cultural studies. His foundational view that culture subtly operates in pedagogical ways was a compelling case for broadening analyses of pedagogy beyond the confines of formal learning sites such as schools and universities. According to Giroux (1998, 2000, 2004a, 2004b), people's identities are continuously shaped through everyday cultural and political spaces where their experiences take on form and meaning. For Giroux, the media and the culture they produce, propagate, and promote have become the most crucial educational force and are the primary means of transmitting social norms from generation to generation (Hickey-Moody et al., 2010).

Tisdell and Thompon (2007) argued that media produces categories through which individuals shape and organize their ideologies and politics because of the way it represents differences. Furthermore, Yin (2005) discussed how these differences are then accentuated in movies that establish "dominant experiences and identities while marginalizing those of the dominated" (p. 153). She discusses strategies such as critically examining the points of view often privileged in movies and paying attention to selective attribution in media, where people selectively interpret what they see based on their interests, background, experience, and attitudes. Both papers focus mainly on popular cultural products that reproduce class, gender, sexuality, and race, among others, but they argue that problematic cultural products can still foster critical perspectives if teachers bring them into their classrooms for discussion and critical analysis (Tisdell & Thompson, 2007; Yin, 2005). One notable example of this type of media examination is the Bechdel-Wallace Test, a straightforward measure used to evaluate the representation of women in fiction, particularly within films. This test was first mentioned by cartoonist Alison Bechdel and her friend Liz Wallace in their comic strip *The Rule* (Bechdel, 1985) within Bechdel's long-running *Dykes to Watch Out For* comic run *(1983 – 2008)*. To meet the criteria of the Bechdel-Wallace Test, a work must satisfy three conditions. It should feature at least two women characters; both characters must be named, and they must engage in a conversation about something other than a man. This test underscores the frequent absence of significant representation of women in many fictional works.

This instrumental and fruitful scholarship in the past three decades added to the systematic analysis of the spheres of public space, popular culture, media, and political activism (Sandlin et al., 2011). Today, contemporary media is a site of informal learning, socialization, and acculturation, just as past generations have used traditional media for the same purpose. At present, young people learn, form identities, and create communities using this new media ubiquitously (Greenhow & Robelia, 2009; Ismail, 2020). In cultural studies and education research, the increased use of the term public pedagogy has become a way to explore the

connection of cultural and media artifacts to the processes of social domination through

hegemony (Burdick & Sandlin, 2013). Specifically, the lens of cultural studies has offered

education researchers a way to critically investigate public and popular culture spaces for their

pedagogical aspects and how these spaces reproduce or challenge common and oppressive

representations of reality (Sandlin et al., 2011). Early feminist and queer scholars engaged with

public pedagogies of popular culture, emphasizing that media could also be a site for liberatory

discourses that help produce collective identities among marginalized populations. In his

foundational work, Roger Simon (1992) reimagines pedagogy as cultural politics, representing

and understanding our social world and encouraging the extension of possible social identities

by developing competencies and capabilities. Simon presents a vision for a pedagogy of

possibility, highlighting how educational practices can foster hopeful and transformative

outcomes. Through his work, he effectively blurs the lines of the confines of traditional learning.

He applies his ideas to cultural workers, artists, activists and anyone interested in promoting

positive social change. Thus, liberatory spaces of resistance and possibility are often created by

depicting new potentials and critically examining the complex interaction of politics, societal

forces, media, and popular culture (Sandlin et al., 2011; Simon, 1992).

Queer identity formation and contemporary media

For queer youth, especially in rural or conservative areas, who often do not have a

physical space to explore their identities safely, contemporary media can be a site of learning,

connection, and community (Lucerno, 2017). Fox and Ralston (2016) say that social media plays

a vital role in shaping queer identities by providing a space to share experiences, ask questions,

explore roles, and have a common culture. The informal learning in these safe online spaces

with like-minded individuals often functions as the first step toward integrating queer identity

into youth's physical environments. The authors explain that social media learning can be seen

as traditional learning, such as seeking and obtaining information directly from online

resources. For example, queer youths with questions or uncertainties look for websites or online

social sources to answer them. Some common topics that are sought include identity labels and meanings, coming out stories, relationships, and concerns related to transitioning and what to expect from hormones or surgery (Fox & Ralston, 2016; Hiebert & Kortes-Miller, 2021).

Social learning is another type of informal learning that occurs via contemporary media. This type of learning involves identifying suitable role models and observing their behaviours (Bandura, 2001). For example, youth who can find peers online who share their queer lives authentically can observe and then imitate their behaviour. According to Fox and Ralston (2016), identifying with online role models can boost queer individuals' self-efficacy for behaviours such as coming out. This study shows that young people could recognize and follow LGBTQ+ peers, celebrities, and organizations by following links in their network or searching for keywords or hashtags on sites like X (formerly Twitter), Instagram, and Tumblr. This way, they could populate their newsfeeds and identify content relevant to their queer identity. Queer celebrities were a significant source for learning; many participants said that seeing these celebrities living their lives openly and being vocal about their support for queer issues was inspiring and normalized conversations about sensitive issues, such as same-sex marriage. In addition, many older queer folks use social media such as YouTube to teach youth about LGBTQ+ issues. This teaching usually involves sharing information about queer history and their personal experiences as queer individuals. According to the article, teaching was most common among individuals who were 'out' and those with less common queer identities, such as asexual and transgender individuals (Fox & Ralston, 2016; Michaelsen, 2017).

In a similar study, Hiebert and Kortes-Miller (2021) examine the use of TikTok by GSM youth during COVID-19 lockdowns in early 2020. In this study, they found that social media can provide connection to others with shared experiences of discrimination as well as the ability to access vital information that may not be accessible outside of online spaces due to societal heteronormativity, homophobia and transphobia (Schmitz et al., 2020). This study also discusses Lucero's (2017) findings that social media can connect youth to supportive peers and

adults, help the development of sexuality and gender identity, and support and guide the coming out process. This process is outlined well in Cavalcante's (2016) intimate ethnographic case study, which focuses on a transgender individual's online coming out and transition story, exploring the successes and challenges of the experience. The study highlights how online technologies facilitate identity exploration, create new identity management tasks and help with the complex navigation of being trans in public spaces. For transgender individuals who live in a world not designed with them in mind, online communities and digital care structures can help contend with the challenges of everyday life.

YouTube

YouTube was launched in 2005 as a video-sharing site that allows users to upload, view, and comment on videos. Today, YouTube draws almost two and a half billion users per month. As YouTube content continues to attract immense audiences, the scope and influence of the platform have begun to rival traditional television programs in the United States (Miller & Bond, 2022; Shepherd, 2025). Research shows that a staggering number of people incorporate YouTube video sharing and watching into their daily habits and routines, with approximately 122 million daily users (Shepherd, 2025). Social media platforms such as YouTube can genuinely be social lifelines for queer youth. Studies examining YouTube investigate how content creators use intimate self-disclosure as a strategy to connect with their audiences. Narratives highlighting LGBTQ+ YouTubers' most vulnerable moments are often highly engaging and receive the most positive feedback, reflecting the appeal of sentimental culture (Miller, 2018; Michaelsen, 2017). The 'It Gets Better Project' was a fitting example of this created intimacy, which allowed queer peers to feel differently together with others. YouTube effectively enables a feeling of shared suffering, commonality, and support (Michaelsen, 2017).

YouTube's life-sustaining quality can also be seen in its ability to help alleviate loneliness and breed familiarity (Michaelsen, 2017). YouTube seems to be a markedly constructive space for GSM youth to develop a sense of self and build community with content creators and other

users. Content on queer YouTube channels highlights 2SLGBTQQIAP+ culture and terminology and provides audiences with information, validation, and entertainment related to their sexual or gender identities. The demand for detailed and intimate narratives about queer YouTubers' lives may arise from the perceived lack of such narratives in other, more traditional media spaces. Research indicates that GSM individuals often establish role model relationships with media personalities in the absence of real-life counterparts, a finding substantiated by many interviewed YouTubers. This personal investment seems to encourage altruistic behaviours among queer YouTubers. One expression of this altruism is the policing of harmful content. Policing negativity was viewed as a necessary measure to protect potentially vulnerable LGBTQ+ viewers, particularly youth. Although time-consuming, this was seen as a critical essential duty to maintain a safe space in their community (Miller & Bond, 2022).

Reddit

Reddit, another social media site, consists of innumerable communities which gather to share information, discuss fandoms, read news, create memes, and explore a variety of subjects. Reddit comprises a connected community of subforums called 'subreddits,' which cover a staggering and expansive array of topics. Reddit's unique voting system, which includes upvoting and downvoting, plays a central role in shaping the collective identity of the site's various communities. According to Gaudette et al. (2020), by using the upvoting (which increases content visibility) and downvoting (which decreases content visibility) functions on Reddit, users can shape the discourse and build a collective identity within their subreddit community.

Hundreds of queer-focused subreddits allow their communities to share, learn and support each other. They range from substantial, general 2SLGBTQQIAP+ communities with over 1.2 million members, such as r/lgbt, to smaller, more specific communities, such as r/trans, with about 588,000 members or r/NonBinary, with about 263,000 members at the time of writing. Every identity under the rainbow has various subreddits, allowing their members to

find information, discuss important issues, make jokes, share news and cultural artifacts, and learn from and with each other. Importantly, Reddit has technical anonymity, as it is a public website and does not require passwords to access its information (Reddit Inc., 2024); therefore, the vast majority of Reddit users do not use their real names or pictures and instead opt for avatars and usernames that often cannot be linked to their identity in real life. Triggs et al. (2021) discuss these factors in their study that found that the platform seems to invite a sense of safe space because it "allows LGBTQ people to separate, connect and form group identities while limiting the social and physical risks of harm placed upon queer socialization by heteronormative society" (p. 8). This type of anonymity is vital for youth who do not have safe physical spaces to interact and learn from the queer community at large but can do so online in the safety of their devices.

Dimension 20

Dungeons & Dragons (D&D) is a cultural space that provides informal learning and identity exploration. D&D is a tabletop roleplaying game where players embody and perform the identity of a fictional character and make improvised choices based on their character's background and personality. The game's narrative is facilitated by a Game or Dungeon Master (GM) who describes and creates the world in which the players explore. For queer people, imagining new ways of being and relating is essential to developing a sense of one's queer or trans identity. In D&D, the player's character's gender is entirely theirs to invent. When players are already embodying the experience of an elf, dwarf or aasimar, playing a person of another gender is relatively easy. From there, anything is possible. For queer youth and those who are intimately familiar with the arbitrary limitations of binary gender expression, being able to create one's gender expression and identity can be very liberating.

D&D does have problematic origins, as it was developed out of the wargaming communities of the mid-20th century. That gaming culture was composed mainly of cisgender-heterosexual (cishet) white men creating games for other cishet white men (Garcia, 2017).

However, introducing the fifth edition, which had more streamlined, flexible rules and inclusive language, made D&D more accessible and popular than ever. Kawitzky (2020) argues that customization is an essential queer survival skill. The process of taking on a system that may have begun as hostile or exclusionary and making it livable, creating spaces within it to exist and sustain marginalized identities, is one of resistance. This creative flexibility characterizes how imagining new worlds might be a utopian impulse and is also woven into the fabric of D&D, which fundamentally engages with collaborative world and scenario building.

D&D's increase in popularity was aided by 'Actual play' (sometimes known as Live play) shows like Dimension 20, where queer and trans players have been present in every season. According to Coates (2023),

> Dimension 20 is easy to fall in love with because of its inclusivity: The series is openly queer in a way D&D, at least as far as marketing materials go, often isn't. And despite complex narratives and fully realized characters, the series is a perfect jumping-on point for someone just entering the world of Dungeons & Dragons (para. 9).

Actual play shows have gained significant popularity over the past 15 years. They represent a distinct narrative medium, typically as podcasts or web shows, where professional actors improvise by playing tabletop role-playing games (TTRPGs) on camera. These shows usually include in-character interactions among players, storytelling and worldbuilding by the GM, and out-of-character elements such as battle strategies, dice rolls, and discussions of game mechanics (Zeoli, 2023).

Jennifer Cover (2010) explains that one of the primary reasons players are drawn to D&D is a narrative agency, which results in productive interactivity, which means that the players have control over the story that develops from their gameplay. Cover discusses this narrative uniqueness when she asserts that D&D's "interactivity exceeds what is typically available in other narrative forms, such as novels or video games – it allows for collaborative authorship, in which player and DM work as co-authors towards finessing the final text" (p. 18).

This allows for much more freedom to create a collective story, which can be liberating for the players. The best part about actual play shows is that queer individuals who may not have an opportunity to play D&D in their physical environment can watch shows like Dimension 20 with diverse actors who play amazingly wide-ranging characters. Queer people have the opportunity to see themselves in the world-building, storytelling and characters and learn from their stories.

Marginalization of Transmasculinities

In the last few decades, feminist scholarship has turned to the critical study of men and masculinities to understand the process of patriarchal power and how men's socialization and behaviours establish and support the systemic dominance of men over women (Gardiner, 2005). Some feminists pushed for opportunities to bridge the fields of masculinity and feminist theory, emphasizing the importance of addressing gender inequalities from multiple perspectives (Beasley, 2019). A prolific sociologist and gender theorist, Connell (2005) added to the academic discourse about the diversity of masculinity and called to "recognize the relations between the different kinds of masculinity: relations of alliance, dominance and subordination" (p. 37). According to Connell (2005), these relationships are formed through practices that involve exclusion, inclusion, intimidation, and exploitation of other masculinities. For Connell (2015), masculinities are hierarchical in each society's definition of their hegemonic masculinity pattern, which changes over time. Certain masculinities operate globally, influenced by phases of imperialism, colonialism, decolonization, and globalization. Currently, new forms of masculinity are emerging in global business, being spurred by unchecked capitalism alongside movements aiming to reform masculinities in various countries. This approach partially transformed the study of masculinity by dismantling the idea that to study masculinity was to examine the types or static characteristics of men.

In the same period, transgender people had become more visible in North America, and transgender studies have become commonplace; however, much of the research on transgender people was focused on the experiences of male-to-female (MTF) transgender people in urban

areas entirely (Stryker, 2017). In the second edition of his book, *FTM: Female-to-Male Transsexuals in Society*, Aaron Devor (2016) addresses this issue of invisibility for trans men. He recounts that when he first began writing the first edition of his book in the late 1980s, there was a significant lack of published material on the subject. At that time, professional literature scarcely mentioned transmasculine individuals, with fewer than 100 articles addressing them before 1987. It was challenging to find information on trans men in general, as the internet had not yet become widespread; there were no websites or online groups available for trans individuals to access information or support. During that time, studies that focused explicitly on masculinity paid extraordinarily little attention to transmasculinity and/or masculine-presenting non-binary bodies in general (Gottzén & Straube, 2016). Some literature explicitly focusing on the experiences of trans men emerged in the late 1990s and early 2000s. However, it was mainly drowned out in the masculinity research space by privileging cis-gendered masculinity and a general lack of interest in trans and queer embodiments of masculinity. Some early studies of transmasculinity had poststructuralist and interactionist theoretical approaches influenced by Butler's (1990) seminal work that emphasized that gender is not based on essentialist ideas and has to be learned in everyday interactions through repetition. This applies to all individuals, cis or trans - a theoretical approach that is very valuable to understanding transmasculine individuals. Ekins and King (2006), for example, discussed the understanding that not only gender but also the norm of (binary) sex is socioculturally and historically produced. They demonstrate that much of the science around sex, sexuality, and gender is based on the binary gender divide, viewed without question. When scientists encountered exceptions to this binary, they tended to explain away the anomalies rather than challenge the binary itself. This highlighted that the binary is a social creation, drawing attention to science and medicine's political and cultural dimensions in these areas (Ekins & King, 2006, p. 26).

In the social realm, Schilt (2010) conducted a study on trans men's experiences of gender inequality in their workspaces, where she details the interactional process of "achieving social

maleness" (p. 48), that is, the work of being recognized as a man by others. Schilt (2010) shows how trans men may gain acceptance and privileges as men but also that many experience marginalization and discrimination if they choose to live openly as transgender. Moreover, in his work, Vidal-Ortiz (2005) discusses the experiences of female-to-male (FTM) individuals and their transitions. He argues that their experiences of being seen as men are not currently accepted identity patterns since "ideal masculinity" is built on renouncing feminine traits (p. 192). Due to their embodied history, trans men are always relegated to a "subordinated masculinity," together with homosexuality, symbolically expelled from hegemonic or traditional masculinity. These perspectives highlight how the construction of heterosexuality as the normative standard of sexuality rests on the perpetuation of a heterosexual/homosexual binary, which alternatively can be understood as compulsory heterosexuality (Rich, 1980). Rubin (1993) discusses this issue by illuminating that the full range of possible sexual orientations and behaviours are hierarchically ranked and operate as a basis to distribute social power and privilege. However, she erroneously believed there was no difference between gender identity and sexual orientation, something that we now know is inaccurate (American Psychological Association, 2024).

In her book *Transgender History*, Susan Stryker (2017) discusses transmasculine marginalization further. She outlines the efforts of one particular group of white feminists who have set the cause for transgender individuals back: Trans-Exclusionary Radical Feminists (TERFs). TERFs hold several arguments against trans individuals; many of them involve sex essentialism, which is the idea that gender is strictly tied to biological sex. Another central argument is that trans men are not truly men but women who are confused, coerced or misled by patriarchy to abandon womanhood. Many of these arguments also stem from the notion that trans men are trying to escape misogyny or internalized homophobia by transitioning so they can reap the privileges of patriarchy. Black and intersectional feminists were the first to insist that there is no essential "woman" and to understand the oppression of any particular woman or

group of people meant taking into account the things that intersect with an individual's identity, such as their race, religion, disability, socioeconomic status and a myriad other factors that marginalize or privilege them, including being transgender or having a GNC identity (Crenshaw, 1991; Moraga & Andéluza, 1983). These types of arguments also lead to the inclusion of the T into the LGBT acronym in the mid-1990s. Before this, many white, gay, lesbian and bisexual people did not accept trans identities as part of the queer movement. They considered trans people to be, first and foremost, trans people as opposed to members that could also be gay, lesbian, and bisexual. The more accurate separation of the concepts of gender identity, gender expression, sexual orientation and sex characteristics did not come into common cultural use until well into the 2010s in North America (Stryker, 2017).

Transmasculine representation in media

Historically, transgender people have primarily been represented on screen in negative and stereotypical ways. Perhaps the most negatively impactful aspect of these representations is that these stereotypes can become rooted in the public mind without access to varied and complex characterizations. Over the past two decades, however, the media landscape has slowly changed, providing more visibility for transgender people (Capuzza & Spencer, 2016; Mocarski, 2019). This change has occurred primarily due to a critical mass of transgender people, allies and activists who joined together to challenge transphobia and change the public narrative about trans issues. An essential part of this change in public discourse is the meteoric rise of more progressive television programming featuring lead or supporting transgender characters rising across all classifications, including scripted, reality, made-for-television movies, and documentaries. As well as the success and critical acclaim of scripted series such as *Orange is the New Black, Transparent, Glee and Sense8* (McLaren et al., 2021).

Nevertheless, Booth (2011) provides a critical warning when he explains, "As is the case with any marginalized group, however, visibility is a risky prospect....an increase in media representation may be just as likely to confuse the issue further as to clarify it, particularly when

the commercial interests controlling those representations are inclined to frame them in sensationalistic terms" (p. 191). In addition to sensationalism, Johnson (2016) argues that increased television representation has resulted in the regulation of transgender identities and expression. Siebler (2012) maintains that the appearance of transgender characters across a variety of television genres largely has resulted in a dominant narrative, one that equates "trans" with "transitioning." This dominant narrative causes concern because it functions as a form of gender policing in which transgender characters exist only to support a liberal and often individualistic message about tolerance and inclusion rather than challenging stereotypes. This is a significant issue because when the chances of direct contact with a group are limited, people must rely on indirect contact, such as media representations, to shape their attitudes toward a group (Bracco et al., 2024; Mocarski, 2019). Unfortunately, there is still a distinct lack of visibility of transmasculine characters as well as a lack of opportunity for trans men to see themselves on television and to identify with such characters. Keegan (2014) emphatically observes that "The increased visibility for trans women has not necessarily meant increased visibility for transgender men. Trans men of colour fare even worse: Representations of their lives in scripted media are nonexistent" (para. 3). In addition, the lack of representation of masculine GNC individuals is even more pronounced (Capuzza & Spencer, 2016).

The absence of transmasculinity is ever-present in GLAAD's Where We Are on TV Report (2024). In the 2023-2024 television season, twenty-four transgender characters appeared on broadcast, cable, and streaming services; of those counted, only five (21 percent) were trans men. According to GLAAD (2024), only one of the five transmasculine characters was present in the traditional media outlets: broadcast and cable. The other four were on streaming services, showing that contemporary media is still ahead in the queer representation department. In fact, out of the twenty-four total transpeople counted, 19 of them were on streaming services. Johnson (2016) discusses the issue that when transmasculine characters are finally portrayed, there is often a heavy push for a purely medical model to explain the way

transgender people feel about their bodies and identities. This advances a specific argument that there are two binary genders, and transition always occurs in the context of changing one binary category to another. This leaves out the non-binary, genderqueer and GNC individuals who may also identify as transmasculine but do not adhere to a strict binary notion of their gender. These tropes ubiquitously oversimplify a more complex understanding of the dynamics intrinsic to one's gender identity (McLaren et al., 2021). Other problematic representations are also common, such as transmen being victimized by repetitively being misgendered, physically, mentally, and sexually abused. Often, transmasculine people are shown to be constantly interrogated and experience gender policing in bathrooms and changing rooms (Capuzza & Spencer, 2016). There is minimal opportunity to see transmasculine joy, authenticity, and a simple, noncomplicated existence. Most representations are embroiled in dramatic tones and story hooks that can become dehumanizing.

Transgender Audiences – Real-life implications

Representational implications are highlighted in Villegas-Simón et al.'s (2024) study of how transgender audiences relate to their portrayal in media. The study explains that many trans people have a heightened capacity to identify the stereotypes and prejudices in the narratives that represent them. As a marginalized group which is still stigmatized and whose fundamental rights are not recognized worldwide, the media that represent them are relevant because they construct a convincing image of what it is to be a transgender person. In reality, trans people are acutely aware of the impact that mass media representation has on their everyday social environment, their legal status, their identity development, and their self-esteem (Villegas-Simón et al., 2024, p. 32).

Most of the media stereotypes and prejudices discussed by the participants in Villegas-Simón et al.'s (2024) study are framed within transnormativity. Cispassing, which is the act of getting recognized and assumed to be cis, stands out as a central element that determines practically all popular transgender discourses in traditional media. Cispassing drives the

decision behind the creation of most trans characters, who are usually those who fit the gender binary the best. Most of them address the tragic lives that trans people lead until they achieve their supposed dream to adhere to the physical, cultural, and social aspects that are hegemonically associated with their gender. Therefore, trans audiences consider that, in this scenario, the only way to exist in the media is to appear or desire to be cispassing, but this has little to do with their own embodied experiences and knowledge and is a vital element of negotiation and resistance during their media and cultural practices.

There is often a negotiation process between representation, stereotypes, and stigmatization that transgender audiences engage in based on their own experiences when dealing with harmful or inaccurate media portrayals. Cavalcante (2018) defines resilient reception as the strategies that queer audiences employ to handle adverse emotions and feelings resulting from hurtful media portrayals. The author includes "rest, rebuilding, and reclamation practices" (p. 1187). Fundamentally, these practices are survival strategies that include managing, coping, and rebounding, enacted as practical responses to trans people's intensely emotional encounters with media and society in everyday life. Essentially, "practices of audience resilience highlight the work and emotional labour required to endure the shocks and disturbances that come with increasingly living in and migrating across complex and integrated media environments" (Cavalcante, 2018, p. 1195). The exhaustion and stress experienced by transgender individuals, which build up through their daily interactions and media consumption, impose a considerable emotional drain that requires careful management and resolution.

On a more positive note, Cavalcante's (2017) article explores transgender audiences' interactions with what he calls 'breakout texts,' which are media that portray first-of-its-kind representation. One of these media pieces is the film *Boys Don't Cry* (1999). One participant, a transgender man in his early twenties, describes his experience of watching the movie. He said that his viewing experience was profound: "*Boys Don't Cry* was just so intense for me. I really

got into it." While he had seen representations of transgender women before, *Boys Don't Cry* was the first time he saw a transgender man on screen: "When I saw the film, I was like, 'Wow! That's me.' I felt like I had never seen it in my life either, and it was very intense to find somebody who I felt was very similar to who I was" (p. 550).

The film generated strong feelings of self-recognition and catalyzed action, where the participant began developing his identity online. At one point, after seeing the movie, he started to research things on the internet. He began finding webpages of support groups or people who would write about how they felt. This encouraged him to look stuff up, like photos of trans people. Those online photos showed him what he could do, and he started doing it. *Boys Don't Cry* was a crucial resource for his self-making, igniting a chain of events that helped him to explore, test, and actualize his transgender identity more fully.

According to Cavalcante (2017), break-out texts are facilitators of "queer identity work," which is the act of finding, articulating, and performing LGBT identities (p. 540). Breakout texts often initiate this self-exploration by operating as a first impression of a hidden identity and being broadly available and visible in popular culture. In addition, in this study, some participants welcomed the opportunity to perform as cultural interpreters, which is the opportunity to participate in a larger social conversation—a conversation from which they often felt excluded by having a stigmatized and disenfranchised identity. They discerned breakout texts as vehicles that ignited public interest in topics that had been previously taboo or overlooked, which subsequently transformed their stigmatized status.

Unfortunately for society at large, improved visibility and representation of transgender individuals does not only result in acceptance and understanding. An influx of representation comes with the threat of greater hostility and violence against those represented. As mentioned above, visibility in itself can be a trap, especially for those who are already the most visible and vulnerable. Transphobes who are upset to see trans people on the covers of magazines or existing in television shows do not aim their anger at the celebrity in any meaningful way but

aim it at the trans people they encounter in their day-to-day lives (McCarthy Blackston, 2023). With the increased visibility comes backlash and legislation aimed at transpeople's access to public spaces and services, especially in healthcare. In the United States, there were significant increases in rates of past-year suicide attempts among GSM youth ages 13–17 in states that enacted anti-transgender laws relative to states that did not (Lee et al., 2024). These laws established limitations to access to gender-affirming healthcare and restricted bathrooms to the individual's sex assigned at birth. They prohibited transgender youth from participating in sports or school activities that align with their gender identity, thus creating new stressors in these young people's lives and affecting their mental health negatively. The data for Lee et al.'s (2024) study was collected from 2018 to 2022, when these directives were implemented at the individual state level. Conceivably, for more wealthy parents of transgender children, there may have been avenues of escape to more liberal states or countries to find gender-affirming care and access to social support and resources. Now, in 2025, with the re-election of Donald Trump in the United States, these anti-transgender laws are occurring at the federal level (Rummler, 2025; Jones, 2025; Trans Formations Project, 2025). The current political climate in the United States underscores the need to maintain positive and liberatory online spaces for GSM folks to help with mental health challenges and suicidal ideation due to minority stress, which is the stress that accumulates due to negative experiences associated with one's marginalized social identity (Rabasco & Andover, 2021; Lee et al., 2024) that will likely be exacerbated further after these legislative changes.

Conclusion

Throughout this chapter, I have discussed that contemporary media spaces are sites of public pedagogy and that, for many people, they can provide a powerful place for informal learning and identity formation. Notably, for queer youth, especially those of marginalized status, such as transmasculine individuals, contemporary sites such as social media and streaming services can be an incredible boon for representation, community, and learning. I

illuminated that representation can also come with hardship and hostility, and it is important to consider the nuance of drawbacks and benefits of increased visibility for minoritized individuals. On the positive side, I have shown that some contemporary media sites have a better capacity to represent a fuller range of diverse transgender identities, with significant opportunities to question deeply embedded social assumptions about the gender binary and gender stability. Transmasculine people represented in contemporary media can continue to play a significant role in challenging stereotypes, increasing social acceptance and personal safety, and providing resilient role models for other transgender youth and adults.

Chapter Three: Methodology and Methods

As discussed in the introduction, I have chosen to critically examine three contemporary media spaces and analyze their representations of transmasculine individuals. The following questions guided this study:

1. How or to what extent do the YouTube, Reddit, and Dimension 20 case studies challenge and/or reinforce the hegemonic forces of cisnormativity?

2. How or to what extent do the YouTube, Reddit, and Dimension 20 case studies function as a liberatory space for transmasculine individuals?

To help me answer these research questions, I undertook a qualitative multi-case study (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 233) consisting of three data dives into: YouTube, Reddit, and D20. According to Yin (2014), a case study is an empirical inquiry investigating a phenomenon in its real-life context. In case study research, multiple data collection methods are used, as they involve an in-depth study of a particular phenomenon. In her paper, Priya (2021) further explains that there are three types of case studies: exploratory, descriptive, and explanatory.

> An exploratory study is often an initial examination of a phenomenon, and the goal often is to develop pertinent hypotheses and propositions for further inquiry. A descriptive case study attempts to draw a complete picture of a particular phenomenon. In contrast, an explanatory case study investigates the "how" and "why" questions behind a phenomenon (p. 96).

Given the scope of my MEd thesis research and the fact that I am delving into an under-researched topic by seeking to understand the representation of transmasculine individuals in three contemporary media spaces, exploratory case studies best suited my research.

I used content analysis to investigate these case studies (Neuendorf, 2010), which involved systematically categorizing and coding the media content I sampled to identify patterns, themes, and biases. Modern content analysis is a technique often used in analyzing online media artifacts because it is unobtrusive and can effectively analyze data that is relatively

unstructured for meanings, symbolic qualities, and representations; it has been used often for communications media like newspapers, social media, and television (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p.179; Hsieh & Shannon, 2005). Qualitative content analysis involves numerous passes through chosen media, first identifying tentative themes and patterns and then, through subsequent examinations, more firmly identifying coding categories. This approach also allows researchers to consider contextual cues within each space better. The process emphasizes discovery and description rather than establishing numerical relationships between two or more variables (Altheide & Schneider, 2013). My content analysis was framed through a critical social justice lens, with particular attention being paid to queer and intersectional feminist theory contexts.

Ethical considerations

Since I did not conduct research directly with human participants, a formal ethical review by Lakehead's Research Ethics Board (REB) was unnecessary. Nevertheless, ethical issues remained a significant consideration in my study. As mentioned above, Reddit and YouTube are free and public sites where information can be accessed without barriers or a password. Additionally, most Reddit users do not use their real names or pictures and instead opt for avatars and usernames that often cannot be linked to their identity in real life. Still, I used pseudonyms to protect community members' privacy when quoting their comments. On the other hand, some YouTube commenters did use their real names and pictures, and when quoting them, I made sure to anonymize their data carefully and not capture their names or images in screen grabs.

Collecting data from the internet for research raises a general ethical issue relevant to this study that scholars have discussed. My study undertook what Merriam and Tisdell (2016) describe as observational research from a *complete observer* position (p.145). I collected observational (Caliandro, 2017) unintrusive data from Reddit and YouTube, which are public spaces. This is akin to naturalistic observational research, "that studies human acts or behaviours in a natural environment in which people partaking in their normal daily activities

are observed with or without their knowledge by researchers who do not intervene in any way in the activity" (Government of Canada, 2023, para. 13).

Still, using such data is an ethical grey area because explicit consent is not asked for or given by those whose data is used in such research. Indeed, all images, videos and text captions were posted with the account users' consent to Reddit's and YouTube's privacy policies, which meant I could access them freely for my research. The Panel on Research Ethics (Government of Canada, 2023) says that,

> If existing information on SM [social media] platforms was created by its user with the intention that it would be available in the public domain with no restrictions, then such information can be considered accessible to others, including for research purposes. An example of information that exists in the public domain and can be freely available (i.e., no barriers at all) are comments on YouTube videos or opinions using hashtags where users intend to make their opinions known to others on specific topics. It may include videos posted by public figures e.g., politicians, influencers, athletes, or actors, with the intent to make the videos accessible to others in the public domain and with no expectation of privacy. In such cases, the information is intended to be accessible to the public without the need to get additional authorization, permission, or consent, and is likely to be exempt from REB review (para. 19).

While I was technically allowed to do this research, I wanted to ensure that my research did not cause harm given that I am studying vulnerable populations. I was tremendously respectful and careful with all the information I gathered for this project. To create an additional safeguard for privacy, I did not upload research data to the cloud. I kept all my research notes and any private information I collected on my computer, password-protected in my home office.

Furthermore, according to Merriam and Tisdell (2016), the show Dimension 20: *The Unsleeping City* (2019) can be considered a popular culture document. Popular culture documents are designed "to entertain, inform and perhaps persuade the public. They are public

in nature, so they are sometimes categorized under public records. Popular media forms such as television, film, radio, newspapers, library works, photography, cartoons and the Internet are sources of 'public' data" (p. 167). This allows researchers to use them as media artifacts for data collection without needing human participants. This means I could access and study the show as a primary document for my research without going through an REB review.

Data collection

Given the overwhelming number of posts and comments on both Reddit and YouTube sites and the need to keep the amount of data manageable in an MEd thesis, I chose to limit myself to collecting data for three weeks in September 2024. These weeks were spent completely immersed in those spaces. As discussed in the ethical consideration section above, I took a complete observer or "lurker" position (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 159). I did not converse with the Reddit community members or YouTube commenters. Conducting research from a wholly hidden perspective is acceptable because Reddit and YouTube are both free and public sites.

I spent the week of September 9, 2024, in the r/ftm subreddit. r/ftm is "a place for the guys," a "Support-based discussion place focused on trans men, trans-masc individuals, and other people assigned female at birth who are trans" (r/ftm, 2011). At the time of writing, it has 260,000 members. During this week, I spent approximately two hours a day reading the top posts, filtered by 'Top Posts,' This allowed me to see the posts that were most interacted with and read their comments daily while taking careful field notes. I ended up with 27 posts and their top comments, which comprised 267 samples. I then switched to archived posts and examined the top four posts per year and their top ten comments in the past three years to see how the community has changed over the years. I ended up with 12 posts and 30 comments in total. I downloaded any relevant media or figures as needed.

Afterward, I spent the week of September 16, 2024, viewing the Jammidodger channel on YouTube. Jamie Raines is a Sunday Times Bestseller author of the book *The T in the LGB* (2024) and a content creator on YouTube. He is a trans man based in the UK, and his channel,

Jammidodger, has 1.14 million subscribers and over a thousand videos about trans and queer issues (Jammidodger, 2011). During this week, I spent approximately two hours a day watching videos and reading comments on this channel. I filtered the videos by 'Latest' and watched the latest six videos posted. I then read the top five comments and replies under these videos – generating a sample of 502 comments. After a few days, I switched to the 'Popular' filter to see the channel's top five most watched and commented-on videos. Doing this allowed me to see how the channel has changed over time. This amounted to approximately two to three videos daily, depending on their length. I read the top five comments under the videos and a maximum of 25 comments under the top comments while taking careful field notes and, once again, saving any relevant media or quotes as necessary. I ended up with a sample of 424 comments and their replies.

For the Dimension 20 case study, I chose the actual play show, *The Unsleeping City* (2019). This one was slightly more difficult, as this is a narrative show with 17 episodes running for 34:11 hours. *The Unsleeping City* is an urban fantasy D&D campaign that follows a group of 21st-century heroes born and raised in New York City. They are explicitly presented as heroes and not adventurers. The player characters (PCs) are not a questing party who stray far away from home, which is the most common trope in D&D storytelling but instead choose to stay put and defend their city (French, 2022). Since I have previously watched the show, I downloaded the episode transcripts available in the Dimension 20 Wiki (2022) to examine the show's textual narrative closely. I also used the Wiki to reference specific media, such as pictures, character sheets, and actors' information. I spent the week of September 23, 2024, carefully reading and re-reading the show's transcripts, choosing scenes involving Pete "the plug" Conlan, one of the main characters, making field notes, and saving relevant quotes. I ended up with ten scenes pertinent to my research questions.

Sampling strategies

I utilized purposeful sampling to choose postings and comments from which the most information could be discovered or gleaned (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 96). The type of sampling that I used started as convenience sampling and continued to theoretical sampling as I understood more about the behaviour of the community members on the two social media sites. For Dimension 20: *The Unsleeping City*, I searched for scenes related to and including Pete Conlan, a trans man played by Ally Beardsley, a nonbinary transmasculine actor. I specifically searched for scenes related to Pete's trans identity, how he is received by his peers and the learning and growth he undergoes throughout the show. After examining scenes related to Pete's trans identity, I read the entire script in totality to see how Pete was presented as a whole.

Data Analysis

I created three separate documents corresponding to each case. In each document, I collected the relevant media I wanted to analyze. In the Reddit case study, I assembled a document with the posts, comments and field notes I took during the week of September 9th. Similarly, for the YouTube case study, I assembled a document with my field notes, links to the videos I watched, and any relevant comments and upvote information I deemed important during the week of September 16th. Finally, for the Dimension 20 case study, I made a document with the scenes I have collected and my notes about them. I used the qualitative research software NVivo to analyze the data efficiently by uploading the three separate documents onto the program.

I started with open coding by attempting to organize the data into categories. There was an overwhelming amount of information, but using NVivo to manage the data was very helpful. Initially, I coded based on the themes I found in the data. Table 1 illustrates the breakdown of themes I discovered, the case studies they were found in, and references that refer to them. Some references fell under multiple themes. As can be seen in Table 1, there were five major

categories: 'Body and Medical Matters,' 'Mental Health,' 'Relationships,' 'Social Justice' and 'Social Situations.'

Table 1

Themes found and the references corresponding to them

Theme	Case Study	References
Body and Medical Matters	**Reddit, YouTube, D20**	**33**
Mental Health	**Reddit, YouTube, D20**	**137**
Gender Euphoria	Reddit, YouTube	35
Misgendering	Reddit, YouTube, D20	54
Transphobia	Reddit, YouTube, D20	17
Relationships	**Reddit, YouTube, D20**	**53**
Family	Reddit, YouTube, D20	24
Friends	Reddit, YouTube, D20	17
Sex and Romance	Reddit, YouTube, D20	12
Social Justice	**Reddit, YouTube, D20**	**23**
Social Situations	**Reddit, YouTube**	**81**
Bathrooms and Changing Rooms	Reddit, YouTube	18
Bureaucracy	Reddit, YouTube	17
Pronouns	Reddit, YouTube	2
School	Reddit, YouTube	31
Work	Reddit, YouTube	13
Total		**327**

Some categories were further categorized due to the number of specific references discussing a subtheme. The theme, 'Body and Medical Matters,' was a category that included issues of physicality, medical processes, medications and general comments about embodied experiences.

'Mental Health' was broken into three subcategories: 'Gender Euphoria,' Misgendering' and 'Transphobia.' The term gender euphoria originated in online and in-person GSM communities. It is a feeling of joy and rightness in one's gender or sex. These experiences can be external, internal, and/or social (Beischel et al., 2022, p. 276). Misgendering is a concept that refers to a situation in which an individual deliberately or inadvertently refers to or describes a person in a manner that does not correspond with their affirmed gender. Katz-Wize (2021) describes the impacts when they explain that being misgendered "is both exhausting and demoralizing. When people are misgendered, they feel invalidated and unseen. When this happens daily, it becomes a burden that can negatively impact their mental health and their ability to function in the world" (Para. 2). Thus, experiencing misgendering often and on purpose becomes an additional hardship that transpeople have to endure. Transphobia refers to the discrimination, aversion, fear or violence directed towards transgender individuals. This theme discussed mental health as a general topic and concerns specific cases that encompass mental health but can be broken down further, such as a post about someone's experience with gender euphoria and how it affected their mental health.

The theme of 'Relationships' was broken into three subcategories: 'Family,' 'Friends,' and 'Sex and Romance.' This theme also required further breakdown due to the complexity of the different types of relationships discussed. For example, some posts and comments were explicitly about romantic relationships, and some were about friendships or issues with family members. The theme 'Social Justice,' specifically, concerned overarching conversations and discussions around issues of equity, intersectionality, current politics and resistance. Finally, 'Social Situations' was broken down into five subthemes: 'Bathrooms and Changing Rooms,' 'Bureaucracy,' 'Pronouns,' 'School,' and 'Work.' This was also a necessary breakdown because the situations varied greatly. Themes in this category included posts about people's experiences with changing rooms at the gym or school or attempting to change their name at work,

navigating bureaucratic processes in civic settings and so on. The total number of references for this code was 327.

Next, I coded based on the formats of engagement I found in the data. This included the types of posts, comments or videos and the genres or styles of media prevalent in the data. Table 2 shows the breakdown of engagement formats I found, which case studies they appear in and the number of references that use that format. I found 11 prevalent formats and genres in the data: The 'Appreciation' category included posts showing gratitude to content creators or commenters for information provided. The 'Celebration' category included posts highlighting famous transmasculine people in the media or celebrating people's victories around their gender journeys. The 'Discussion' category included posts and comments that elicited further, in-depth conversations about various topics. The 'Drama or Tragedy' category showcased scenes that featured hardship and emotionally charged situations. The 'Education' category included all the videos, posts, comments and scenes that sought to teach and explicitly inform audiences about specific topics. The 'Humour or Comedy' category included all the jokes, memes, videos, comments and scenes that sought to make things funny and delivered information in a humorous way. The 'Question' category included posts with a specific inquiry with a relatively short answer; this is opposed to the 'Seeking Advice' category, which was for posts that were more involved and complicated and required a nuanced understanding of the situation. The 'Seeking Support' category often went hand in hand with 'Seeking Advice,' but not always, as sometimes, posters wanted validation and kindness without definite solutions. The 'Solidarity' category included posts about shared experiences, commonality, and appreciation towards transmasculine individuals. Finally, the 'Venting' category included posts, comments, and videos showcasing frustration and voicing injustices, sharing hardships and difficult experiences. Many references fell under multiple categories. The total amount of references was 202.

Table 2

Engagement formats found and the references that use that format

Engagement Format	Case Study	References
Appreciation	Reddit, YouTube	4
Celebration	Reddit, YouTube	14
Discussion	Reddit	2
Drama or Tragedy	D20	10
Education	Reddit, YouTube, D20	20
Humour or Comedy	Reddit, YouTube, D20	30
Question	Reddit	7
Seeking Advice	Reddit	27
Seeking Support	Reddit	24
Solidarity	Reddit, YouTube	38
Venting	Reddit, YouTube	26
Total		**202**

After creating the codebook of themes and engagement formats, I was able to start looking at patterns in the data that pertain to my research questions. My first question was: How or to what extent do the case studies from YouTube, Reddit and D20 challenge and/or reinforce the hegemonic forces of cisnormativity? In order to answer this question, I needed to define the term more precisely so I could effectively group relevant themes that could apply to potential challenges or reinforcement of cisnormativity. Thus, the term refers to the societal assumption that being cisgender—where one's gender identity corresponds with the sex assigned to them at birth—is the default. This perspective frequently marginalizes and erases the experiences of transgender, non-binary, and gender non-conforming individuals. Cisnormativity reinforces the

notion that other gender identities are abnormal or less legitimate by positioning cisgender identities as the norm (McBride & Neary, 2021).

Once I found a comprehensive definition of cisnormativity in the literature, I went through the data once again. I coded all the references that challenged or reinforced cisnormativity in some way. In my data, no references reinforced cisnormativity. As for challenging cisnormativity, I ended up with three broad categories: 'Representing other ways of being,' 'Arguing against bigotry,' and 'Coming together with loved ones.' 'Representing other ways of being' ended up with references that showcased authentic transmasculine lived experiences, with both joys and hardships, in a frank and open way. 'Coming together with loved ones' included references to family acceptance, close friendships, healthy romantic partners, and affirming and caring relationships. Finally, 'Arguing against bigotry' included references to individuals standing up for themselves in their day-to-day lives, whether it was calling out transphobia at work or simply managing bureaucratic processes that make it difficult for transgender people to live their lives. As with the previous pass-throughs, some references fall under multiple themes. Table 3 shows the broad categories and subcategories that fall under them. Some references did not have a subcategory but fell under the umbrella of the overall theme of a challenge to cisnormativity. The total number of references for this code was 205.

Next, I was ready to answer my second research question: How or to what extent do the YouTube, Reddit and D20 case studies function as a liberatory space for transmasculine individuals? Once again, I wanted to define the terms in the question clearly. Thus, a liberatory space, for this thesis, is a safe online space or platform where transmasculine individuals and their loved ones can find community, information, truthful representation and support. After defining the term, I wanted to examine the relationship between engagement formats and how they may function as a liberatory space. Table 4 shows that relationship. I ended up with three broad categories: 'Identity formation,' 'Learning' and 'Support.' I was able to aggregate the relevant references under each category.

Table 3

Themes that showcase challenges to cisnormativity

Challenging Cisnormativity	Case Study	References
Representing other ways of being	**Reddit, YouTube, D20**	**54**
Gender Euphoria	Reddit, YouTube	35
Coming together with loved ones	**Reddit, YouTube, D20**	**53**
Family	Reddit, YouTube, D20	24
Friends	Reddit, YouTube, D20	17
Sex and Romance	Reddit, YouTube, D20	12
Arguing against bigotry	**Reddit, YouTube, D20**	**98**
Bathrooms and Changing Rooms	Reddit, YouTube	18
Bureaucracy	Reddit, YouTube	17
Pronouns	Reddit, YouTube	2
School	Reddit, YouTube	31
Work	Reddit, YouTube	13
Transphobia	Reddit, YouTube, D20	17
Total		**205**

References that used 'Celebration,' 'Discussion,' 'Drama or Tragedy,' 'Humour or Comedy,' and 'Solidarity' engagement format ended up under the 'Identity Formation' category. This is because these references showcased specific artifacts of identity work, where individuals were authentically themselves and powerfully represented transmasculinity. References that used 'Appreciation,' 'Celebration,' 'Education,' 'Humour or Comedy,' 'Question,' and 'Seeking Advice' ended up under the 'Learning' category.

Table 4

Engagement formats that function as a liberatory space

Liberatory Spaces	Case Study	References
Identity Formation	**Reddit, YouTube, D20**	**94**
Celebration	Reddit, YouTube	14
Discussion	Reddit, YouTube	2
Drama or Tragedy	D20	10
Humour or Comedy	Reddit, YouTube, D20	30
Solidarity	Reddit, YouTube	38
Learning	**Reddit, YouTube, D20**	**102**
Appreciation	Reddit	4
Celebration	Reddit, YouTube	14
Education	Reddit, YouTube, D20	20
Humour or Comedy	Reddit, YouTube, D20	30
Question	Reddit	7
Seeking Advice	Reddit	27
Support	**Reddit, YouTube**	**100**
Celebration	Reddit, YouTube	14
Discussion	Reddit	2
Question	Reddit	7
Seeking Advice	Reddit	27
Seeking Support	Reddit	24
Venting	Reddit, YouTube	26
Total		**296**

Thus, references in this category included educational content where folks took the time to answer questions, explain complex issues, and generally try to instruct others on topics that may be important to transmasculine people's lives. References that used 'Celebration,' 'Discussion,' 'Question,' 'Seeking Advice,' 'Seeking Support,' and 'Venting' ended up under the 'Support' category. This is because, in this category, there was a strong sense of community help, uplifting individuals, guiding folks through their hardships, and celebrating wins together. There was, of course, considerable overlap between the references as many fell under multiple categories. The total number of references for this code was 296. Despite the many challenges involved with the data analysis and coding, some clear patterns emerged, and the relationship between codes became more evident with every pass.

Chapter 4: Findings

Overview

  This section will provide an overview of my findings that pertain to all three cases. I will then discuss each case study individually. This is because each case is unique, and while much of the findings overlap, each case had its way of answering the research questions. As mentioned above, my first research question asked: How or to what extent do the YouTube, Reddit, and Dimension 20 case studies challenge and/or reinforce the hegemonic forces of cisnormativity? All three case studies showed a pattern of challenging cisnormativity; as shown in Table 3, the most common theme category with 98 references was 'Arguing against bigotry.' There was a marked challenge to cisnormativity in the defiant and proud storytelling of the posts, videos and comments on both social media sites and in the scenes that showcased Pete standing up against transphobic family members. The next theme category, with 54 references, was 'Representing other ways of being,' all three case studies showcased transmasculine people existing in the world, taking space, communicating their experiences and showing both joy and hardships that they go through. Lastly, the theme category, 'Coming together with loved ones,' had 53 references and showed scenes, posts, comments and videos that described close relationships with family, friends or romantic partners in a way that reinforced the normalization of transmasculine individuals and their lives.

  'Learning' with 102 total references, and 'Identity formation' with 94 references, were the engagement formats most conducive to challenging cisnormativity. These were prevalent in all three case studies. There was a bi-directional relationship between the most common themes and engagement formats for challenging cisnormativity; for example, media showcasing other ways of being contributed to the learning and identity formation of transmasculine individuals. This relationship is shown in Figure 1. This means that the more people learned from these spaces, the more they, in turn, posted their own stories of standing up for themselves or getting

together with a romantic interest, the more it helped others with their identity formation and so forth.

Figure 1

Relationship between themes and engagement formats challenging cisnormativity
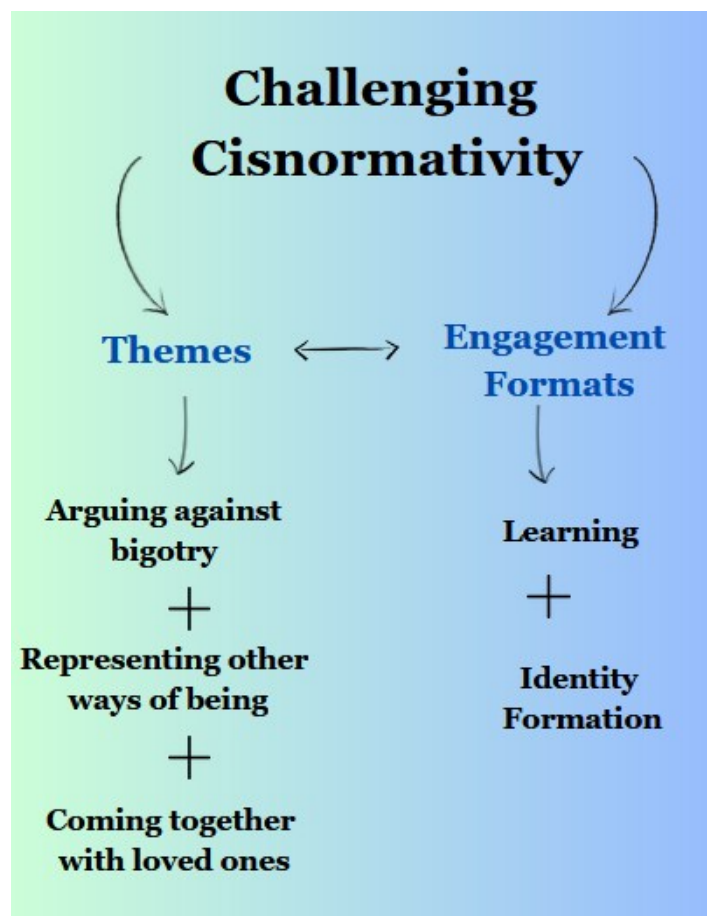
My second question asked, How or to what extent do the YouTube, Reddit and Dimension 20 case studies function as a liberatory space for transmasculine individuals? All three cases were found to function as a liberatory space. Table 1 above shows that the three most common themes in the case studies were 'Mental health' with 137 references, 'Social situations' with 81 and 'Relationships' with 53. These were the themes that people engaged with the most or frequently showed up in the posts, comments, scenes and videos I was analyzing. Again, there

was a bi-directional relationship between themes and engagement formats, with 'Humour or comedy' and 'Education' as the most common. It appears that topics that were important to the community members of these spaces were often delivered comedically or educationally, and often both at the same time. For example, posts about awkward social situations around transitioning were posted as memes, jokes or funny personal stories. This seemed to allow safe, educational engagement with the content and served as an entertainment device. As liberatory spaces, these case studies allowed transmasculine individuals to share, learn, and find themselves in the storytelling of others. They allowed for a safe environment in which to find community and support.

Figure 2

Relationship between themes and engagement formats functioning as a liberatory space
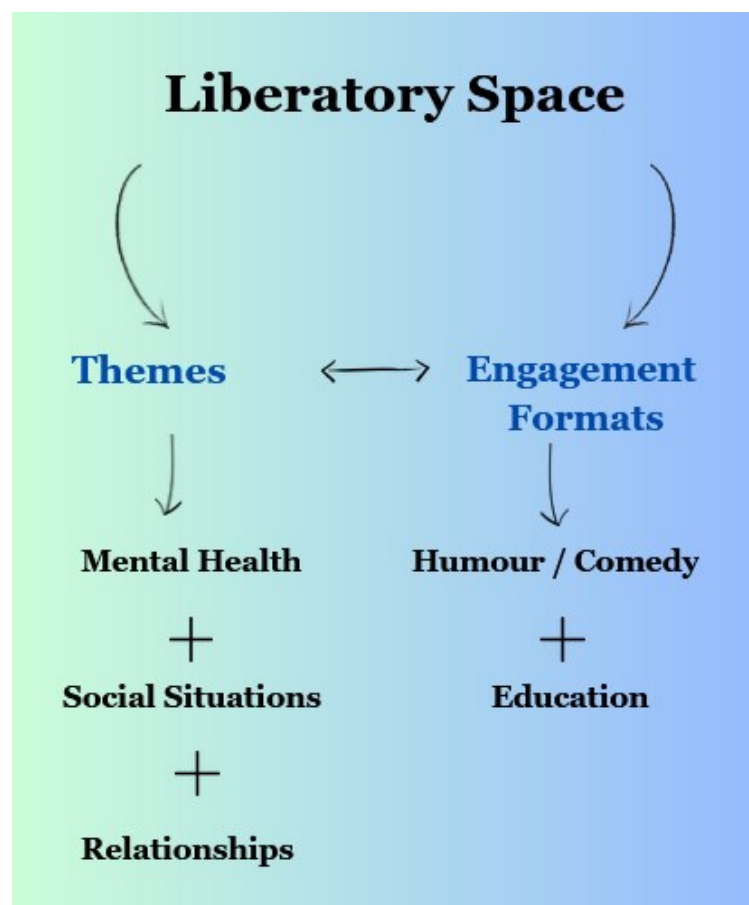
Reddit

The r/ftm subreddit was a treasure trove of information. When I was doing my first pass of coding for themes and types of posts in this space, I could not help but notice how supportive commenters tended to be with the posters. It was one of the most compassionate subreddits I have encountered on Reddit. The r/ftm subreddit embodied the most liberatory space out of my chosen case studies. The postings tended to be ones that looked for support and advice, shared funny or heartwarming stories, and celebrated personal wins or wins for trans men in general. For instance, posts such as these were quite common:

> **I just did a fuckin pull-up 💪 🐨**
>
> I have never once in my life done a pull up on the bar unassisted. Rock climbed and was pretty much arboreal pre-puberty 1.0, still no dice. Came home from work today, looked at the one I have mounted up in my hallway, said "hey, you know what. Maybe" and up I fuckin went. It's high up there! Somewhat concerning! It felt like nothing too! I'm going rock climbing at the end of this month and I'm so excited. Giving myself the gift of uppies!!! That's what I'm talking about!!!! (u/RP-1, 2024)

This post garnered 242 upvotes and 12 supportive comments, congratulating this individual and sharing similar stories. I classified this post as 'Celebratory' (engagement format) and 'Body and Medical Matters' (theme); in this post, it is clear that User RP-1 is celebrating their accomplishment and is excited to share it with the community, and the theme relates to the changes this poster is seeing in their body after taking testosterone as gender-affirming care. Additionally, I want to note that this and all other examples quoted from Reddit are verbatim. I wanted to keep the exact language, emojis and tone without pointing out typos or spelling mistakes. Other celebratory posts included stories about individuals successfully changing dead names on work, school or government paperwork. Posts and comments about euphotic experiences around finding comfortable or well-fitting clothing, having small victories such as being addressed as a man in public, or being hit on by attractive people.

There were also a lot of educational and celebratory posts about famous transmasculine individuals throughout history, including current celebrities. Representation appeared to be very important to this subreddit. An example of one such submission is showcased well by User RP-2 in Figure 3, a post about a transgender surgeon in the British Army. This discussion topic garnered over 4,000 upvotes and 128 comments. Many commenters shared additional interesting and educational facts about other transmasculine historical figures. I categorized User RP-2's post as 'Education' (engagement format), 'Celebration' (engagement format), 'Work' (theme) and 'Body and Medical Matters' (theme). Posts like this garnered a lot of comments and upvotes and were generally the top posts each year.

Figure 3

Dr. James Barry [Digital Image], in a Reddit post
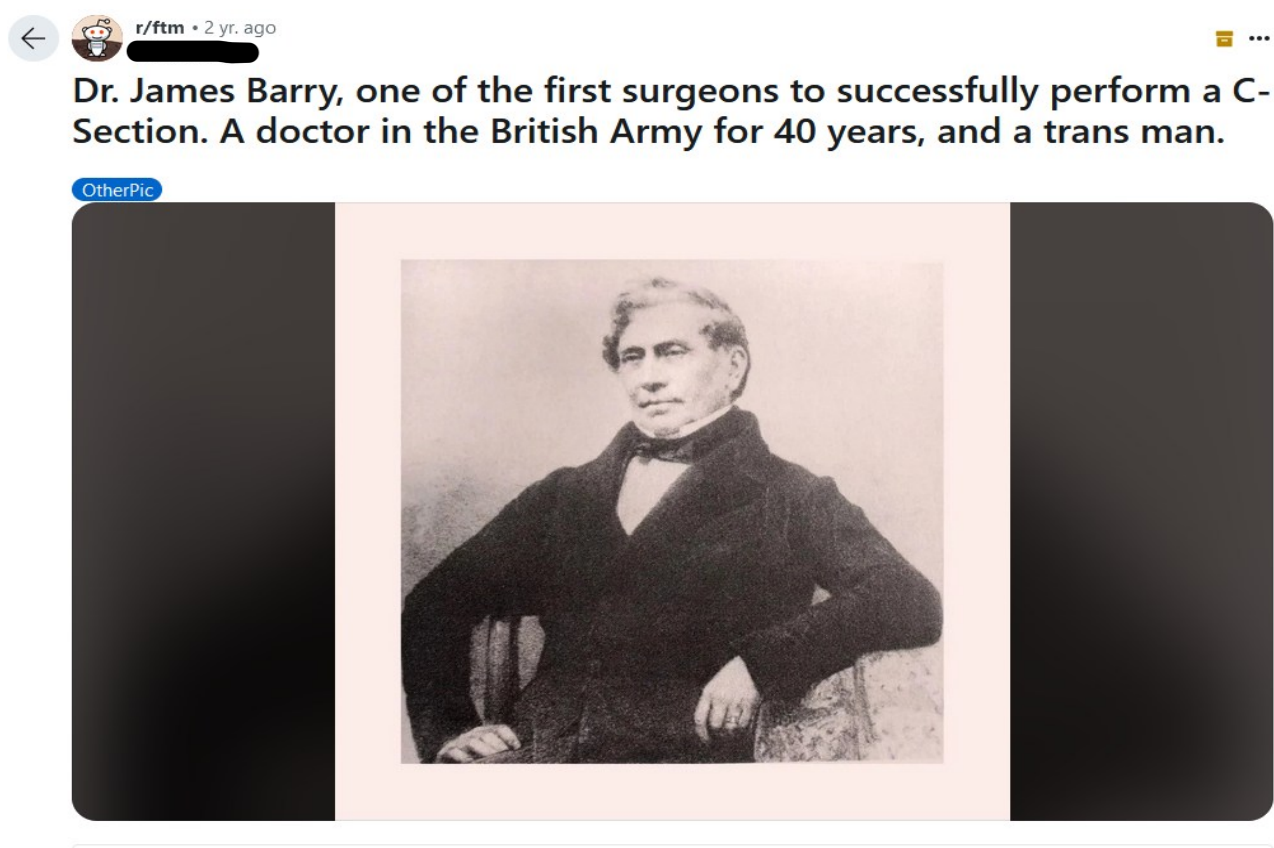
On the other hand, submissions that garnered difficult conversations and community discussions that started from a place of hardship were just as frequent. In these types of posts, there are generally robust responses and advice offered to the submitter; an example of this is:

I never wanted to be a man, but I am

the "men are inherently dangerous" has fucked me up. I lost some friends when I came out because they turned out to be quite terfy and saw my masculinity as a betrayal and a threat, even when I hadn't even started HRT. I'm starting to pass now, and when I look at myself in the mirror I kind of freak out? I find myself flinching any time I'm around my women or femme friends and my voice raises in excitement, or I express myself too bluntly, or take too much space. it has taken me a lot of effort to start to accept myself as a man and I'm definitely not there yet. I know I'm a man. it is quite obvious. but I'm so afraid of being the "dangerous man" that I'm limiting my freedom and making myself small. has anyone battled similar things and found a way to overcome it? (u/RP-3, 2024)

In this submission, User RP-3 discusses their transition journey and how they are struggling and seeking community advice. This post was classified as 'Seeking Advice' (engagement format), Seeking Support' (engagement format), 'Friends' (theme), 'Body and medical matters' (theme) and 'Social Justice' (theme). User RP-3 received a lot of advice and support from the community with this post, especially about dealing with internalized shame and having frank conversations with their loved ones. Many commenters shared solidarity with the poster's experiences and validated his feelings.

Other frequent posts and comments asked straightforward questions, such as what to expect from starting testosterone, where transmen hang out, what to do when a menstrual cycle interferes with activities and looking for resources about particular topics. All these questions were always answered thoroughly and personally. Using NVivo, I created a word cloud (see Figure 4) using all the posts and comments I analyzed from Reddit to see the most common words and themes in this space. It is interesting to note that some of this space's main words

and themes were about mental health and body matters. Periods, in particular, were a common topic in this subreddit, where many submissions revolved around issues of menstrual suppression, effectively hiding sanitary products, and dealing with the dysphoria associated with getting a menstrual cycle even years into hormone replacement therapy (HRT). Topics related to social situations, cispassing, and relationships as they related to mental health outcomes were also quite frequent.

Figure 4

Word cloud created from r/ftm posts and comments

As for challenging cisnormativity, r/ftm was a beacon of representation because the entire subreddit was created expressly by transmasculine folks for transmasculine folks. Posts representing various transmasculine identities were typical, and many posters were happy to upload personal stories and pictures detailing their life experiences. Reddit also embodied the categories of 'Arguing against bigotry' and 'Coming together with loved' ones well due to all the posts about overcoming hardships and opposing transphobia and bureaucracy at school, work and society at large, especially as they related to medically transitioning, pronouns and dead names. Many posts were also from parents, friends or partners looking for advice on how to help or support their transgender loved ones. Those posts were always met with the community's outpouring of love and encouragement. Furthermore, as a liberatory space, Reddit was a

significant site for 'Identity Formation,' 'Learning,' and 'Support,' with the latter being the most common, with 102 and 100 references, respectively, as shown in Table 4 above. The Reddit case study alone contributed to most of the 'Support' category references (60 out of 100) out of the three case studies.

In conclusion, Reddit, as a whole, can be problematic, often pushing content to the political extremes (Gaudette et al., 2020); however, in this case, the r/ftm subreddit created a safe space for transmasculine individuals seeking community. The moderators did an excellent job of removing any hateful posts or comments. During the week I was immersed in the subreddit, I did not find even one hateful or mean-spirited post. The community seemed to do a good job policing itself and quickly reporting problematic posts to ensure this space stayed welcoming for transmasculine individuals and their loved ones. This aligns with the findings of Miller and Bond (2022), which indicate that queer content creators, and in this case, subreddit members and moderators, frequently strive to create and uphold a safe environment for vulnerable community members.

YouTube

While watching the videos on the Jammidodger channel on YouTube and reading the comments, I noticed a slightly different atmosphere in this community compared to Reddit. In terms of challenging cisnormativity, Jamie is an expert. He has a PhD in psychology, and his doctoral research was about transgender men. Not only is he an author and a wildly successful YouTuber, but he is also very entertaining. Most videos I watched were firmly classified as 'Education' (engagement format), where Jamie and sometimes his wife would speak about transgender issues, queerphobia, transitioning, relationships and so forth in an educational format. Most of these videos, even those dealing with challenging subjects, had some humour or comedy interwoven to make those often tricky topics more palatable to a general audience. Under all the videos I watched, there was strong community engagement with comments and upvotes. For example, in a video where Jamie reacts to an anti-trans documentary in detail and

debunks misinformation that being trans is a new phenomenon, that gender-affirming care is being pushed on kids for-profit and lists fabrications about the harms of transitioning, a community member shared their experience of being transgender before it was "cool":

> What drives me crazy with the school teacher who says "no one was nonbinary or genderfluid five years ago" and she was right - 9/11 happened when I was in fifth grade. My peers said the r-slur, called stuff "gay" in a derogatory way, and no one in my graduating class was trans. AND YET I still knew I wasn't "one of the girls" and eventually came out as nonbinary with education and self-reflection. But no one influenced me to be nonbinary. No TV show, movie, or cartoon told me I was trans, and yet I wore boys' clothes as a kid and wanted a voice like Tim Curry even though I was a girl. No one told me I could be nonbinary, but looking back it was painfully obvious. The only difference between then and now is that I have the vocabulary now to describe WHY I felt that way. That's what documentaries like these are actually promoting - the limitation of language to keep kids like me suffering in the closet (YC - 1, 2024).

Comments like YC-1's were common in this channel, where often, individuals shared personal stories about their experiences with their trans identities. As in the Reddit section, I quoted all comments verbatim and kept their writing style and spelling intact. This comment garnered 741 upvotes and 21 replies in the week I was immersed in this space. The importance of this and comments like it is understated because it cleverly shows how language changes over time. While it is true that these terms were not commonly used 20 years ago, the concept of being transgender has been a part of human experience throughout history and across various cultures. The binary gender framework is insufficient to encapsulate and represent the diversity of human experiences. Fortunately, a trend of individuals affirming the information discussed and offering additional information to further educate on the topics in the videos was common. The aforementioned is a compelling way to challenge cisnormativity because not only are the videos themselves educational and offer different perspectives, but the community members of

this channel also contribute to validating the information provided further by sharing additional viewpoints and offering a range of experiences.

The Jammidodger channel also challenged cisnormativity through intentional humour and comedy videos that normalized the trans experience. In a video where Jamie is reading funny, awkward stories posted online about people's trans experiences, many commenters responded with more humorous stories about their own. Commenter YC-2 shared one such experience they had at work:

> At my current job I work with mostly women. The only men in the lab are me and the pathologist. Somehow the conversation got around to babies and pregnancy and I, having had 2 kids, was naturally taking part in the conversation. One of the cytotechs (who i get along with really well but she'd only been there for about six months at the time) was looking at me in utter confusion. I didn't notice right away and even when I did I thought maybe I had described something weird. Then one of the histotechs yelled from the other side of the room, "Girl! He's trans! He can do babies!" I had no idea she didn't know I was a trans man. Apparently, it hadn't come up until then! It was very funny, though. She was so embarrassed because she (her words) didn't think that maybe the reason a man would be describing his experience with pregnancy is because he's trans (YC-2, 2024).

There were over 1000 comments, stories, and jokes about this video, with 77,000 views. These are significant because the validation and solidarity experienced under these types of videos are very clear from the number of posts, upvotes, and views these videos garnered.

The most popular video on this channel of all time is a video where Jamie outlines his entire transition from the beginning to essentially what Jamie considers "the end," with detailed and frank discussions about testosterone, top surgery, bottom surgery, new birth certificate, and everything in between. This came out in February 2020 and garnered 2.9 million views and over 16,000 comments. The top five comments were overwhelmingly positive, with sentiments

similar to this commenter: "I am a 67 yr old woman, I'd like to thank you for sharing your experience as it has been helpful in helping me to understand. You are a lovely person. I wish you a long happy life" (YC-3, 2021)**.** Many other comments helped humanize Jamie's experience as a trans man. This video reached a broad audience of people who are not necessarily part of the queer community but somehow found the video and were able to resonate with it and learn from it. The present video is a perfect example of challenging cisnormativity because Jamie, being an individual who is conventionally handsome, educated, successful and in a stable, loving relationship, shows very clearly another way of being that becomes a possibility to other transmasculine individuals. Jamie has become a role model for GSM youth and created a safe space for many queer folks via his channel. As I mentioned above, intimate self-disclosure is a popular device used on YouTube, and it is an effective way to share information that becomes powerfully meaningful and educational for people watching.

As a liberatory space, the Jammidodger channel provides ample learning opportunities. Most of Jamie's videos are educational, even if they are also funny or comedic. Comments under his videos often showed appreciation for the information provided. A commenter under a video in which Jamie responds to an inaccurate and inflammatory list of things testosterone does and doesn't do for trans people mentions that "I've been needing something to send my mom about transmasc stuff that DOESN'T feed into the misinformation being spread around 🙏 💚 " (YC-4, 2024). This comment shows that these videos allow others to find the words to share with people in their lives who may not understand their experiences or need to learn more about specific topics that are not found in traditional media avenues.

Other individuals, especially those of less common rainbow identities or those of marginalized status, even in the queer community, share their unique experiences that, once again, are difficult to find anywhere else. This commenter is an intersex individual who was willing to share their experience with gender-affirming care, medical assistance and the hypocrisy of transphobic legislation:

Intersex person here on hormones for 30+ years 😅 what really makes me mad though is that the same hateful people who don't want to allow trans kids to access this "terrible" care think that intersex kids should be forced to! It comes down to - it's not about protecting kids. It's about protecting an outdated stupid idea that gender is perfectly binary. And in that rigid mindset no one is allowed autonomy (YC-5, 2024).

Comments like these were once again met with kindness and appreciation and were very helpful to the overall learning environment that Jamie cultivated for his channel.

The Jammidodger channel was firmly situated in the 'Identity Formation' and 'Learning' categories regarding its function as a liberatory space. 'Humour or comedy,' 'Solidarity,' and 'Education' (engagement formats) were the most popular ways Jamie engaged with his followers and how his community members tended to interact with each other. Out of the three case studies, this channel was the most educational, thus cultivating an atmosphere of curiosity and information sharing. Similar to the r/ftm subreddit, this space also policed negative comments and maintained boundaries against hateful speech. In every video, Jamie encouraged kind communication, understanding and respectful discourse.

Dimension 20

This case study was the most unique out of the three. This was the only case study that showcased the 'Drama or Tragedy' engagement format code, with ten references corresponding to it. These were mostly coded to highly emotional and intense scenes that occurred throughout the show. However, this show's most common engagement format was the 'Humour or Comedy' code, with 'Education' following right after. This makes sense because it is a comedy actual play show, and professional comedians play all the characters. Despite this, many scenes are heartfelt and earnest and show personal growth, a significant theme for Pete Conlan (see Figure 5), one of the main characters. Ally Beardsley described Pete in the introduction scene as "almost exactly like Hunter S. Thompson, only young. It's like, I'm wearing a cowboy hat. I got on shades, like the yellow shades, because they're helping me with seasonal affective disorder right now. I am

not doing well on the inside" (Dimension 20 Wiki, 2022). Later in the scene, Pete is at a check-up with his healthcare provider, Dr. Lugash Primjitzski, who is also a doctor for New York mobsters and criminals. Pete tells his doctor that he is taking anti-psychotics, testosterone, and psychedelics. Pete is eating poorly and not sleeping, all while still healing from his recent top surgery.

Figure 5

Pete Conlan [Digital Image]

Right at the outset, Pete is a mess. He is seemingly hallucinating and having financial, personal, mental health and medical problems. All of this is showcased in a humorous, increasingly absurd, and ironic way.

As mentioned above, the actor playing Pete is Ally Beardsley, a comedian who lives and works in Los Angeles. In an interview with the Washington Post, they discussed their experience playing D&D on camera while grappling with their identity and creating a transgender character for the campaign:

> I had started going by the gender-neutral they/them pronouns at work and among friends, but sourcing hormones or getting surgery seemed equal parts expensive and invasive. A fun thing about fantasy is stripping away the crunchy, real-world limitations and asking yourself: "What would I do if I could do anything?" That season's arc for my character, Pete, was extremely euphoric for me. I had described him as a trans cowboy you might see at Burning Man, and the artist drew him dressed as a freaky Hunter S. Thompson in an open shirt to show his top surgery scars. He has wild magic — uncontrollable and dangerous in the game mechanics — which we used to explore the painful chaos of leaving a family that doesn't accept you. Since then, I've started testosterone HRT and had top surgery. It's funny to listen back to myself playing a character who had transitioned in ways I hadn't. It's full of inaccuracies that make me smile (Barkley, 2024, Para. 36).

It is clear from Ally's interview that playing a transmasculine character was meaningful because it allowed them to explore who they wanted to be in a safe environment. Pete's challenges and growth throughout the show were both educational and emotional.

There is a dramatic scene in which Pete is kicked out of his apartment and, at the same time, is found by his transphobic father, Mitch, whom he has not seen in six years. Utterly confused, Pete asks him how he located him. Mitch grabs a box of Pete's things and starts carrying it down the stairs of the apartment complex; when Pete follows him, trying to get his stuff back, Mitch says that he hired a private eye to find him. Mitch says that his family wants Pete to come home, and Pete immediately protests, saying that he does not want to be 'the only trans person anyone's ever met in their life.' Pete gets a weird feeling as the argument with his

dad escalates, and when Mitch goes to call Pete by his dead name, bubbles spill out of his mouth. Mitch, panicking, tries to speak, but more bubbles come out. Within seconds, the bubbles lift Mitch into the air and send him out into the skies of New York. This allowed Ally and Brennan Mulligan (the dungeon master) to play an uncomfortable situation in a safe space. Ally talks about this experience in the same interview:

> With Pete, it was really important to me to tell a story other than the dramatic lead-up to a medical transition. So we started with him having just gotten out of surgery, but that's all you see of that process. Part of his backstory is that he doesn't have a relationship with his transphobic parents, and before shooting the first episode, I felt sick to my stomach. I've been on a journey with my parents, and our starting place didn't have much common ground. When my character meets with his father, it felt as though I was actually running into my own on the street. Brennan could sense that discomfort, and as my character's dad was about to call Pete by his deadname, Brennan shut the interaction down, surrounding his dad with bubbles that carried him into the sky. Magic is the power and freedom to manipulate your reality, and you can banish the awful voices in your life — let them swirl away into the air (Barkley, 2024, Para. 38).

There is incredible growth in Pete as he comes into his magic and proverbially gets his 'shit' together.

In a later scene, after Pete rescues a magical child named Nod, the heroes arrive in the realm of dreams. Nod, snuggling and showing affection like a younger sibling, leans into Pete. Observing Pete's assortment of various pills, Nod creates purple and gold pills as a gift for him, noting that he appears to have an interest in them. Pete uses this moment to inform the group that he intends to become sober as he adjusts to his new reality and powers. Nod elaborates that a Vox Phantasma is selected to protect the dream realm during times of danger. Due to the general disregard for dreams and magic, contacting a Vox Phantasma before their selection is impossible, as they would ignore Nod's efforts to reach them. Consequently, they are chosen and

suddenly introduced to their new role. Pete remarks that being chosen has been a positive experience, and Nod's trust in him is greatly appreciated.

After showing his true nature when he risks himself to save Nod, Pete earns respect from his newfound friends and fellow heroes of New York, who could not care less about Pete's transgender identity and are only concerned about his erratic and illegal behaviours at the outset. They now champion his sobriety efforts and safeguard his well-being by offering a place to stay, helping with nutrition and exercise, and providing emotional support. By the end of the show, Pete is unabashedly a hero. He is powerful and caring and often saves the day by safeguarding innocents and his friends.

Using NVivo, I created a word cloud using the sample of scenes I have chosen that involved Pete. Some of the most common themes and words showing up are about change, community, being whole, and acting right (See Figure 6).

Figure 6

Word cloud created from The Unsleeping City sampled scenes

The themes of change, community and being whole are consistent with my impression of Pete's

journey as a character and his personal growth. It was clear from watching the show and reading the transcripts that Ally Beardsley showcased Pete's ability to change and get better, all while using humour and comedy as a way to represent a complex and flawed trans character who may be a work in progress but is still very much an incredibly heroic and competent person.

As a liberatory space, D20 did a great job of discussing and showcasing personal hardships and improvements. The most common themes were issues surrounding family, friends, and romantic relationships, as well as mental health challenges. The word capitalize appears as a central theme because the main 'bad guy' was a metaphor for unchecked capitalism, and therefore, much of the strife occurring in the story was a direct result of greed. In addition, change was a significant theme, where scenes about metamorphosis, wanting to get better and grow, and Pete overcoming his challenges with addiction were integral to the plot. Community is another central theme shown throughout the show's arc, which states that no one is an island (following the New York island metaphor), and everyone needs support to improve. These themes were presented in an earnest, often comedic way. As we have seen above, education and comedy can come hand in hand, and D20 straddles that line very well. The most common theme categories representing D20 as a liberatory space are 'Identity formation' and 'Learning' with 40 references each.

As for challenging cisnormativity, D20 hit on every major theme category, having references in all of them. 'Representing other ways of being' was showcased by Pete, an unapologetically flawed, complex, hilarious, and remarkable person. Pete was allowed to make mistakes, learn from them, and improve. 'Arguing against bigotry' was also showcased well because there are scenes where Pete stands up for himself against family members, such as the scene I discussed above with Pete's father, and some scenes showed his friends supporting him. This is effectively illustrated in a scene where Pete's former girlfriend attempts to exploit the trauma of their co-dependent relationship to act out a controversial performance art piece. The piece involves them interrogating each other publicly about the harm they have inflicted on one

another. Pete refuses to participate, and his friend group stands up for him. A fire ensues at the location, and the team rescues everyone from the building, including Pete's ex. This leads to the last theme category, 'Coming together with loved ones,' which is showcased well in many scenes because Pete's friends deeply care for him. For example, when Pete does not have a place to live, Kingston, one of the other main characters in the show, allows Pete to move in with him and mentors him. The entire team consistently helps Pete: Ricky with better eating habits and exercising, Kugrash with advice, and Sofia with emotional support. Since this is an adventure game, they also fight alongside him, aiding each other in battle with healing and magical assistance. Finally, Pete rescues his transformed and enlightened father from the land of dreams, Nod, and together they visit Pete's family back home, where Mitch introduces Pete as his son who is visiting. Pete is able to do all that by the end of the show because he knows he has the support of his new chosen family, the heroes of New York.

Conclusion

Throughout this chapter, I have discussed how my chosen case studies functioned as a liberatory space for transmasculine individuals and how they challenged the forces of hegemonic cisnormativity. Sensitive themes, personal stories, comedic anecdotes, and educational tales were all ways in which these case studies allowed complex transmasculine representation to flourish. Both social media sites were also significant sites for identity formation and support for the newly transitioning and questioning transmasculine folks and even their loved ones. These findings make it difficult to deny that small pockets of possibility still exist in the internet's often toxic and hazardous landscape.

Chapter 5: Discussion

There are a lot of interesting things to say about these results. For one, I was unsurprised about how supportive and engaging some of these spaces would be because, as I mentioned above, I have used them, mainly Reddit, for over 15 years. I have learned a lot from the storytelling of others as I was struggling with my queer identity in my teens and 20s. Nevertheless, analyzing how these sites succeeded in being supportive and liberatory community spaces for transpeople was fascinating. As I mentioned earlier, contemporary media is a powerful site for informal learning. Today, young people explore, form identities, and create communities using these spaces (Fox & Ralston, 2016; Greenhow & Robelia, 2009). It was clear from these case studies that many of the individuals utilizing them did not have a physical space where they could safely share and learn information about transgender issues. The commenters and posters that had the confidence and safe space to share their stories chose to come to these spaces to specifically teach others and to offer advice and support to younger queer members of the community. Many digital spaces became a liberatory space for 2SLGBTQQIAP+ folks because, in this political climate of banning books and legislating heteronormativity, online spaces may have been the only ones available to them. The results that I have found seem to corroborate the line of scholarship that discusses the utility and benefits of social media for marginalized queer populations.

In addition, a common thread through the case studies was the use of humour and comedy. Miller et al. (2016) discuss this phenomenon in their article, which examines the role of humour in teaching and learning. They talk about how:

> Instructors' use of related humour [humour related to the course content] was associated with learning because it enhanced student motivation. Humour thus has a role to play in promoting students' relaxation and increasing their interest so that they become more receptive to instruction on content material and are more likely to learn actively (p. 792).

Much research has been done on this topic, and the consensus is that humour does help with learning. While establishing a causal relationship between those two is complex, the correlation between humour and learning cannot be ignored. Whether it is due to an increase in interest, enjoyment or motivation (Bakar & Kumar, 2019), similar results were shown in my case studies because commenters, content creators and actors used humour as their primary engagement or education techniques. Seeing humour in memes, jokes, and satire as a unifying force that brings attention to difficult topics was interesting.

Another common thread in all three cases was the limited intersectional representation of transmasculine individuals. On Reddit, most appreciation posts and pictures of well-known transmasculine individuals predominantly featured non-disabled, white transmen. One often mentioned and shared individual was Elliot Page, a wealthy, conventionally attractive white trans man (See Figure 7).

Figure 7

Elliot Page [Digital Image] in a Reddit post
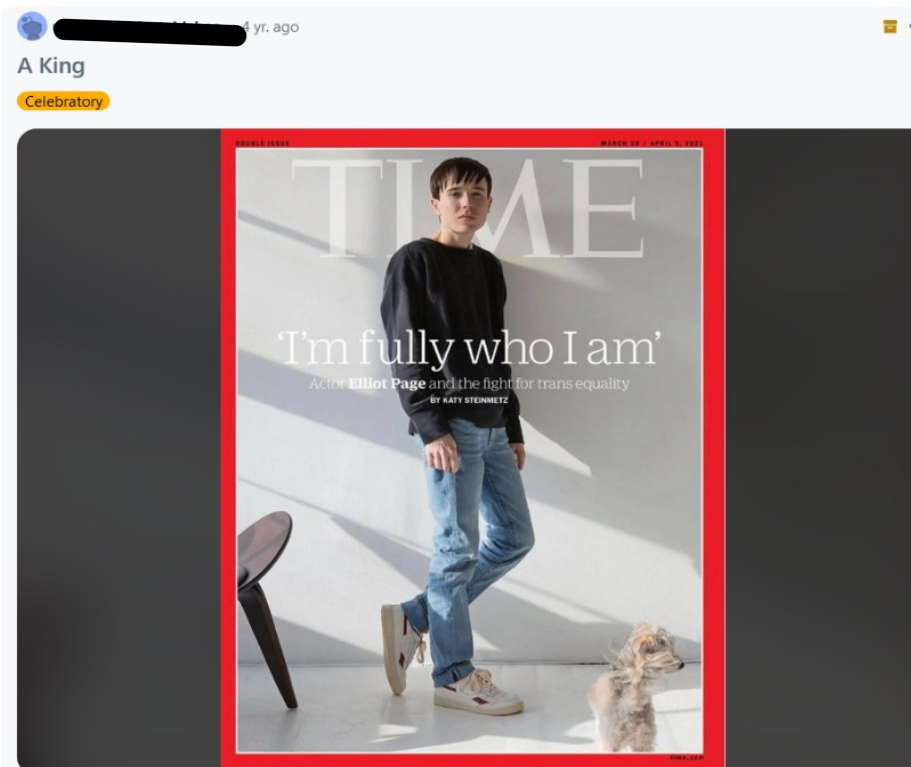
While it is important to have this kind of representation in mass media, there are privileges that Elliot possesses due to his social location that transmasculine individuals of colour, for example, may not have. During the time I spent in the subreddit, there were virtually no posts about or by religious minorities, trans men of colour or trans men with physical disabilities. This pattern played out again on YouTube, as Jamie is another successful, conventionally handsome white trans man (See Figure 8). However, based on the comments I have read, the community members on his channel are often quite diverse and are happy to share their stories and input on his videos. Jamie often talks about his issues with anxiety, which is a good representation of mental health challenges and is also good at often calling out and acknowledging his various privileges in his videos.

Figure 8

Jamie Raines [Digital Image] in an article for Attitude Magazine

Pete, another white trans man in the Dimension 20 case, does have struggles with addiction and homelessness but can quickly overcome them with the help of his friends and incredible magical

powers that are unlocked once he is chosen as a Vox Phantasma, a hero of New York. All these cases show that there is a privileging of young, thin, white, transmasculine individuals who seem to be the preferred portrayal of transmasculinity in these spaces. Physical disabilities and Black, Indigenous, and people of colour (BIPOC) representation were wholly inadequate on both Reddit and YouTube. Much of the conversations surrounding people's experiences came from folks who were vastly middle class, from the majority religion (Christianity), white, non-disabled and had some form of neurodiversity. Mental health challenges and neurodiversity were very well represented. Unfortunately, with the homogeneity of most commenters and posters, it was difficult to find diversity in transmasculine experiences that did not conform to those social locations.

Furthermore, biology and medical transition topics were markedly emphasized during my time in these spaces. In the Reddit case study, there was a large portion of posts and comments highlighting issues surrounding HRT, preparing for surgeries and a preoccupation with bodily matters. On YouTube, the most popular videos that Jamie has ever posted are about his medical transitioning journey, with millions of views. For many community members, in both social media sites, the hegemonic notion that there are two binary genders and that transition always occurs in the context of changing one binary category to another was a given. This did not leave much space for non-binary, genderqueer and GNC individuals who may also identify as transmasculine but do not adhere to strict binary notions of their gender. In the Dimension 20 case, the actor playing Pete is a transmasculine, non-binary person. However, when filming the show, Ally chose to play Pete as a transgender man who went by he/him pronouns. This emphasis on biology and binary gender can be problematic for GNC individuals because, as mentioned above, people who do not encounter diverse identities in their day-to-day lives form their conceptions of marginalized people from stereotypical depictions. Thus, representing a fuller range of diverse transgender identities allows for opportunities to question

embedded social assumptions about the gender binary and gender stability, and showing the fuller array of transmasculine identities is important.

Another commonality was that the mental health theme had the most references and was the most common in all three case studies. It makes sense if young transmasculine folks do not have people in their physical environments who can offer the kind of support that they need, especially regarding their queer identity. This is, again, consistent with the findings of researchers looking into various social media spaces and how GSM youth utilized them. One of the main functions of these spaces was to help with mental health concerns, such as alleviating concerns about transition, finding people who can relate to their experiences of isolation, loneliness, and uncertainty about labels and identity, and seeking advice about difficult issues in their lives (Fox & Ralston, 2016; Hiebert & Kortes-Miller, 2021; Miller, 2018; Michaelsen, 2017; Lucero, 2017). Reddit and YouTube functioned precisely as these researchers asserted, as a pedagogical force and a stand-in community when a physical one was unavailable. Dimension 20 also did not shy away from showcasing and discussing mental health challenges, and examining the fan response to this representation was beyond the scope of this thesis; however, as a fan of the show, I was part of the Discord server that the community used to discuss the show, and Pete was very much appreciated, as many fans could relate to his struggles.

In conclusion, there may be a circular relationship between the privileged portrayal of young, physically able, well-off, white, transmasculine individuals and the continuous engagement of the same kind of people in these media spaces, where one leads the other. The more privileged identities are posted, the more those identities are attracted to these spaces. The over-emphasis on biology is problematic; however, addressing mental health challenges and using humour to educate were great qualities consistent across the case studies. These sites are of utmost importance despite their flaws due to North America's current political climate. Following the re-election of Trump in November 2024, changes were made to United States government policies on gender and diversity. In January 2025, President Trump signed

executive orders revoking a directive that prevented discrimination based on gender identity or sexual orientation, recognizing only two genders – male and female – and declaring they could not be changed. In the US, Federal departments must now recognize gender as a male-female binary, replacing instances of 'gender' with 'sex.' In addition, federal funding for gender-affirming care ceased, and gender self-identification on federal documents, such as passports, is now prohibited. These and other attacks on transgender individuals' day-to-day lives have raised serious concerns from queer organizations who advocate for human rights and the protection of transgender and nonbinary individuals (Rummler, 2025; Jones, 2025; Trans Formations Project, 2025). As I write this, many online queer spaces are sharing resources, stories, information and fundraising efforts to help trans individuals who are adversely affected by these new directives. As previously mentioned, supportive spaces for GNC and transgender individuals are crucial. They can be literal lifelines for GSM youth, as safe physical environments are increasingly being erased due to actions by the American federal government.

Chapter 6: Limitations and Future Research

It is transparent now that this was an investigative endeavour. In my heart, I wanted to believe that there are still some good places on the internet and that we, as a queer community, can come together and support each other because the current campaign of terror against our GNC and trans siblings is not going to stop any time soon. I wanted to do this research to see if I can find definitive online spaces where we can feel safe. This is a challenging topic to contemplate because I have so much privilege, so much more than my trans siblings. As a cis woman married to a cis man, I can hide well in heteronormative environments, which ensures that my physical safety is not threatened. However, not all of my rainbow siblings have that kind of privilege. From this research, I want to find ways to come up with better outreach and engagement programs for queer folks, particularly youth. I do not think we do enough in Ontario to reach GSM youth and make them feel safe, especially not in more conservative areas (Pollitt et al., 2021).

Our schools and communities are still incredibly heteronormative spaces, and there are not that many role models for GSM youth to be able to create these spaces in their physical environment. As I discussed above, we have seen a revival of violence and public discourse against 2SLGBTQQIAP+ folks, especially students and teachers, in the past few years (Skelton, 2023; Ellis, 2024). Much of this rhetoric started coming from the United States with Trump's 2016 ascent to power, as a massive influx of bills focused on transgender people has been brought forward, aiming at gender-affirming care, participation in sports, bathroom use and education around gender and sexuality (Thompson, 2023; Trans Formations Project, 2025). This has ramped up even more since Trump's recent inauguration. We are certainly not exempt from this rhetoric here in Canada, as there have been

> protests against drag queens reading to children, stand-offs around access to gender-affirming care, and public rows about Pride flags. In New Brunswick, Premier Blaine Higgs has lamented a rise in gender diversity as 'trendy,' and proposed legislation that

would bar teachers from using a student's preferred pronouns without parental consent

(Moran, 2023, para.3)

among other much more violent acts. I vividly remember June 28th, 2023, three months after I was accepted to this program, when University of Waterloo philosophy professor Katy Fulfer and two of her students were stabbed while she was teaching her gender studies class. I was horrified, and it made me unbearably anxious as I am a queer woman and intended to research queer issues. Skelton's (2023) analysis of the situation resonated with me, where they said that,

The conditions that made it possible — escalation of rhetoric of hate accompanied by hateful and violent actions against 2SLGBTQIA+ people — are deliberate, a manifestation of hate and vitriol that is nurtured by people who feel threatened by this teacher's and other's work. This was not senseless, as in without logic. It unfolded in a climate where a political movement desires to push women, queer, trans and nonbinary people out of public life. (Para. 3).

This made it even more important for me to continue my research; two years later, we are seeing a worsening of these conditions.

Indeed, this atmosphere of fear and heteronormativity is consistent with the findings of Mitton et al.'s (2021) study, which examined anti-oppressive pedagogical practices with pre-service teacher candidates, they found that "although Canadian teacher education programs generally espouse a commitment to equity education, most do not provide explicit education on how to create safe and inclusive classrooms and schools for LGBTQ+ learners" (p. 33). The fact that many Canadian teachers do not know how to create an inclusive and supportive environment for queer youth in their classrooms is a significant problem because, now more than ever, the creation of safe physical spaces is needed for queer folks, and it is now apparent why these online spaces exist in the first place. The engagement techniques used in these case studies showed me that there are effective ways to aid in learning, identity formation and support for trans youth. Throughout this thesis, I have shown that humour, memes, intimate

disclosure, and frank storytelling are excellent ways to provide the kind of community that many trans folks need to feel safe and thrive. I am eager to continue research in this space, especially given the political situation in the United States. I would love to explore further the topic of public pedagogy, informal learning and how liberatory spaces can be a lifeline for queer folks. This topic is critical now that there is such a concentrated attack on queer folks in the United States, and this always results in similar sentiments here in Canada.

In order to get more well-rounded data from multiple sources, I would like to do it in a more personal way. I want to interview GSM youth and ask about their informal learning preferences, favourite themes, engagement formats, and what they would need to have the kind of liberatory spaces I have seen online become a reality in their schools or communities. I would also design a survey to get a larger sample of preferences, complementing the more detailed interviews. I want to be able to sample a much broader population with more religious, ethnic and racial diversity, as this was lacking in my data. I would also like to sample more non-binary and GNC folks. Examining how physical disabilities or socioeconomic status differences affect GSM youth's access to safe spaces is also an important consideration for this research topic. My ideal dissertation would be a mixed-method design, combining qualitative and quantitative research methods to provide a more comprehensive and nuanced understanding of my research questions. This would allow me to marry my love for science and statistics with my love for social justice and critical research. Now, more than ever, those of us who have privilege and opportunity need to support those marginalized by the ever-increasing systems of oppression modelled and pushed by patriarchal and heteronormative ideologies that only want to legitimize cisnormativity and the gender binary.

Chapter 7: Conclusion

Throughout this thesis, I examined how contemporary media can function as a liberatory space for transmasculine individuals and challenge cisnormativity. Being steeped in these spaces, reading so many posts and comments by queer individuals was personally very healing because even though I have plenty of rainbow friends, we are all in our 30s and 40s with busy lives, personal responsibilities, hardships and challenges. We all live far from each other, mainly because the cost of living pushed us all away to the outskirts of Toronto in every direction, sometimes as far as a three-hour drive. I do not get to see them often, and even when I do, we do not all congregate in one place these days. Reading and watching so much content created by queer people, and represented in various ways, even if flawed, was remarkable. It had quite a positive effect on my mental health, and I imagine that for other queer folks, it has a similar effect.

Through this research, I found that these contemporary media spaces had many positive aspects, such as providing representation, companionship, education, resources, and advice. I have seen the incredible ways in which these sites were able to provide levity to difficult matters, showcase queer joy, and make astutely humorous observations about just how devastating things can be for queer folks. Many community members on these sites expressed gratitude and appreciation for the support these digital places provided them and their loved ones. On the other hand, I have also seen that these spaces are imperfect and can be quite homogeneous, missing crucial voices from intersectional representations and the wider variety of transmasculine identities. Nevertheless, just as in real life, perfection should never be the goal, and these case studies were significant sites for identity exploration, formation and support for GSM youth, the newly transitioning and questioning transmasculine folks. Trans veterans who transitioned many years ago often occupied these spaces as educators and affirmers to help their community find an easier path by answering questions or offering advice and information.

To illustrate this point, Lester (2017), in their book, describes their experience in online spaces as both a blessing and a curse:

> More than just the change to the practical elements of our shared lives and communities is the change technology has made to the ways in which we interact with each other and see ourselves. The cost - online abuse, doxing, sustained harassment - is high. But even with that, the impact is tremendous. I can, if I choose, spend the day speaking with other people, exchanging ideas and sharing the things I love...I can find places to be myself and have that self automatically treated as legitimate. That casual allowance of my authenticity is a game changer. Once you get used to it, you never want to go back (p. 196).

CN Lester captures precisely the ease and comfort in a supportive queer space and that there is nothing better than finding such a liberatory space online. These case studies often portrayed this feeling of authenticity and freedom. I certainly felt this way in these spaces. Nevertheless, I appreciate that I may come off sounding innocent and naive, much too concentrated on the positives of contemporary media. In my day-to-day life, I am certainly not an optimist nor a romantic; I am a staunch cynic and acutely aware of the dark sides of online spaces.

When I was initially looking to research social media, my thesis supervisor, Michael, recommended that I read several seminal works on data capitalism, surveillance capitalism, media literacy and issues of identity in the age of algorithms. These books and articles were important and necessary for this type of research. However, they made me highly anxious and depressed. I knew I had to pivot to something more positive because I was struggling with mental health issues again, so together, we decided that it could be worthwhile to examine contemporary media sites as spaces of possibility. I knew it was feasible because, as I mentioned above, I have seen the good things that some online spaces can do. I resonated with *Participatory Culture in a Networked Era* by Jenkins et al. (2016), a book on my reading list from Michael. This book had some optimistic things to say about online communities. It was

written in a conversational style, and the authors discussed the transformation of participatory culture in the last 20 years, given the explosion of social technologies mediating communication and collaboration. Participatory culture is the idea that the public can simultaneously be both the creators and consumers of media. The authors deliberated the aspirational version of participatory culture as embodying ideas and social practices that facilitate communal learning, empowerment, civic action and skill building. This idea of participatory culture was well represented in my chosen case studies. The Jammidodger channel on YouTube, r/ftm on Reddit, and *The Unsleeping City* (2019) on Dimension 20 were exemplars of participatory culture and represented the idealized version of what safe queer spaces can be. I firmly believe we can admit that there can be a lot of good in these spaces while simultaneously being aware of the many ways to improve them.

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