A qualitative study exploring transgender youths' experiences of using social media

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Contents

Abstract

Background

The rise of the Internet in recent decades, along with social media and communication platforms, has created an opportunity for transgender individuals to seek out a common alternative identity that may reduce the societal pressure of fitting into a particular gender role dictated by biological sex. The developmental period that adolescents go through is accompanied by an array of challenges, more so for a young person whose biological sex is incongruent to their felt gendered sense. Research in social media use within the trans population is still developing, given the growing interest in how social media impacts on our sense of identity. Given the importance of identity development in adolescence, this highlights the need for research into this specific population. This study thus aims to contribute to the existing literature by exploring the experiences of transgender adolescents in using social media.

Method

A qualitative research methodology was employed, using a thematic analysis approach. A total of 11 participants between the ages of 15 to 18 were interviewed. Recruitment took place at the Tavistock and Portman NHS Foundation trust as well as using snowballing sampling.

Results

Participants described using a varied range of social media platforms. A total of 3 main themes were developed from the data, with participants describing how social media played an initial role in helping them explore their trans identity, how they find

themselves aligning with particular trans narratives on social media and lastly how participants make use of social media to present an image of themselves to others.

Discussion

The participants' experiences on social media mirror and intersect with the transitional journey many of them take in changing their gender and this has implications for how clinicians can take into account social media influences when working with young trans individuals.

Chapter 1. Introduction

<u>Thesis Overview</u>

The aim of this thesis is to explore the experience of using social media platforms among transgender adolescents. Specifically, it intends to examine how the use of social media by transgender youth impact on the development of their self-identity, particularly in relation to gender.

Identity formation lies at the heart of this thesis, with the target population likely being caught in a mix of confusing identities, be it gender or the growing phase of adolescence. Typically, the developmental period of adolescence is accompanied by an array of challenges, more so for a young person whose biological sex is incongruent with their perceived gender identity.

With the rise of the Internet, research interest into the role of the Internet and social media in how it shapes our identity has been increasing. For example, Sherry Turkle (1995) has been influential in her concept of the Internet as a 'social laboratory' through which people are able to explore identities that they would otherwise find difficult to do in the physical world. This is even more significant given that adolescents today have grown up in an era where they are familiar with digital technology from a very early age. "Digital Natives," a term coined by Marc Prensky (2001), aptly describes this group of people.

In the vein of relatively recent research looking into how the current Digital Age plays a significant role in developing our identities, this thesis endeavours to investigate how a sense of self is constructed in transgender adolescents within this context.

Chapter Overview

To provide background into the aim of the research, this chapter will present relevant theories and research regarding the transgender experience, identity formation theories and how digital technology interacts with identity formation. Firstly, a working definition of transgender will be considered and the prevalence rates for transgender adolescents and associated mental health risks will be discussed. Next, a history of how transgender experiences have been presented and talked about will be summarised. Various theories around identity construction including traditional developmental psychology views and how the Internet and social media have contributed to these ideas will also be examined. Lastly, literature around how social media is used within the transgender population will be summarised and reviewed.

Defining "transgender"

Within the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, fifth edition (DSM-5) (American Psychiatric Association, 2013), the re-classification of Gender Dysphoria (GD) to describe the transgender population reflects a change in perspective from the previously classified Gender Identity Disorder. This change shifts the focus from the incongruity between a person's biological sex and their identified gender to the importance of the associated distress accompanying this incongruence. Incidentally, the World Professional Association for Transgender Health, in their Standard of Care document (WPATH, n.d.), stipulated a caveat that people with GD are but a subset of the transgender population and that not all people who identify as transgender experience GD persistently to be clinically diagnosed. It is thus important to note that the DSM-5 classification is based on a clinical understanding, and does not encapsulate the full range of people who might identify as transgender. There is mounting criticism

of the authority afforded by the medical diagnosis of GD in dictating the narratives of trans experiences. This will be further discussed in the section describing medical discourses of trans experiences.

Entering the words "transgender definition" into a recent Google search brought up approximately 1.2 million hits. Just the first page of the search results covered a whole array of websites such as the ubiquitous Wikipedia, ('Transgender', 2017) which was the first search result; while also including official dictionary definitions like Merriam-Webster ('Transgender | Transgender Definition by Merriam-Webster', n.d.); medical definitions from WebMD ('What It Means to Be Transgender', n.d.) and a number of specialised transgender information websites such as BeLongTo.org ('What does Transgender mean? - BeLonGTo.org', n.d.) and the National Centre for Transgender Equality (NCTE) ('Transgender Terminology', 2015). Most of these websites often have a disclaimer that the definition and terminology of "transgender" are dynamic and change over time. The sheer number of websites that attempt to define this population is testament to the complexity.

For the purposes of this paper, a working definition of the term "transgender" is taken from the National Centre for Transgender Equality (NCTE) website ('Transgender Terminology', 2015) which is founded and run by U.S.-based transgender activists lobbying for policy change. These activists have been influential in educating the wider public on various transgender issues, both social and legal, and have been a striving force towards equality for transgender rights. On their website, "transgender" is defined as:

> *A term for people whose gender identity, expression or behaviour is different*
> *from those typically associated with their assigned sex at birth. Transgender is a*

broad term and is good for non-transgender people to use. "Trans" is shorthand for "transgender."

(Note: Transgender is correctly used as an adjective, not a noun, thus "transgender people" is appropriate but "transgenders" is often viewed as disrespectful.)

Throughout the rest of this thesis, the terms "trans" and "transgender" will be used interchangeably with the above definition in mind. Using these umbrella terms would encompass a wide range of people from the surgically confirmed transgender person to self-identified genderqueer and gender fluid individuals. Significantly, this contemporary understanding of transgender has been crafted to resist the labels imposed by the medical establishment to narrowly define cross-gender identities and behaviours (Currah, 2006). This very resistance to defining the scope of the term 'trans' in a simplistic manner also mirrors the historic transgender movement's subversion of a rigid concept of gender as a strict binary determined by physical sex. This is perhaps made even more significant when considering the current political climates and uncertainties around the narratives of what trans people are and are not allowed to do (for e.g. the rescinding of US policy around use of toilets for trans youth in schools in 2017 vs. more progressive changes within the UK around gender neutral school uniforms).

Defining Sex and Gender Terminologies

"Gender, like gravity or breathing, is a really complicated topic when you start taking it apart and breaking it down" (Stryker, 2009, p.9)

Before moving on to the rest of the chapter, this section seeks to define some common terms and concepts around sex and gender that are often unchallenged. As the quote suggests, gender is often experienced in daily life without much thought to questioning

the assumptions underlying a very fundamental way of thinking of ourselves (Stryker, 2009). The following terms and definitions summarised from Stryker's book *Transgender History* (2009) break down differences in terminologies and serve as a foundation for when these terms are used throughout the rest of the thesis.

Sex. Sex is largely considered to be biological in nature and taken to refer to reproductive capacities defined by the production of either egg or sperm within an individual. Producers of the sex cell, sperms are typically referred to as males and similarly, producers of the sex cell, eggs are typically referred to as females.

Gender. Although gender is often used interchangeably with the word sex, there are distinct, and important, differences between the two. Gender is considered to be a cultural process and is the social organisation of categorising people based on what genitals they are born with. Within the last 5 years, there has been growing public awareness of the cultural construction of gender with a growing number of people viewing it as a continuum with man and woman on opposite ends (BBC News, 2016). A salient point to note is that gender is dynamic and historical, contingent on cultures and time periods.

Gender role. This refers to societal pressures and expectations of how one should behave based on their gender. For example, stereotypes of what careers are fitting for men and women, such as men are doctors, women are nurses, reinforces what gender roles are. The risk of prescribing such gender roles is that falling outside of these rigid boundaries mean that we fail to be seen as being a "good" man or woman.

Gender identity. This is a person's subjective feeling of how they fit within a gender category. For a majority of people, this feeling is congruent with the gender category that they have been socially assigned to. However, this isn't necessarily the same for

people who identify as trans, who feel uncomfortable with the gender they have been assigned with and believe that they belong to a different gender category.

Sexual orientation. Our sexual orientation refers to who we are attracted to and what we find erotic and pleasurable. This can also describe how and who we act out our desires on. Commonly, the words "heterosexual" is used to describe when our desire is directed towards a member of another gender, "homosexual" when it is towards a member of the same gender and "bisexual" when it is towards either gender. Sexuality, like gender, is increasingly thought of as a spectrum, and terms such "asexual" and "pansexual" are used in an attempt to capture more experiences on this spectrum. This concept is often closely linked to gender; however, there are distinct differences. For instance, a trans person can identify as any sexual orientation, just as a non-trans person can.

Trans man/Trans woman. Although transgender has been defined above, within the trans community, people commonly refer to those born with female bodies who consider themselves as men as "trans men" whereas people born with male body parts who consider themselves as women are known as "trans women". Often a preferred pronoun would be established by the individual (for e.g. "she" and "her" for trans women; "he" and "him" for trans men) and it is considered polite to use their preferred gender terms when referring to them.

Queer and Genderqueer. The word "queer" was popularised as a positive way of describing homosexuality in the early 1990s. This was an attempt to re-appropriate the word, which had previously been used in an offensive manner. Queer is thus less of a sexual orientation and more of a political statement. Although typically associated with sexuality, a small subset of queer theorists places importance on trans practices in furthering queer politics. These people call themselves "genderqueer". Occasionally,

genderqueer is also used to refer to people who are comfortable resisting gender norms without the need to change their biological sex, which differentiates them from the typical view of transgender people, who are thought of as wanting to live as a gender other than the one they were assigned with.

Cisgender/Cissexual. The prefix cis means "to be on the same side", and these two words were coined in recent years to oppose the idea that by default, "woman" and "man" can only refer to people who are not transgender. Saying cisgender or cissexual makes explicit the frequently unsaid assumption of non-transgender people, similar in the way that prefacing "woman" with "white" takes away the assumption that any women of another race is a deviation from the norm.

Statistics and Prevalence Rates

Typically, societies organised around a majority population can often lead to prejudice and discrimination towards the minority group (Bumiller, 1992). This is perpetuated by ignorance and misinformation about a less recognised and less common way of being (Stryker, 2009). In the context of gender, most people might find it difficult to recognise the humanity behind a person if they struggle to make sense of their perceived gender, which can lead to an instinctive fear of The Other as a defence mechanism. This could then manifest itself in an outward display of hate or disgust, such as physical and/or emotional abuse, which could have devastating effects on the person. Savin-Williams & Ream (2003) demonstrated this in their study where they found that a gender variant identity itself is not a risk factor to mental health conditions, rather it is environmental factors such as family, peer and societal negative reactions that cause significant distress. Furthermore, transgender people often experience a lack of social support and access to protection that is common in the general population (Grossman & D'augelli,

2006; McKinney, 2005), hence increasing the likelihood that they might engage in risky and harmful behaviours.

Prevalence of Transgender Youths

The true prevalence rate of transgender adolescents is difficult to determine as most data available is gathered within a clinical sample of adolescents with a diagnosis of GD. This means that a large portion of the population that does not present with clinical difficulties meeting these diagnostic criteria is not being captured and only an underestimation of its prevalence rate can be discussed. Furthermore, the term "gender dysphoria" is a predominantly Western construct (Vasey & Bartlett, 2007) which means that at a global level, a majority of the data around prevalence comes from Western cultures that subscribe to that definition. At present, there is a lack of systematic epidemiological studies that have looked at the true prevalence rate of transgender adolescents.

Globally, studies that looked at the prevalence rates of GD have shown a range of 0.05% in Belgium and the Netherlands (Olyslager & Conway, 2008) to 1.2% in New Zealand (Clark et al., 2014). However these numbers are based on adults who presented at gender identity clinics (Olyslager & Conway, 2008) and adolescents who are 15 years and older (Clark et al., 2014).

Within the U.K., there has been an incremental rise in referrals to the Tavistock and Portman NHS Trust Gender Identity Development service (GIDS); the only nationally-funded specialised service for children and adolescents up to their 18th birthday who need support around their gender identity. In both personal communication with Dr Bernadette Wren (23 Nov 2016) in the service as well as published data on their referral rates on the Tavistock and Portman Trust website (Carmichael, 2016), the increase in

referral rates has been exponential (diagram 1).

Diagram 1. Referral rates to GIDS (Wren, personal communication, 23 November 2016)

Increase in referrals 1989-2016
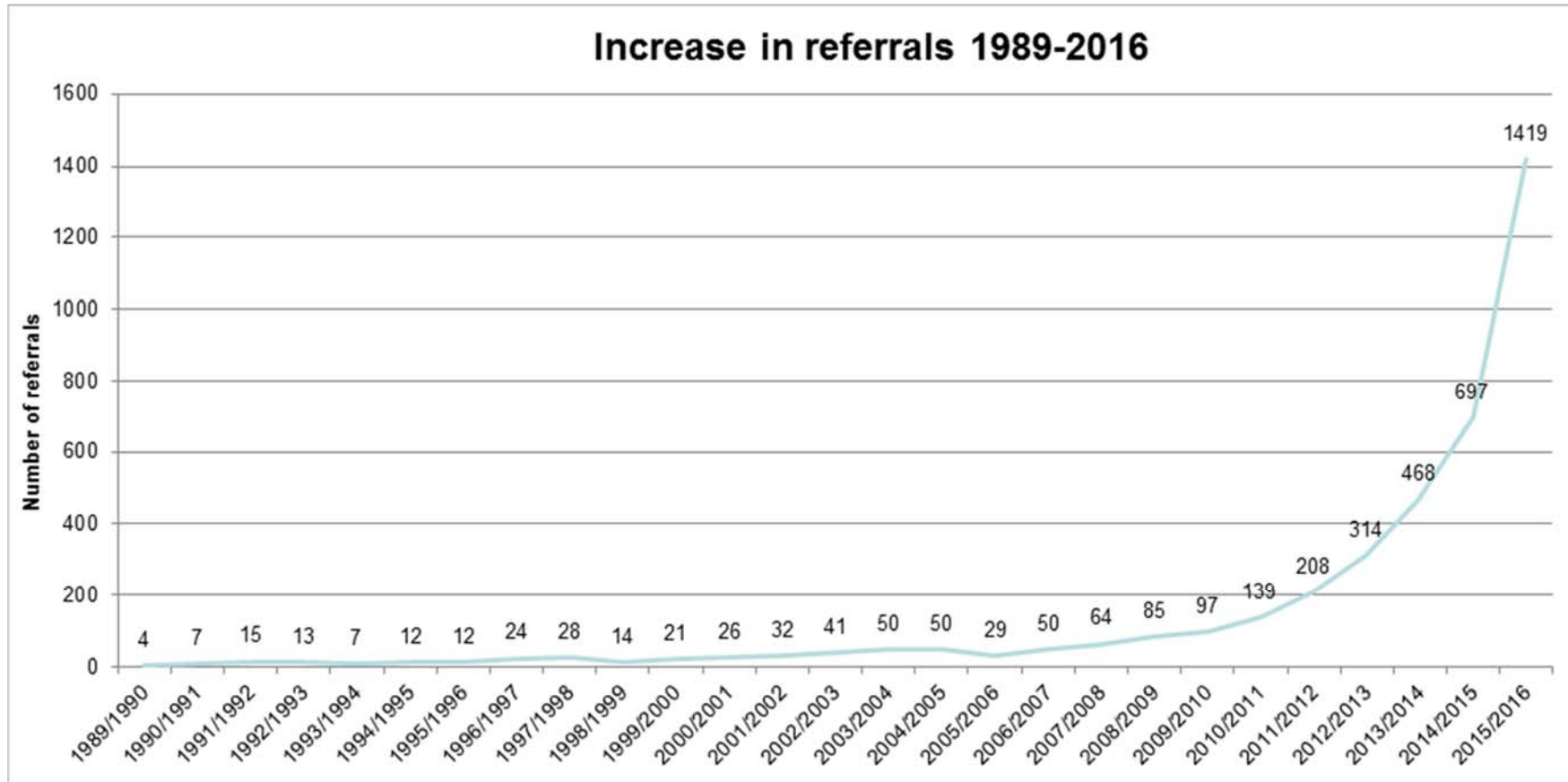
Transgender Youths and Mental Health Risks

Studies looking at the associated mental health difficulties of transgender youths have shown that this group is at a higher risk of co-existing difficulties than youths in the general population (Coates & Spector Person, 1985; Holt, Skagerberg, & Dunsford, 2016; Reisner et al., 2015). Specifically within the GIDS service in the U.K., the three most commonly identified difficulties presented by clients were bullying (74%), low mood or depression (42%) and self-harming behaviours (39%) (Holt et al., 2016). Within this study, data comparing self-harming thoughts and tendencies between assigned males and females adolescents showed that although self-harming thoughts were more common in assigned males, actual self-harm was more prevalent in assigned females.

This report echoed earlier findings and research around associated mental health risks. A study by Hendricks and Testa (2012) found that young people with GD were more likely to be at risk of prejudice and discrimination leading to bullying, while an earlier study by de Vries, Doreleijers, Steensma, & Cohen-Kettenis (2011) found that adolescents diagnosed with GD present with more internalising problems such as anxiety or depression as opposed to externalising behaviours like aggression.

However, this doesn't necessarily mean that the young people who present at gender clinics are always suffering from distress. It was found that young people who have good social support, are taking puberty suppressants and are receiving psychological therapy to guide them through the process of transition are able to cope well (Costa et al., 2015; Drescher, Cohen-Kettenis, & Winter, 2012). While engaging in positive social interaction with other transgender individuals have shown to build resilience (Testa, Jimenez, & Rankin, 2014).

Understanding Transgender Experiences

While historical accounts of transgender practices have been known to exist in ancient cultures (Stryker, 2009), the study of transgender experiences is considered relatively contemporary, emerging within the last century from medical studies of transgender individuals. Within Western societies, medical and psychological perspectives have dominated how a transgender identity is viewed and subsequently experienced (Benjamin, 1954; Hirschfeld, 1910). This has since given rise to numerous critiques of the medical discourse in trying to understand the transgender experience better. In the following section, different theories and accounts of the transgender experience will be laid out, beginning with the dominant perspective of the medical discourse, followed by different strands of psychoanalytic, feminist and postmodern theories in their attempts to navigate a more progressive understanding of gender development and transgender identities.

Medical Discourse

> *Medical perspectives stand out as the culturally major lens through which gender blending may be viewed in our society. Other perspectives must take medical perspectives into account whether they ultimately incorporate, extend or reject them. (Ekins & King, 1996, p. 75)*

Within medical practices, trans practices were initially classified under the label "transsexuality" as a separate category of sexual behaviour alongside homosexuality (Hines, 2007b). The 1960s was a period of growing research into transsexuality within the fields of sexology (Benjamin, 1977), psychology (R. Green & Money, 1969) and psychiatry. Research into this population emphasised a dysfunctional mental illness as the cause of the transsexual 'condition' and provided a framework for the treatment of

trans people with innovative forms of technology. This was influential in that it offered some form of protection for transsexuals who were regarded as having a medical problem as opposed to a moral one and provided professionals within the medical sphere a reason for treating and conducting research with the transsexual population (Denny, 2004).

This opened up new ideas at the time around gender as a construct separate from biological sex and allowed for increasing societal acceptance of reconstructive surgery. As a result, this strengthened the role of medical doctors by giving trans people the opportunity to live as their "true" selves. Within this dominant narrative of transsexuality as a medical condition, the power of language and definition provided by the medical profession point to a top-down approach where their authority regulated the way trans experiences were described (Hausman, 1995). While acknowledging that trans people are given the opportunity to have access to technologies aiding their transition, the underlying understanding appear to be pathological in nature. The development of a diagnostic criteria regarding what a "true transsexual" is was based on a binary polarisation of the male and female sexes (Califia, 2003). For instance, the notion of what a "true transsexual" is legitimises certain experiences and feelings as suitable for medical intervention while discounting others that do not fit into this narrative. This upholds societal constructs of heterosexual masculinity and femininity as being the standard for normal sexual behaviour and this construct still holds clout within decisions on contemporary diagnostic criteria (for e.g. DSM-IV and DSM-5 (American Psychiatric Association, 2000, 2013)).

The emphasis on diagnosing, classifying and treating trans individuals had a huge impact on the narratives that trans people can claim that would be recognised within the

medical field. This is important as being accepted, and diagnosed, as a transsexual serve as a gateway to not only accessing hormone replacement therapies and sex reassignment surgeries but also to officially change their legal gender status. The concept of gender dysphoria was developed in the 1970s to replace the term "transsexual" and several iterations within the DSM have reflected the ever-changing concept of what the medical profession originally viewed as transsexuality.

Currently, mental health professionals working with trans people serve a paradoxical dual role as both provider of the diagnosis and therapist at the same time (Korell & Lorah, 2007). As mentioned above, the diagnosis legitimises and allows access to transitioning interventions; however, it also operates as a way of pathologising trans people's identities in which it is labelled as a mental disorder (J. Butler, 2004). Within the DSM-V (American Psychiatric Association, 2000), the process of diagnosis meant that trans people's wishes are labelled as pathological, potentially causing distress and placing pressure to conform to a particular narrative in order to gain access to the technologies to live as they want (Raun, 2016). This has been somewhat rectified in the DSM-5 (American Psychiatric Association, 2013) in an attempt to get away from pathologising the trans identity of a person by diagnosing the associated distress of coming to terms with it.

Psychoanalytic Theories

Psychoanalytic theory was one of the first comprehensive attempts at explaining what we now understand as gender in an era where masculinity and femininity were assumed to map onto two distinct biological sexes (Person & Ovesey, 1983). Although largely criticised for being rigid and phallocentric, Freud's work in psychosexual development (1949) laid the foundation for thinking about gender manifestation, postulating that our

sense of gender embodies aspects of inner conflicts alongside unconscious motivation (Bell, 2004).

However, Freud's theories are not without its limitations; most damningly, he viewed masculinity as the natural state of mankind and theorised that girls discovered their femininity through their awareness of their lack of a penis (i.e. penis envy). Karen Horney was one of the first psychoanalysts who critiqued Freud's theory of penis envy and offered a more feminist perspective on gender development (Horney, 1993). She disagreed with the fundamental view that women's awareness of their femininity stemmed from the disappointment of a lack of penis, rather, she asserts that it is grounded in their awareness of their vagina. She argued for gender behaviour to be evident from a very early age, prior to awareness of anatomical differences, while acknowledging that other social factors such as cultural and family dynamics play a part in determining gender identity (Paris, 2000).

Another major contributor to psychoanalytic theories around gender development was Robert Stoller. Similar to Horney, he argued that in the development of a core gender identity, although there might be innate hormonal predispositions, we cannot deny the environmental circumstances that influence gender development (Stoller, 1991). Most significant in his work is the idea that infants are assigned by medical authorities to be either male or female when they are born based on their external genitals. Subsequently, these gender roles are consciously and unconsciously imprinted by how the child is raised, in both subtle and covert ways, according to gender stereotypes. He stressed that the child is able to hold a strong conviction of their core gender identity by the age of two and these self-affirmations are confirmed and shaped by his/her surrounding environment. His views on "proto-femininity", a term he coined to describe the process

wherein children, regardless of gender, initially identifies with their mother is a vast departure from Freud's phallocentric theories (Person & Ovesey, 1983). Extending beyond that, he claimed that in order for a boy to develop normative gender development, he must be able to dis-identify with his mother and absorb masculine traits from his father. When this process of separation is hindered, female identification is absorbed in little boys and abnormal gender identification occurs (Greenson, 1966; Stoller, 1991). These psychoanalytic theories have been largely concerned with normative gender development and like in medical discourses, have been used to pathologise gender-variant identities.

More recently, Ehrensaft in her book *Gender born, Gender Made: Raising health gender-non conforming children* (Ehrensaft, 2011) expanded on Winnicott's original concept of self to capture the idea of a gender self. Winnicott introduced the concept of true and false selves (1965), describing the true self as an authentic sense of wholeness that keeps one feeling alive. The false self, in contrast, serves a protective function by taking on the social role so that the true self can continue existing. He proposes that the false self is an extension of the true self and can manifest itself in healthy or unhealthy ways. A false self is functional when it allows for the presentation of socially acceptable ways without compromising aspects of the true self. An unhealthy true self develops when there is a feeling of forced compromise and an inability to get a sense of what the real self is.

Ehrensaft (2011) extended this concept into the context of gender and proposed that there exists a false gender self in which people might put on a "mask" of gender-conforming behaviour, adapting based on expectations from society. Though it serves as a defensive strategy against prejudice, it also has the potential to be overwhelming if

people do not feel in control of it. Gender creativity, she suggested, is a way of making the true gender self more dominant through an environment that allows for it. With people around that allow for their true gender self to emerge, the false gender self is able to adapt more flexibly and "perform" in certain socially constrained situations.

Second Wave Radical Feminism

With the advent of second wave feminism, which provided a radical critique and subverting of dominant gender roles, the discourse around transgender issues was also subjected to much scrutiny. The issue of being transgender raised questions that greatly concern not only the epistemological status of sex and gender, but also more fundamentally, the ontology of it (Hines, 2007b). Both on a theoretical and political level, radical feminism had been hostile towards trans practices, decrying trans people as anti-feminist and as reinforcing the normative stereotypical gender system that prevents social change and women empowerment (Raymond, 1980, 1994; J. Shapiro, 1991). Many of these radical feminist theories of trans people defended the notion of a "pure woman". Trans women are therefore often seen as reinforcing a stereotypical model of extreme femininity, while trans men are characterised as traitors who submit to the patriarchy and seek male power and privilege (Raymond, 1980). Furthermore, Raymond (1980) posited that being transgender is a distinctly genetic male practice that arose from a patriarchal medical system in order to construct servile women while Jeffreys (1997) positioned transgender practices as reinforcing constructed ideas of what correct femininity and masculinity are meant to be.

Heyes (2003) argues against the viewpoint of Raymond and other radical feminist views with the opinion that this creates a divide between feminism and the trans movement while dismissing the agency of trans people. Other feminist writers too have opposed

these radical feminist views as painting a picture of trans people as deviant outsiders and have adopted a more progressive, postmodern approach to thinking about transgender issues. This approach will be discussed in further detail within the postmodern theories section below.

Postmodern Theories

The era of postmodernism challenged the assumptions of fundamental modernist concepts of self as stable and coherent. It signified a turn towards notions of multiplicity and the deconstruction of absolute concepts such as identity (Wren, 2014). This view also emphasised how inherently unstable binary gender terms are, which appear to be a collective way of classifying experiences in Western civilisation.

The underlying premise of postmodern approaches suggest that gender is seen as a negotiation between the self, others and the wider culture, i.e., how a person experiences the social construction of gender within their individual context (Dimen & Goldner, 2002). Rather than being a stable and enduring construct, gender is fluid and evolves over time (Goldner, 1991; Layton, 2004). These approaches seek a more understanding view towards non-normative gender and sexual practices while critiquing the way that the medical and psychological fields have narrowly defined what "deviant" gender and sexual expressions are. A discussion of three different postmodernist approaches will be presented here.

Feminist Theories

Postmodern feminism is one of the first schools of thought to move beyond binary models of gender. Echoing Robert Stoller's (1991) ideas that gender narratives are reiterated by medical professionals even before an infant is born, Judith Butler (1993)

asserted that this reinforces the naturalising effect of gender where naming the gender immediately places boundaries around how the infant is thought about. In her influential book *Gender Trouble* (J. Butler, 1990), she questioned the idea of gender as social meaning attached to biologically distinctive bodies (i.e., sex) and argued that this restricts the understanding that gender can be thought of separately from sex. Understanding these two concepts as separate would allow for greater diversity in embodied gender expressions not associated to biological sex (Hines, 2007b). Instead, she introduced the idea of gender as constructed through performative acts based on dominant cultural scripts that are often enacted unconsciously (J. Butler, 1990; Kassoff, 2004). Gender identities are therefore largely shaped by dominant societal expectations that privilege heterosexuality.

Queer Theories

Queer theories draw heavily upon poststructuralist works including Lacan's psychoanalytic model of a de-centred self, Derrida's (1967) ideas of deconstructing binary linguistic structures and Foucault's (1980) approach to power, knowledge and discourse. Similar to postmodern feminist thinking, these theories take the stance of gender and sexual identities as being socially constructed and offer a framework for thinking about trans identities in a non-pathological manner. Utilising the concept of differences, queer theory has incorporated the trans population into analyses of gender diversity, looking at ways trans culture challenges our normative views of gender and sexuality (Hines, 2007b). This has enabled greater exploration into how bodies defined by biological sex can be reframed and reinterpreted (Rubin, 1996).

While queer theories play a significant part in acknowledging trans identities and practices, they are unable to account positively for differences without losing sight of the

subjectivities that make up difference. The lack of emphasis upon particularity in deconstructing identities has paradoxically led to a homogenous grouping of transgender as a distinct identity category (Seidman, 1993). While the recognition of difference is preferable to modernist views of gender diversity, it is acknowledged that this approach has a tendency to ignore subject positionality (MacDonald, 1998). Queer theory has also failed to account for the many conflicting accounts from trans people around an authentic sense of gender (Hines, 2006).

Transgender Studies

The field of transgender studies was borne out of the critique of queer theory, considered by Susan Stryker (2004) to be its "evil twin". Building on the critiques of queer theory, trans studies argue that with queer theory's focus on deconstructing the identities of trans people, there is a lack of attention paid to their subjective embodied experiences and narratives (King, 1993; Prosser, 1998; Rubin, 1996). This could end up invalidating the categories through which trans people can make sense of their experiences.

Trans studies address this by incorporating autobiographical bodies of work and focusing on social and political activism within the community. This has led to an exploration of the interplay between bodily experiences and social discourse around gender. In particular, much debate within trans studies surrounds the tension between ideas of deconstructive and fragmented gender categorisations and the need for a fixed and coherent identity articulated in many trans autobiographies (Hines, 2006; Wren, 2014). An increasing focus on trans issues in recent years has also been attributed to broader social and cultural shifts, such as the rise of the Internet in allowing greater access to a larger community and the changing political and economic climate that captured the zeitgeist of the late '90s and early '00s (Stryker & Whittle, 2006).

Rise of the Transgender Rights Movement

Understanding the growing recognition of transgender people would not be complete without considering the trans rights movement, a collective resistance against society's treatment of trans people. Trans people were no longer willing to be seen as living on the fringes of society or individuals to be gawked at and be afraid of, instead there was a growing movement of trans being seen as a political identity, fighting against societal oppression through the enforcing of a gender binary.

In considering the rise of trans as a political movement, it is undeniable that there was a heavy overlap between gay and trans activism within the US in the 1960s against police oppression and violence (Stryker, 2009). It is also no coincidence that the trans activist movement gained traction during a period of massive social upheaval brought about by other radical liberal movements that were happening throughout the US at that time (i.e. African American civil rights movement, Women's rights movement). Progress within the UK was still lagging then, the 1971 case of Corbett vs. Corbett, involving the divorce of a trans women from her husband led to the long-standing legal position of trans people: that biological sex was given precedence over psychological gender (Whittle, 2000). Similarly, new attitudes towards trans people were introduced by the publication of Dr Harry Benjamin's (1977) ground-breaking book at that time *The Transsexual Phenomenon* which seemed to legitimise a transgender identity and gave cause to justify a need for positive action. The Stonewall riots that occurred in 1969 were widely attributed to form the basis of the gay liberation movement among a time where the AIDS disease was often associated with gay men. At the same time, this also marked a growing separation of the trans and gay communities who had increasingly divergent interests and goals in de-stigmatising identities. This eventually culminated in the gay liberation movement excluding concerns specific to trans people and led to an

erasure of trans visibility and the role trans people played in the Stonewall riots. Most tellingly was the exclusion of trans people in the early days of commemorating the Stonewall riots, which eventually gave rise to the annual Gay Pride Day.

The 1990s were a time of rapid change and expansion for the trans community as the modern definition of "transgender" as an umbrella term for all non-binary forms of gender expression was introduced (Feinberg, 1992). The growing popularity of media meant greater access to images and news coverage of famous trans people. This aided in depicting trans people in a more sympathetic and relatable light, with coverage of trans people in mainstream media being seen as a culmination of society's acceptance towards the trans community (Day, 2015). The impact of the Internet is also undeniable in allowing news to be shared quickly, generating hype and fervour around certain issues, and this meant that trans issues were gradually being embedded into public consciousness. Greater visibility of trans issues and famous trans people serving as role models have led to more significant attempts at policy changes within the UK (i.e. Gender Recognition Act 2004), leading to the general sense of greater social acceptance.

Identity Theories

Identity is typically defined as "people's concepts of who they are, of what sort of people they are, and how they relate to others" (Hogg & Abrams, 1988, p. 2). The work of developmental psychologist Erik Erikson in the 1950s was hugely influential in our understanding of what identity is. In its present-day use, identity can refer to a multitude of concepts, ranging from a social category defined by membership rules and expected behaviours to a set of individual distinguishable features of a person that is mostly unchangeable (Fearon, 1999). Paradoxically, blending these two concepts together suggests that although identity is something that is unique to the individual, it also

implies that to have an identity is to subscribe to membership in a broader social group who we assume are similar to us (Buckingham, 2008). Recently, it has also been suggested that our current ideas of identity are shifting more towards a social constructionist stance (P. L. Berger & Luckmann, 1966; Holstein & Gubrium, 2000; Sampson, 1989) where the way we develop our sense of self is culturally bound. The period of adolescence is significant in that it is often regarded within Western culture as a period where individuals are faced with the myriad confounding tasks to do with defining a coherent sense of their identity (Kroger, 1989).

This section will present a discussion of various identity theories, capturing individualistic theories from biological to psychological and developmental perspectives as well as social identity theories with a brief sociological account. Specific focus will be placed on the period of adolescence, capturing the theoretical constructs behind the research population. Postmodern interest into identity as a social construct will also be discussed followed by a brief description into the growing research around gender identity development.

Identity Formation Theories

Biological Perspective

Psychologist Stanley Hall (1907) was the first in his field to observe the period of adolescence and apply scientific methods in researching it. He was attributed with coining the word "adolescence", defining it as the developmental period from puberty to adulthood between the ages of 12 to 25. His interest in Darwin's biological concept of evolution was evident in his work, where he introduced the theory of adolescence as a period of storm and stress which corresponds to a tumultuous transitional time in human history (Muuss, 1988). Three aspects characterised this period: erratic mood swings,

risky behaviour and interfamilial conflicts. The emotional upheaval that comes during this phase was seen as fluctuating between contradictory tendencies such as from high energy and exuberance to apathy and melancholy, wanting solitude and isolation while entrenched in relationship issues. Peer groups and idolisation are also prominent during this phase, where significance is placed on peer influence at the expense of rebelling against any form of authority (i.e., parents).

Freud's Psychosexual Development Stages

According to Freud's (1949) psychoanalytic theory, his discussion of adolescent development was only in relation to psychosexual development. He suggested that psychosexual development progressed in a series of stages that are biologically fixed, with little influence from the environment (Muuss, 1988). Each stage is characterised by the fixation of instinctual sexual libido on different parts of the body. As physical growth progresses, certain areas of a person's body become significant as sources of frustration or pleasure. Normal development occur when these different sexual libido arise and dissipate as we mature; on the contrary, being stuck on a psychosexual stage while the body matures lead to frustration and anxiety that if persists into adulthood, would form a mental disorder of neurosis. Freud placed much emphasis on the early 5 years of life in shaping the adult identity. This constitutes the development of the ego and superego to control the id's desires into more socially acceptable behaviour. These desires manifest in different areas of the body at each psychosexual stage, thus the ongoing need to resolve the conflict between the id, ego and superego. Adolescence was believed by Freud to be a universal period that was symbolic of emotional and behavioural changes due to the relationship between physical and psychological changes. This, he felt, was the explanation for the peak of negative affect such as anxiety, irritability and despair.

Developmental Theories

Influential developmental psychologists like Erikson (1971) and Marcia (1966) furthered the study of identity formation by demonstrating that adolescence serve an important purpose in the forming of an identity which encapsulates one's principles, values and adopted role. Identity formation is therefore a distinctive process in which adolescents are exploring different identities and roles within the different sectors of life (e.g., gender roles, friendships, religion, romantic relationships, occupations, etc.). Through this process of exploration, adolescents evolve into individuals with differences in identity development.

Erikson's (1971) famous developmental theory is built upon Freud and Piaget's (1936) descriptions of linear stages into adulthood. His theory consisted of eight stages that capture a psychological conflict and resolution which would determine progression to the next stage. In the adolescence stage, this psychological conflict is between role confusion and stable identity, and is described as a state of 'moratorium'. This period is often characterised by significant physical and psychological changes through puberty and bodily changes. As a result of this, individuals start to see themselves and the world around them differently. This leads to an increasing preoccupation with how they appear to others. Similarly, as adolescents start to transform visually into more adult-like features, perceptions from people around them start to change as well. The surrounding social environment thus serves as a way for adolescents to gather clues about what characteristics to assimilate, often through interaction with peer groups and family members.

This critical period is one where individuals learn to overcome uncertainty and gain self-awareness through independence. They achieve an integrated and stable sense of identity

when the 'crisis' of uncertainty is resolved by re-defining their sense of self and receiving recognition and affirmation from others.

Marcia (1966), similar to Erikson, placed emphasis on the period of identity crisis in adolescence. However, in a departure from stage-based theories, he proposed that identity formation is a dynamic process and identifies 4 statuses that adolescents can potentially find themselves in. The first status is foreclosure, where the individual doesn't engage in crisis by complying with others' (i.e. parental) expectations. The second status is diffusion, where the person doesn't settle on a commitment and gives up attempting to resolve the crisis. The third status, moratorium, consists of the person actively struggling with the crisis and trying out different commitments. The fourth status is achievement, where the individuals have resolved the crisis and are clear about who they are as a person. Individuals can find themselves inhabiting any of these statuses and Marcia posited that the process of forming an identity therefore neither begins nor ends with the period of adolescence.

Social Identity Theories

Identification is, of course, identification with an other, which means that identity is never identical to itself. This alienation of identity from the self it constructs ... does not mean simply that any proclamation of identity will be only partial, that it will be exceeded by other aspects of identity, but rather that identity is a relation, never simply a positivity. (Crimp, 2002, p186-187)

Scholars of social identity theories study how people identify themselves in relation to others, such as by identifying as members of a distinct group, developing a sense of community and distinguishing themselves from people outside this group (Hogg & Abrams, 1988; Tajfel, 1981). They postulate that having a particular identity is to align

oneself with a social category or be assigned to it by others (Fearon, 1999), where social categories are defined by a set of people who follow the implicit or explicit rules of what it means to be a member of the same category. This is done through two parallel processes of self-categorisation. The first process which emphasise perceived similarities within group members and the second, engaging in social comparison where people who are similar are categorised as the in-group and people who are different are considered the out-group (Hogg & Abrams, 1988; Stets & Burke, 2000). Stets & Burke (2000) also point out that these social categories precede individuals in that people are born into these predetermined structures and develop their sense of identity through whichever social category they are assigned to at birth. This typically involves stereotyping, a cognitive bias that simplifies the process of people distinguishing commonalities and differences between the self and other (Buckingham, 2008).

George Mead (1982) introduced the idea of the self as a social process. He presents the self as part of the process of communication, either in the form of thinking (inner conversation) or as social interaction (external conversation), thus positioning the mind and self in terms of social processes. Similarly, Erving Goffman (1956) views the self as being socially situated and presents an account of how individuals in seeking social interactions with others will engage in a form of theatrical performance to achieve that. Using the metaphorical concepts of front stage and back stage, he distinguished between behaviour that conforms more to societal norms (i.e., in the workplace or in social gatherings) that happens in the front stage and behaviours that are more freeing and honest in the back stage. These backstage performances are viewed as being closer to the authentic identity of the self. Aside from his notions of the social self as an interaction and response to others, he also sees it as being contingent on the setting and occasion of everyday interaction.

Identity as a Social Construct

This postmodern concept of identity being determined by social and historical constructs serve as a critique to the more individualistic theories of identity formation (Gergen, 1985; Sampson, 1989). Sampson (1989) argues that a person's identity is meaningful only within the context of belonging to a particular place and time and serves as a mediated product of society, while acting out this role also has potential repercussions on society. Berger and Luckman (1966) suggests that when individuals are born, we grow up experiencing how others around us react to us and we eventually form implicit rules about how people act and are treated. This internalising of societal interaction and incorporating different perspectives becomes a part of us, thus establishing the subjective sense of what our identity is (Gergen, 1991). The way this is enacted differs greatly based on cultural context and other socioeconomic factors (i.e., gender, ethnicity, class). For example, within Western societies, Descartes' concept of "I think, therefore I am" reflects the cultural zeitgeist that sees the individual as a separate and distinct self (Holstein & Gubrium, 2000).

This ideal of individualism in contemporary Western societies raises children to treasure their freedom as individuals, with little input from their parents in determining their sense of self, career choices, romantic partners and other aspects of their lives. However, this way of thinking differs from other cultures around the world, and even from cultures in past generations. Most cultures have historically valued the importance of staying within the structures of one's inherited identity and forming a collectivist identity. The contrast between notions of what freedom and democracy mean are particularly salient within the colonialism era, when the West attempted to liberate other cultures in the name of freedom without taking account of cultural differences (Berger & Luckmann, 1966).

Youth Culture - A Sociological Account

In discussing the adolescent phase, a brief sociological account of what youth culture entails will be discussed here. Youth culture bears more similarities with social identity theories than individual identity formation theories in that it is concerned with the social uncertainties that adolescents go through in their transitional phase. This account suggests that the idea of adolescence as a distinct phase in our lives is a relatively recent social invention (Zelizer, 1994), with the evidence being that there are significant variations in the nature of youth according to social factors such as generation cycles, social class and ethnicity. In past generations, children were once regarded as a cheap source of labour until criticisms of child labour emerged and a growing population of middle-class people developed notions of protected childhood and introduced the concepts of adolescence as a transitional phase between childhood and adulthood (H. Cunningham, 2006).

In more recent years, adolescence has also increasingly been defined for commercial purposes. In the 1950s, the category of "teenagers" was effectively introduced through the marketing of consumer culture, with products aimed specifically at this particular age group (Ulrich & Harris, 2003). Thus, the ever-changing concept of youth implies that rather than being an essentialist, universal state of being, it is a construct that is dependent on social and historical context. This is important in considering how digital media plays a role in forming young people's identity in our current era.

Gender Identity Development

Cognitive theorists in gender identity development focus much of their research on the impact of cognitive factors in children (Kohlberg, 1966; Ruble, Taylor, & Berenbaum, 2006). Kohlberg's (1966) cognitive developmental theory suggested that the process of

children learning about gender starts at an early age and is a gradual, stage-based process. Between the ages of 18-24 months, children develop the ability to name their own and other people's gender; this development is associated with an increase in gender normative preferences for toys and play as well as a penchant for same-gendered playmates. Furthermore, Hill and Lynch (1983) suggest that there is an intensification in gender role expectations during adolescence, with increasing pressure to conform to gender roles leading to the consolidation of distinct gender role identifications. While gender identification is congruent to assigned gender for the majority of adolescents, researchers acknowledge that there is a growing number who do not fit into this majority (Diamond & Butterworth, 2008; Steensma, Kreukels, de Vries, & Cohen-Kettenis, 2013).

Other gender theorists have utilised Erikson's (1971) model of identity formation to understand trans youth's sense of identity. More specifically, the concept of role confusion parallels trans individuals' experience in making sense of their own personal sense of identity and identity roles prescribed by society (Vanderburgh & Forshee, 2003). Although gender variance is often seen as a cultural pathology, this understanding of how trans individuals may experience their identity development in a similar fashion to the "role confusion" adolescent phase posited by Erikson work towards discounting the view that a transgender identity is pathological. Gidden's (1991) theory on a stable self-identity is also useful in understanding trans identity development. He argues that for a self-identity to be stable and coherent, it requires a self that is reflexive and continuously able to integrate occurrences in the external world into an on-going self-narrative. This integrated self-narrative thus provides a sense of an individual that is whole and complete; the lack of integration within trans youth contributes to a fragmented feeling of being out of place with one's body (Dame, 2016).

In understanding the dynamics of trans youth and the risks that they encounter, it is useful to consider Maslow's (2013) self-actualisation theory, which suggests that in order to develop a healthy identity, an individual needs to have their basic needs met. Trans youth frequently experience higher levels of stress and homelessness compared to their peers as a result of non-supportive environments (Burgess, 2000; Vanderburgh & Forshee, 2003). Their fundamental needs of shelter and feeling safe are therefore often unmet in the context of fractured family relationships, so friendship groups take on a more significant role in caring for their emotional needs (Weeks, Heaphy, & Donovan, 2001). In particular, the role of these "families of choice" can be important in the process of transitioning where shared knowledge and emotional support are provided (Hines, 2007a).

Digital Media and Identity

The advent of technology heralded an era ushering a change in social relationships and the narrowing of a gap between our private and public lives. This concept has been around for a long time, such as when the invention of the telephone facilitated more efficient ways of social communication and yet was criticised for disrupting established social norms (Marvin, 1990). To this day, these debates bear a striking resemblance to issues around digital technology and the Internet. Although the Internet has been celebrated as creating new forms of social life and communities while being a resource for many empowerment and liberation movements, it is also seen as a threat to our privacy and a new means of commercial exploitation (Buckingham, 2008). Technological determinism embodies these discourses, through which technology is seen as neutral but the ways in which it is used have a social and psychological impact on society (L. Green, 2002). Within this adolescent generation of "digital natives" who

grew up with technology at their fingertips, the assimilation of technology into their everyday lives is ubiquitous and has much bearing not only on their identity formation but also the fundamental way that they relate to others (Buckingham, 2008; J. G. Palfrey & Gasser, 2013).

The Internet has also been a space where marginalised minority communities have emerged with a re-defined sense of common identity, serving as a platform where many physical limitations imposed on them can be overcome (Mehra, Merkel, & Bishop, 2004; Smith & Kollock, 1999). Within the transgender community, this impact has been massive, providing opportunities to transcend expressions beyond their physical bodies and increasing resources for better understanding their subjectivities in a postmodern fashion (MacKenzie, 1994; Stryker & Whittle, 2006; van Zoonen, 2002).

This section will begin with a discussion of the psychology of digital and social media, followed by the impact this has on both adolescents and the transgender community.

Influences of Sherry Turkle

Sherry Turkle (1995) described the Internet as a 'social laboratory' for the construction of self, conveying the idea that individuals make use of this virtual space to explore identities that they would not be able to in the physical world. She introduced the idea of how the Internet and computer culture play a contributing role in thinking about our identity not as a stable construct but as multiplicity, lending itself well to postmodern thought. Prior to the age of the Internet, people were bound by different roles dictated by society, and it was not easy to experiment with different identities. In the postmodern era, people are able to build a sense of self by experimenting and experiencing different sets of identities, made easier by the convenience and anonymity of the Internet.

Turkle draws upon Gergen's (1991) idea of a saturated self where exposure to pluralism

and diverse cultures challenges the notion of an essentialist self and enables the self to take on different identities and roles, growing in complexity. Communication technologies enable us to do that with the ease of introducing a multitude of other voices that saturate our mind, incorporating these multiple perspectives that slowly become a part of us. Turkle's description of a social laboratory is apt in that it allows for people to experiment, and sometimes combine, different constructions of themselves. This encompasses the view of the Internet as a transitional space (Winnicott, 1953); as interactions with other people take place online, exchanges are experienced within that intermediate zone between an individual's subjective intrapsychic reality and the external electronic environment (Clarke, 2009). Turkle asserts that multiplicity in identities is possible only when these different selves are able to gain fluid access amongst each other. Experiences on the Internet allow us to develop postmodern examples of psychological health, as multiplicity is inherent in communication technologies and we are able to confront the constructed nature of our identities and (virtual) realities.

Psychoanalytic Take on Social Networking Sites

Building on Turkle's work, Balick (2013) questioned whether it is technology that fundamentally changes the way we relate to each other or if it is just a new platform where the same relational psychodynamics that underpin our real life relationships express themselves. He argues that the ease of access to others mean that we are presenting aspects of ourselves online 24 hours day, increasingly merging our internal and external worlds. How we manage different aspects of ourselves on a virtual platform is akin to calling upon our true or false self in a variety of contexts.

Furthermore, he emphasises that there is a choice in presenting an identity when going

onto social networking sites (SNSs), perhaps based on psychodynamic motivations of wanting a lesser known aspect of themselves to be seen. This further reinforces that the Internet is seen as a transitional space to explore the internal reality of one's own identity. The way we construct representations of ourselves is informed by the presence of real and imagined audiences (boyd, 2008) encountered through SNSs that impact the way we see ourselves, the way we wish to see ourselves, how we want others to see us and the parts of ourselves that we want hidden away. Walther (1996) had previously referred to a hyperpersonal self as the strategic choices people make in creating their online identities, through selective disclosures to present a version of themselves that is more socially acceptable (i.e., a false self). This can also be explained by the concept of internal objects wherein our choice behaviours are affected by the internalising of an imagined other's perception (Klein, 1957). Turkle (2011) expanded on this with the idea of "hyper other-directedness", where our feelings and behaviours can be validated just by virtue of someone else's (imagined) presence. The potential for transference and projection online is therefore much greater as our every movement online is based on the real or imagined anticipated reaction of an "other". Indeed, the way that an SNS like Twitter or Facebook operate reinforces the need for recognition through functions like "retweets" and "likes". Over time, users of SNS learn to display representations of themselves through the mechanism of the false self that garner positive engagement with others (Balick, 2013).

Alongside being a transitional space, Balick also pointed out the role of virtual environments as that of a holding space. Winnicott (1953) first introduced the concept of a holding space in relation to motherhood and describes it as the relationship between the mother and infant in which the infant feels safe enough being held in mind to begin the process of separation from mother. Extrapolating this idea onto the arena of social

media, Balick suggests that by entering a virtual space, it opens an individual up to be held in the mind of the "other", whether this is in how much they are exposing their vulnerability or how many "others" are witnessing. Like in infant play, these online spaces serve as a holding space for symbolic and oftentimes practical way of exploring the multiplicities of people's identities.

Psychology of the Digital World

Cyberspace is a relatively new human environment that has emerged within the last few decades and research into online behaviours is growing. Especially now in the age of constant connectivity and pervasive cyberspace interactions, there is a growing interest in the realm of the Internet as a psychologically tangible space where our online experiences are increasingly enmeshed with that of our physical world (C. Cunningham, 2013; Suler, 2015; Wallace, 2015). For example, Suler (2015) refers to how spatial metaphors such as "rooms", "worlds" and "domains" are prevailing ways of describing virtual spaces. As technology become more intricate, encouraging increasing levels of inter-user interactivity, the dichotomy between online and offline worlds is becoming more blurred.

As much as this is happening, Drushel (2013) discusses the differences between online and face-to-face interactions that cannot be reconciled. The physical presence of a person in an offline interaction necessitates the use of social cues that are not available in online environments. Furthermore, some physical characteristics of a person make it difficult to construct an identity that is inconsistent with their visible markers, something that can be done with ease online.

Suler (2004) describes the way that people have a tendency to do or say things in a virtual context that they would otherwise never do as the online disinhibition effect. He

attributes this effect to the way that online social processes seem to be amplified and take on a higher level of intensity as compared to offline processes. This also explains the privacy paradox of the Internet age where people's concern about online privacy do not mirror their online behaviour (Barnes, 2006); for example, allowing for increasing disclosures of personal information online while expressing worries about being exposed and vulnerable.

Suler (2015) cites several causes behind the online disinhibition effect. The first is dissociative anonymity, which refers to the way we are able to easily hide aspects of our identity online. This gives the impression of perceived invincibility as people feel they are able to separate out their actions online with no consequences on their real-life identity. Through this dissociation, they no longer feel they have to take ownership over their actions by compartmentalising it to their online self. He also cites invisibility, where people feel that they can blend in and go undetected in a crowd of online users, and asynchronicity, where we do not have to deal with someone's immediate reaction as contributing factors to disinhibiting behaviours online.

With the introduction of Web 2.0, the second-stage development of the Internet that changed the way we communicate from static web pages to dynamic user-generated content (UGC), like social media, that advocates collaboration and sharing, the notion of a separate offline anonymous self as depicted by Suler is changing. The Internet is now being integrated into our lives through the introduction of mobile wireless devices that make 24/7 wireless connectivity a reality (Elwell, 2014). No longer do people have to "go online" to be connected to the virtual world; the ease and accessibility of the Internet is just a click away at our fingertips.

With these technologies so integrated into our lives, the impact of both online and

offline sphere is such that both are equally as important to identity formation. Elwell (2014) asserts that this makes the online identity exploration depicted by Turkle in the early days of the Internet less common and desirable, as authenticity is key to its contemporary usage. He gives the examples of having to provide real names and information to correspond to real-life identities when using social media platforms such as Facebook and Google. The notion of constructing multiplicities in our identities still remain relevant, though Robert Sweeny (2009) refers to it as a "networked identity" where identity formation occurs in the context of the lived experience within interconnected relationships online, taking into account the user as connected to other networked identities much like oneself.

Social Media Use among Adolescents and the Transgender Population

Adolescents of today are considered to be "digital natives", a term defined by Marc Prensky (2001) to mean a generation of people who were born and grew up surrounded by the Internet, digital technology and social media. For these digital natives, the process of identity development is inevitably tied into their online presence. As described above, social media platforms encourage the representation of authentic information on their sites, through posting of photographs and personal information (Zhao, Grasmuck, & Martin, 2008), rendering limited possibilities of identity experimentation.

However, young people are still able to manipulate their online personas to reflect favourable representations of themselves through the number of friends or followers they acquire and pictures that they choose to post (Herring & Kapidzic, 2015). This echoes the earlier point by Balick in which online representations of self, despite measures to ensure authenticity, are still motivated by internal object relations and a presentation of the false self. Research has shown that adolescents still have plenty of

room to experiment with the information they put online, by tweaking their age to appear older, boys wanting to appear more macho and girls giving the impression of being more demure (Valkenburg, Schouten, & Peter, 2005).

More so than in other age group, this is perhaps not surprising as it coincides with the moratorium stage, or the developmental process of exploration and seeing to define who they are (Erikson, 1971). Social media sites such as Facebook and Instagram provide that space where young people are able to interact with peers, an important reference group, and safely experiment with their identity through a culture of self-disclosure (Herring & Kapidzic, 2015; Jordán-Conde, Mennecke, & Townsend, 2014).

Although social media is a relatively new concept that hasn't received much research attention in the past, testament to the growing interest in the impact of social media in people's lives, there have been efforts to synthesise research in this particular area through meta-analysis and literature reviews in recent years.

One such study by Pérez-Latre, Portilla, & Blanco (2011) attempted to summarise relevant themes within the research around social media. They found that the majority of the work is conducted in Anglo-Saxon cultures, mostly focusing on the way that users of social media managed impressions of themselves through how they choose to introduce themselves and whether this has an effect of the quality of relationships that are developed through this context. They also suggest that although social media use mostly serves as a complementary approach to reinforcing existing offline relationships, for "niche" audiences, they are able to make use of social media more successfully to develop well-meaning relationships. Lastly, they briefly mentioned the differences between social media and other types of online media in relation to the ways audience relationships are fostered. For example, social media use is governed by unwritten rules

that favour authenticity, participation and transparency.

A meta-analysis of 36 studies looking at the relationship between social media use and participation was conducted by Boulianne (2015). Her analysis looked at quantitative data that had a focus on actual behavioural-dependent variables (i.e., protesting, voting, volunteering) rather than just behavioural intent. Overall, the data suggested a mostly positive relationship within the realm of civic and political life through building up social networks and exposure to online news. More significantly, the data suggests that the most transformative effects of social media were found in random samples of adolescents; however, the paper did not go on to specify why that might be.

Some studies have taken a closer look at the association between the adolescent population and social media. Bolton et al (2013) conducted one such review study, looking at the implications of social media use among youth (or Generation Y as she termed it in her paper). In general, there is a consensus among studies on the frequency of social media use among this population but not on their social media activities. Some suggest that adolescents are active contributors to social media content while others propose that they often spent most of their time being passive consumers of content, not unlike other generations. It was also offered that in many ways, adolescents make use of social media for the same reasons as other generational cohorts: seeking information, developing a sense of community and keeping in touch with offline friends. They also mentioned the positive psychological effects this can have, such as by strengthening familial bonds and enhancing self-esteem, while also suggesting that this can extend to physical health well-being through effective online communication of health information.

Another systematic narrative review conducted in 2014 (Best, Manktelow, & Taylor,

2014) found similar effects of improved self-esteem and increased social support. They also found additional benefits in the form of safer identity experimentation and opportunities for self-disclosures and emotional expression development. However, they also provided a caveat in that there is also considerable evidence to showing the harmful effects of social media use, such as increased risk to harm, cyber bullying and social isolation.

Being able to negotiate a transgender identity amidst an online environment is a very recent development. Green-Hamann & Sherblom (2013) suggest that there are many motivations for engaging in social media platforms. As discussed above in social identity theories, the creation of an in-group through the use of a shared language is important in creating a sense of solidarity within a marginalised group. This not only emphasise similarities within group members but also helps with the process of developing and consolidating a trans identity. Another motivation for using online platforms is the access to the diversity in knowledge and information that people bring. Acknowledging and bearing witness to another's experiences of being transgender also helps in facilitating emotional closeness while helping them to better understand potential difficulties that they might face (i.e., access to medical treatment, discriminatory laws).

While there is considerable interest in the field of LGBT culture in the last 50 years or so (Meezan & Martin, 2009), most of the work conflate issues of sexual orientation with gender identity. The merging of topics dilutes the distinctive struggles faced by the transgender population (Vanderburgh & Forshee, 2003) and this extends to studies looking at Internet use. In searching for systematic reviews that looked at transgender use of the Internet, most reviews looked at the broader spectrum of the LGBT

population and fall within the context of sexual health information (Muessig, Nekkanti, Bauermeister, Bull, & Hightow-Weidman, 2015; Rose & Friedman, 2013).

<u>Literature Review</u>

A systematic literature review (see figure A1 in Appendix A) was conducted to consolidate the transgender population's experiences of using social media platforms. There are multiple labels and definitions of concepts related to social media which made searching for relevant literature difficult. To encapsulate as much literature that made use of various forms of social media, the definition provided by Kaplan & Haenlein (2010) was useful in considering what constitutes social media. In their paper, they described social media as "a group of Internet-based applications that build on the ideological and technological foundations of Web 2.0 and that allow the creation and exchange of User Generated Content" (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010, p. 61). This includes categories such as blogs, collaborative projects (e.g., Wikipedia), social networking sites (e.g., Facebook), content communities (e.g., message boards, YouTube), virtual social worlds (e.g., second life) and virtual game worlds (e.g., World of Warcraft). This definition was taken into consideration when deciding on the search terms for the literature search (see Appendix A). To conduct the search, relevant electronic databases from EBSCOhost were used (See Appendix A). Additionally, the option to show only peer-reviewed journals and publication dates after year 2004 was used. This was decided on as the term Web 2.0 was first used in 2004, marking the beginning of the social media era (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010).

Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

Articles were included if they looked at the impact of any of the above categories of social media on a transgender sample. Additionally, articles that looked at the

transgender population as a whole or as a subset were included. This included articles concerning the LGBT population but reported separate findings with a specific focus on a subset of the transgender population (e.g., McInroy & Craig, 2015). Given the nature of this particular thesis question, only qualitative studies were included in the search. Studies that made use of social media as a data collection method were excluded as well as studies that observed the impact on the LGBT population as a whole.

Review of the Literature

A total of 8 qualitative articles were identified through an electronic and manual search process (see Table 1 for overview of reviewed literature). The findings of the studies were evaluated against the guidelines specified for good qualitative research in the Critical Appraisal Skills Programme (CASP Checklist, 2014).

For the purposes of the literature review, the articles will be evaluated against two broad criteria: methodological profile as well as a summary of research findings.

Table 1. Overview of reviewed literature

Study Author(s)	Sample (N)	Population under research	Methodology	Main findings
Marciano, 2014	NA	Israeli transgender community	Virtual ethnography of two online arenas Discourse analysis	Transgender users use the cyberspace for preliminary, complementary and alternative purposes to negotiate their gender identity in the offline world.
Shapiro, 2004	10	Transgender activists	Ethnography of textual data. In-depth interviews Thematic analysis	The Internet reduces obstacles to trans activist mobilisation and allows for more efficient organising, thus functioning both as space for activism to happen as well as a facilitative aid.
Gauthier & Chaudoir, 2004	NA	Virtual FTM* community	Ethnography of Internet sources collected over 2 years Content analysis	The FTM community utilises interactive Internet resources to form a supportive community that help facilitate their desire to 'pass' in real life.
McInroy & Craig, 2015	19	LGBTQ** youth, subsection on transgender youth	Grounded theory In-depth interviews	Online media representations of trans people offer a more realistic representation than offline. Trans youth are able to easily access role models online and online provides more opportunities to develop friendships and share information.

Study Author(s)	Sample (N)	Population under research	Methodology	Main findings
Jimenez, 2014	5	FTM transgender youth	Ethnography of YouTube videos Content analysis	YouTube is used as a resource for trans guys to track their transition process, it is also used as a means to share tips and information in making the transition easier.
Farber, 2016	NA	Transgender males	Ethnography of Reddit message board Interviews Content analysis	Resources are shared in virtual spaces and narratives are created that build on their offline experiences of modifying their bodies through fitness.
D. B. Hill, 2005	28	Toronto's transgender community	In-depth life history interviews Longitudinal study, follow-up in 5 years Narrative analysis	Technological advances in communication play a crucial role in trans population's sense of gender, it provides a way of connecting to others that alleviates isolation and offer hope that a transgender way of life is not impossible.
Dame, 2013	5	Transgender vloggers***	Ethnography of YouTube videos and comments Content analysis	A shift in expertise of transgender issues from medical authorities to individuals on a public online platform like YouTube, specific ways of offering advice and focusing on the viewer's novice status help to establish an expert role.

*FTM: Female-to-Male

**LGBTQ: Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer

***Vloggers: video bloggers

Methodological Profile and Strength of Studies

Research Type. All 8 studies employed a qualitative approach to their research as per the inclusion criteria. For the majority of studies, an ethnographic method of looking at content within the social media was used. Some studies followed up their ethnographic approach with interviews to enhance their research (Farber, 2016; Shapiro, 2004) while two studies made use of interviews with users of online social media (D. B. Hill, 2005; McInroy & Craig, 2015).

Range of Social Media Used. All studies explored the use of one form of social media or another, ranging from online newsgroups (Marciano, 2014), message boards (Farber, 2016; Gauthier & Chaudoir, 2004) to content communities like YouTube (Dame, 2013; Jimenez, 2014; McInroy & Craig, 2015). The ethnographic studies mostly observed one or two specific forms of social media; for example, Marciano (2014) looked at the content of two Israeli online newsgroups and Farber (2016) observed threads on the online message board Reddit. On the other hand, research that used interviews had participants bringing up the different kinds of social media platforms that they used; for example, in McInroy & Craig (2015), participants described using Tumblr and Youtube. There is also a good mix of exploring the experiences of both active users and passive consumers of social media amongst the studies.

Definition of Transgender. Most studies provided a definition or a broad explanation of what being transgender is (Gauthier & Chaudoir, 2004; Jimenez, 2014; Marciano, 2014; McInroy & Craig, 2015; Shapiro, 2004); for example, in McInroy & Craig's (2015) paper, they refer to the transgender population as "a diverse group of people whose gender identity and expression diverts from prevailing societal expectations.

Trans includes transsexual, transitioned and genderqueer people", which reflects the definition used in this thesis. Some papers did not include a definition but referenced what the trans community encompass (for e.g., D. B. Hill, 2005- "transsexuals, cross-dressers and transgendered people") or described medical discourses of transsexuality (Dame, 2013). Only Farber (2016) made no mention of how transgender is defined in their paper.

Trans-specific Research Population. All but one study used a transgender research population. Amongst the 7 studies, 3 looked at the inclusive range of trans (D. B. Hill, 2005; Marciano, 2014; Shapiro, 2004) while 4 studies looked specifically at the female-to-male (FTM) trans subgroup (Dame, 2013; Farber, 2016; Gauthier & Chaudoir, 2004; Jimenez, 2014), suggesting that perhaps there is more research interest in the particular experiences of FTM transgender people. McInroy & Craig's (2015) study looked at the perspectives of LGBTQ youths; however, it was included in this literature review as they devoted a section wholly on the perspectives of trans youth.

Aim of Research. An important aspect of presenting research is to consider the rationale of why this particular topic is of interest (Greenhalgh, 1997). All the studies included a comprehensive rationale for their research and set out the context of what they were looking at. In particular, Gauthier & Chaudoir (2004) included a literature review discussing two dominant theories around gender identity: sex role theory and social construction theory. They also justified their use of a FTM population with the tendency of current literature to focus exclusively on the male-to-female (MTF) population. Three studies, Dame (2013), Farber (2016) and D.B. Hill (2005) placed the context of their research within medical and cultural discourses around

transgender practices, with D.B. Hill (2005) also discussing changing ways of thinking around gender from the modern to postmodern era.

Clarity of Research Process. Most studies explicitly mentioned the type of research that was undertaken, Farber (2016) in particular mentioned the grounded theory approach that was used in the study, and provided details on the data collection process. The two main data analyses techniques utilised were content analysis (Gauthier & Chaudoir, 2004; D. B. Hill, 2005; McInroy & Craig, 2015) and discourse analysis (Dame, 2013; Farber, 2016; Marciano, 2014).

Acknowledge Researcher's Position. 4 of the 8 studies acknowledged the researcher's position within the research (Dame, 2013; Farber, 2016; Jimenez, 2014; Marciano, 2014). For instance, Dame (2013) recognised how his insider status as a self-identified trans man could have affected his interpretation of the findings and emphasised being mindful about reflexive inquiry. The other 3 studies touched on issues of privilege and positionality as an outsider in shaping their data collection. Additionally, Marciano (2014) also acknowledged the unique role of an ethnographer in taking on the spectrum from full participation to full observer. He presented an explanation of how he navigated this role by taking part in community events to better engage in the culture without having to intervene in the arena of data collection.

Generalisability of Findings. 4 studies (Farber, 2016; D. B. Hill, 2005; McInroy & Craig, 2015; Shapiro, 2004) presented limitations in their generalisability of research findings to a population that has resources to access the Internet, acknowledging that their participant sample is perhaps skewed towards a more elite, privileged group within the transgender population. As with most online ethnographic research, it is sometimes difficult to establish ethnic and racial diversity within the participants.

However, aside from two studies (Farber, 2016; Gauthier & Chaudoir, 2004), all other studies described the variance (and non-variance) in their participant sample. 4 studies only included participants from a White cultural background with relatively stable socio-economic status (Dame, 2013; D. B. Hill, 2005; Jimenez, 2014; Shapiro, 2004) and Marciano's (2014) study included the Israeli transgender population. D.B Hill (2005) and Shapiro (2004) both acknowledged in their studies that they could only account for one perspective within the transgender population, namely of an elite subset.

Summary of Research Findings

Social Aspect. All except Jimenez's (2014) study discussed how the social aspect of being on social media has impacted the transgender community, reflecting concepts in social identity theory regarding developing close relationships through ingroup categories. In Marciano's (2014) paper, he described how online message boards served as a "complementary" sphere for the Israeli transgender population that were using it, serving as an additional social arena, like a workplace or school, for communication to happen. Similarly, D.B. Hill (2005), McInroy & Craig (2015) and Shapiro's (2004) studies emphasised the use of social media platforms as a space that facilitated networking and connection to the larger trans community. This was helpful in forming a collective identity that provides support and shares relevant information. In Gauthier & Chaudoir's (2004) study, their example was specific to expressions of inadequacies to pass for "men" in which support and acknowledgement from the virtual community led to formation of solidarity that linked the community together. Additionally, Farber's (2016) paper pointed out how interactions with others could also have a cyclical effect on one's own practices and daily living, by motivating

others they would also feel the pressure to live up to their own expectations. Lastly, Dame's (2013) paper was unique in that it was observing YouTube vloggers sharing their transition story, where social media was used in an active way. He showed that even through this one-way communication, feelings of connections were maintained and the act of subscribing and commenting by the viewers indicate some investment in the vlogger's lives and the formation of an on-going social relationship (Lange, 2007).

Ease of Seeking Information. Another theme that emerged from the review was the use of social media for providing and seeking out relevant information. For example, McInroy & Craig (2015) discussed how their participants were exposed to a wealth of resources that is always available online. Similarly, Jimenez (2014) mentioned how social media encouraged the sharing of personal information and stories as a source of information that might not be readily available offline.

Personal and Realistic Account. Several studies showed how social media contributed to the subjectivities of trans people's stories being attended to. D.B Hill (2005) acknowledged that several respondents in his studies were increasingly using online technologies to present their personal stories to others and Dame (2013) suggested that YouTube vloggers were considered to be more authentic representations of a trans lifestyle compared to national media portrayals. Likewise, Jimenez (2014) found that young trans boys were mostly uploading personal and emotional videos about their transitions onto YouTube, and how this aspect of sharing intimate details enabled relating to others on a deeper level. Lastly, Farber (2016) proposed that online collectives were perhaps more relevant to the experiences of trans social media users, as mainstream representations are hyperbolic and unrealistic. Contrary to

offline mainstream representations, she suggests that people are able to provide a more diverse and personal representation of their experiences online, which users relate to more easily.

An Expert Role. Related to an appreciation of personal accounts online, some papers also acknowledged that implicit in the personal contributions of the users was the assuming of an expert role in assisting "newer" members of the community. For instance, Gauthier & Chaudoir (2004) mentioned that although different narratives were produced around "passing" as males, there was a common goal in telling these stories: to provide expert assistance to people who might be struggling to "pass". Jimenez (2014), McInroy & Craig (2015) and Dame (2013) observed the role of vloggers in YouTube in providing expertise to ways of being trans. Jimenez (2014) mentioned how presenting factual information on aspects of transitioning, with little emotion or personal reflection, portrayed one particular vlogger as having certain authority and knowledge on transitioning. Similar, Dame's (2013) study attributed the abilities of trans vloggers to establish their authority to provide advice through pre-empting challenges and questions from viewers. In McInroy & Craig's (2015) study, they referred to these trans people who share their transition process on YouTube as role models who may be "the predominant purveyor of notions of trans identity" due to the lack of positive role models in mainstream media or in real life.

This perhaps signals a move away from medical discourses where expertise lies in the hands of medical authority and is more in line with postmodern ways of privileging the narratives of trans people so that they occupy the role of experts within their own subjectivities.

Presentation of a Timeline (transition tracking). Several studies mentioned the

significance of showing a timeline of their transition online. This is perhaps a caveat to the studies presenting a postmodern way of celebrating subjectivities and the myriad ways of being trans. Jimenez (2014) recognised that having a timeline of physical changes as they undergo transitions provided a validation to the FTM participants of their increasing masculinity. This recognition of fitting in with the appearance of a cisgender male confirms a binary consideration of their gender identity and enables a more exaggerated performance of being a man. However, she found that once the need to perform masculinity subsided, they appear to be more comfortable with their own subjective sense of gender identity. D.B. Hill also presented an argument that not everyone online recounts experiences that are consistent with a postmodernist trans experience (i.e., gender as a fluid spectrum). He states that gender roles are still a significant aspect online and that we cannot deny that a male's privilege and "assertive sexual behaviour" extends into online virtual worlds as well.

Summary. The aim of the literature review was to summarise what previous research has found in relation to the ways that the transgender community has made use of social media platforms. Most studies were interested in how social media has made a difference to the trans community, from improving access to resources to having a more personal account of people's everyday difficulties. The studies predominantly referred to postmodern ways of thinking about gender identities, through a preference of people's subjectivities rather than a caricature of how trans people are portrayed in more mainstream media. However, there are also cautions against generalisation and acknowledging that experiences of wanting to identify as either side of the binary exist.

Rationale for Current Study

The literature review in the previous section highlighted some of the themes that have emerged from social media use within the transgender population. Given that only 8 papers were identified in this area, it underscores the need for more research on the subject. Furthermore, the studies were a mix of adult and adolescent populations. Given the importance of identity development in adolescence, this highlights the need for research into this specific population. This is particularly important when considering the increasingly far-reaching impact social media has on the youths of today, a generation that grew up within a technologically diverse era.

On a broader level, this current study aims to extend research in this area further by exploring the experiences of transgender adolescents in using social media. So far, there has been a lack of research into this particular population and how identity is shaped growing up within the current context of Web 2.0. Taking into account the distinct challenges that come with developing a sense of self as a transgender individual and as an adolescent, this research is interested in the intersectional play between managing these different identities within the context of social media. In line with previous research, a qualitative approach with a focus on their experiences will be taken. To guide this research, two specific research questions will be considered:

1. What role does social media play in transgender adolescents' development of self-identity, particularly in relation to gender?

2. What are the influences, if any, of different social media platforms in the way that they identify?

Chapter 2. Method

Chapter Overview

This method chapter will begin with the discussion of a research paradigm within the context of ontological and epistemological considerations. This will then inform the rationale for a qualitative approach using thematic analysis. Aspects of the research procedure will also be discussed, including details on participant recruitment, data collection and analysis, as well as ethical implications. Lastly, researcher reflexivity will be addressed as it influences the analysis of the data and is a central aspect to the process of establishing trustworthiness within a qualitative framework.

Research Paradigm

The nature of a chosen research is guided by a set of beliefs within the researcher's theoretical framework (Mertens, 2014). This set of beliefs is often referred to as the paradigm, and the researcher's beliefs about the nature of reality and knowledge (i.e., ontological and epistemological beliefs) underpin the overarching research strategy and influence the methodology used (Silverman, 2013).

The primary focus of this research is to explore the experiences of transgender youths in using social media. A qualitative framework is a congruent fit with this aim as it provides an approach that is able to capture both depth and meaning in how these youths are able to make sense of their experience. Typically within a research paradigm, the ontological position influences the epistemological stance, which in turn impacts the research methodology used. Diagram 2 shows the considerations within the paradigm for this particular research, which will be discussed in further detail.

Diagram 2. Ontological and epistemological considerations for research paradigm

Ontology

Realism ⟷ Relativism

↓

Epistemological considerations

Objective reality ⟷ Social constructionism

Contextualism

↓

Method
Thematic Analysis (Semi-structured interviews)
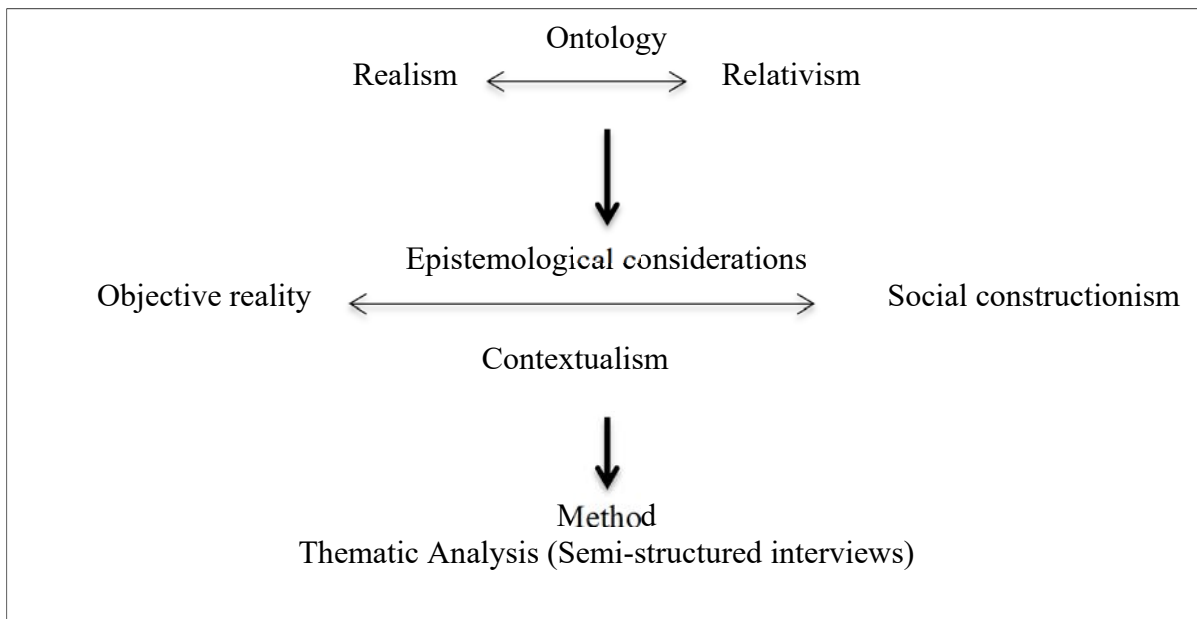
Ontology

Traditionally, research approaches have been divided into polar opposites of a continuum; positivist and interpretivist approaches, with varying philosophical positions aligned between them. The distinction between these two extreme positions mainly lies in the different ontological philosophy that each subscribes to. Ontology refers to the nature of reality and, by extension, the researcher's assumption of what reality is. A positivist approach typically takes on a realist view of the nature of reality. This assumes that an objective reality exists and access to this requires rigorous scientific methodology (Giddens, 1974). This assumption suggests that reality exists independently from human context and is 'out there' to be discovered. (Coghlan & Brannick, 2005). It holds that there is a direct relationship between the objective world and our sense perception of it. It is therefore thought to be possible to gain an accurate knowledge of what is happening in the world, given an objective and unbiased viewpoint (Lyons & Coyle, 2016).

At the other end of the continuum, an interpretivist approach is typically defined by a relativist position, which argues in favour of multiple realities rather than the notion that one objective reality exists (Hudson & Ozanne, 1988). The idea behind multiple realities is that human beings construct meanings through our contexts and interactions with the world as we experience it (Crotty, 1998). These contexts and interactions in turn are imbued with assumptions and biases such as previous experiences, cultural influences and individual personalities (Gergen, 1985).

A middle ground between the two positions understands the world in multiple layers, with several levels of structures interacting simultaneously. These phenomena are physical or social events that take place in the world. Physical phenomena are thought of as existing on their own (i.e. from a realist perspective), however they only become meaningful events when given notice by humans (i.e a relativist stance). Social events on the other hand are events that are contextualised through the intersubjective perception of humans. These social phenomena are therefore only meaningful when understood in the context of time and culture and should be thought of as processes, rather than essences.

The social media context of this research is more in line with the relativist position, where the inherent assumption is that people do not hold one truth towards the incongruency of their physical body and their gender sense. How they identify and view their gender is instead varied and influenced by their past experiences and what they have been exposed to. However, in considering that this research is also concerned with how one understands their gender identity in relation to the body, it can also be argued that the basis of genetic sex is primarily biological (Hull, 2006) and is ontologically prior to gender, which brings with it a realist perspective and a

consideration for a more middle-ground ontological argument.

Epistemology

Epistemology is the philosophical framework concerned with the nature of knowledge and how we come to know what we know (Burr, 2003) while also making certain assumptions about the relationship between the researcher and what they are researching (Harper, 2011). Ontological beliefs about the world commonly dictate epistemological positions, and what the researcher believes about the nature of reality influences the relationship they have with what is being studied.

Positivist-Objective Reality

Within a traditional positivist research paradigm, the belief in an objective reality means that knowledge is thought of as independent of time and context, hence the goal of research is therefore to make replicable and universal generalisations. Knowledge is therefore achieved from collecting and categorising our observations of the world, allowing us to develop theories that would explain how phenomena in the world work. Historically, this has been the dominant approach in psychological research, following the push for psychological research to take on a more "scientific nature". It thus follows that this approach is closely associated with quantitative methods where consistent and replicable results are sought (Carson, Gilmore, Perry, & Gronhaug, 2001). The aim of the relationship between the researcher and what is being studied is to be neutral and objective, this is attained through the methodology by limiting researcher bias as much as possible.

Relativist-Social Constructivist

On the other hand, a relativist perspective generally takes on a constructivist approach to reality, where knowledge is seen as a social construction. This stance takes a

critical approach in challenging the ways in which the world is understood, such as the assumptions of positivist approaches where the categories we use in interpreting the world neatly corresponds to real and objective entities (Burr, 2003). It is argued that researchers are inherently biased with their laden assumptions about the world and cannot be seen as being neutral towards what is being studied (Hofer & Pintrich, 1997). Researchers are therefore actively involved in the co-construction of meaning with the participants and the researcher's position is taken into account and included when placing results and findings into context.

With the focus of the current study on social media, which by its very nature is an inherent social construct, this study is more consistent with a social constructivist stance. Some postmodern feminist approaches towards gender also complements this approach where the categorisation of gender differences into "male" and "female" are taken as arbitrary and society is seen as being organised around this distinction (J. Butler, 1990; New, 2005). They also argue that there are no dimensions on which the concepts of "males" and "females" can be reliably distinguished, hence making this distinction wholly socially constructed (New, 2005).

Contextualism-Critical Realist

Contextualism takes a middle ground between realism and relativism. It argues for the idea of meanings constructed intersubjectively and is concerned with how knowledge is grounded in the meanings created by people within a concrete context. It assumes that all knowledge obtained is context-specific and laden with the perspective of the observer (Madill, Jordan, & Shirley, 2000).

Within contextualism, critical realism represents the movement away from traditional schools of thought around the study of reality and knowledge. This was developed

partly in response to the inadequacies of social constructivist approaches in understanding how knowledge is built (Bhaskar, 2008). Rather than subscribing to either extreme position, critical realism believes that there isn't one truth that can be defined; instead, it combines both a realist ontology with a constructivist epistemology (Bhaskar, 2016). Bhaskar argues that certain objective realities exist; however, our ability to fully understand them is imperfect. In trying to understand these "truths", there is an inherent subjectivity in constructing our knowledge of them (Burge, 1993). Two key concepts to Bhaskar's theory of critical realism is a) the idea that what we think we know is separate from what exists out there and b) what exists is stratified so that our experience of reality does not directly map onto an objective reality. Critical realism acknowledges the important role of relativism in understanding subjective experiences at a 'micro' level, while also taking into account the wider social context at which these experiences are occurring on a more 'macro' level (Sayer, 2000).

Contrary to the previously mentioned postmodernist feminist ideas on sex and gender, some have argued for a more critical realist approach (Hull, 2006; New, 2005). Hull (2006) argues that genetic sex, and by extension the physical body, is ontologically at a lower level than its phenotypical effects (gender), of which environmental factors play a part in co-constructing. She also argues for genetic sex having a biological basis, which cannot easily be altered.

This lends itself well to a critical realist theory of biological sex, as it recognises that reality is stratified. The distinction of our differently sexed bodies is both a reality and partly discursive in nature, which influences different reproductive roles for males and females over time. Taking into account the social constructionist view of social media

while bearing in mind the ontological reality of the body being a vessel for embodied experience, a critical realism paradigm towards this study seemed most appropriate. Critical realism would place the discussion of how transgender experiences are described within the current context of social media (as a social construction) in shaping the way knowledge is talked about.

<u>Participants</u>

Sampling Method

In qualitative research, the procedure of selecting participants differs from that of quantitative methods, as the purpose is not to generalise findings but rather to explore a range of different representations in a particular issue. Sampling in qualitative research is thus concerned with the richness of information and is intended to achieve depth in understanding. A qualitative approach would also beg the question of "What is it like for this person?" rather than the quantitative question of "How many?" The emphasis is therefore on representation rather than numbers, and in selecting participants, it is those who have had specific experiences with the phenomenon that are sought.

This study used a mixed purposive sampling for greater access to people within the population. Purposive sampling involves recruiting participants on the basis that they belong to a sample with characteristics that are relevant to the research topic (Palinkas et al., 2015; Patton, 2002). Typically, qualitative research prefers a fairly homogeneous sample where similarities and differences in experiences are analysed within a group that has been defined as similar according to important variables (Pietkiewics & Smith, 2012). In this respect, participants sampled for this study share common characteristics of being self-identified transgender youths who used some

form of social media. Youths were defined as anyone between the ages of 14-19 years old. Participants also included anyone who fits within the criteria of a self-identifying transgender youth and who uses social media such as Facebook, YouTube, or/and Twitter.

Participants were recruited through the NHS Tavistock Gender Identity Development Service (GIDS), which is the only national clinic providing psychological and medical care for transgender individuals up to the age of 19 years old. In order to trace additional participants or informants, snowball sampling was also used. This is a method of expanding the sample by asking participants to recommend others for interviewing (Babbie, 2012; Crabtree & Miller, 1992).

The following inclusion and exclusion criteria were set based on the above sampling strategy.

Inclusion criteria:

1. Self-identified transgender individuals aged 14 and above
2. Uses at least one type of social media platforms (e.g. Facebook, YouTube, Twitter, Tumblr, etc.)

Exclusion criteria:

1. Participants who do not have access to the Internet or do not use any form of social media.

Sample Size

With a purposive sampling method enlisted, the aim is to gather sufficient depth of information in order to gain greater understanding into a phenomenon rather than recruiting a fixed number of participants (Fossey, Harvey, Mcdermott, & Davidson,

2002).

The question of how many interviews would be sufficient for a qualitative study is a complex one. Typically in qualitative research, experts argue that sample size is often justified on the basis of interviewing participants until data saturation is reached (Mason, 2010). This concept of "data saturation" is most closely related with grounded theory where categorical themes are accounted for and relationships between them tested and validated before a theory can be defined (J. Green & Thorogood, 2004). However, currently the concept of saturation has also been extended to other qualitative analysis such as thematic analysis as a blanket justification for sample size (Ando, Cousins, & Young, 2014), and is taken to mean that data is continuously collected until no new themes emerge from the data (Gaskell, 2000; J. Green & Thorogood, 2004).

Francis et al (2010) suggested that an initial analysis sample of at least 10 participants should be conducted. A stopping criterion would then be established with further interviews conducted until no new themes emerge from the data. Guest, Bunce, & Johnson (2006) methodological paper observing data saturation suggested that data saturation for the most part occurs by 12 interviews within a study that looked at common experiences within a group of relatively homogeneous individuals. This number was also confirmed as a satisfactory saturation point in a later study by Ando et al (2014).

However, the idea of a concrete number for data saturation has becoming increasingly problematic (O'Reilly & Parker, 2012). Although data saturation is widely accepted as a measure of quality and rigour, it has a number of practical weaknesses. One that is espoused by J. Green and Thorogood (2004) is that the possibility of emerging

themes can be endless. Every person brings to the interview their own unique set of experiences and thus data may never truly be saturated, as there will always be something new to uncover (Wray, Markovic, & Manderson, 2007). This approach has also been criticised as being heavily influenced by the notions of the more dominant quantitative research approach that larger numbers equal greater impact. However, this seems incongruent to qualitative inquiry, as having more data does not necessarily lead to more information in regards to the research question . Rather, it is argued that adequacy in sample is determined by the appropriateness of data where different assumptions about knowledge frame the epistemological stance forming the backdrop for research aims and data collection methods (O'Reilly & Parker, 2012).

However, given the realistic limitations of this doctoral thesis, where time is a major factor in the recruitment process alongside ethical boards' emphasis on a concrete sample size, a maximum sample size of 15 was decided upon the above considerations of previous research suggestions, with a conservative allowance for the stopping criterion to be reached.

Research Procedure

Participant Recruitment

Recruitment was carried out through the NHS Tavistock Gender Identity Development Service (GIDS), which provides a national service to people up to the age of 19.

Advertisement posters (Appendix B) were placed within the Tavistock clinic at various group events and in the waiting area, and clinicians working at the Tavistock GIDS also suggested participation of the study to young people fulfilling the eligibility criteria. Potential participants identified by their clinicians who express

interest in participating had their details passed to the researcher. The researcher then contacted the participants and an explanation session was conducted through the telephone, email or in person. Detailed information sheets (Appendix C) were also provided to the participants and they were encouraged to contact the researcher if they had any questions.

If potential participants identified at the GIDS did not respond within 3 weeks of being invited to participate, a reminder invitation was sent. Once a participant had expressed interest in taking part, they were required to sign the informed consent form (Appendix D), and have parental consent if under 16 years old, which were either filled in prior to interviews or scanned and sent back via email.

Data Collection

Duration of Study

Participant recruitment and conducting of interviews for this study took place between July 2016 to April 2017.

Interviews

Qualitative interviews generally take the form of semi-structured or structured interviews. For this study, semi-structured face-to-face interviews took place at the Tavistock and Portman NHS clinic or phone/Skype interviews were arranged, based on the convenience of the participants. This is in consideration of that fact that this service is offered at a national level, and participants might be living in different areas of the UK. The advantage of semi-structured interviews over unstructured is the standardisation of some questions, which allow for comparisons across interviews (Minichiello, Madison, Hays, Courtney, & St. John, 1999).

Taking into consideration the common pitfalls of qualitative research, including equipment failure and environmental conditions, it was felt appropriate to conduct the face-to-face interviews within the premises of the Tavistock Clinic to maintain consistency and reduce the possibility of background noise and interruptions. Similarly, a quiet room was used for phone/Skype interviews. Additionally, recording equipment were checked beforehand to ensure that they are functioning, with spare chargers available.

The interview process took approximately 1 hour. A semi-structured topic guide was used (Appendix E) as well as discussions and exploration of social media websites that are of relevance with each specific participant. Questions framed in the topic guide were broad and vague enough that participants were given the opportunity to express their thoughts as freely as possible. Attempts were made to phrase questions in the vocabulary and language of the individual participants. This is not only in respect of the transgender community through understanding the importance of vocabulary and terminology that they are comfortable with, but also to ensure that the researcher isn't constrained by theoretical terms, enabling greater access to the participants' individual perspectives (Benner, 1994).

Reflective Memos

Memos were recorded of the researcher's thoughts and experiences in the course of collecting data. A balance of descriptive and reflective notes was kept, including what was happening at the moment as well as feelings and impressions. Notes were made as soon as the interviews ended to retain the immediate memory of what was seen and felt. These reflective memos served as a secondary data source in the research as well as a step towards the analysis process.

<u>Thematic Analysis</u>

A thematic analysis was undertaken as the choice of analysis. Thematic analysis is defined as "a method for identifying, analysing and reporting patterns (themes) within data" (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p.79). In contrast to other qualitative methods such as grounded theory or interpretative phenomenological analysis, thematic analysis is a flexible analytic tool that is independent of theory and epistemology, and makes applying across a range of different methodological approaches justifiable, as "thematising meanings" is a common application across multiple qualitative methods (Holloway & Todres, 2003).

Thematic analysis can be applied within any major theoretical, ontological and epistemological framework underpinning qualitative research, and this complements the critical realist aspect of the research. It allows for the constructivist framework through exploration of the way people create meaning out of their experiences while acknowledging the limits of objective reality (Willig, 1999). Similarly, thematic analysis has been shown to be well suited for giving voice to people's experiences (Fereday & Muir-Cochrane, 2006; Joffe, 2011).

Due to thematic analysis' flexible nature, several considerations needed to be made before analysis is considered: the framework informing the research, whether the data will be looked at for descriptive or interpretive meanings and whether the analysis is grounded in the data or guided by pre-existing knowledge. As discussed above, this research takes on a more relativist positioning towards the research question. The emphasis on analysing participants' experiences means that both surface (i.e. semantic) as well as interpretive (i.e. latent) meanings within the data are equally important, therefore providing not just a descriptive account of what participants bring

to the data but also examining the assumptions underpinning these descriptions (Lyons & Coyle, 2016).

Utilising thematic analysis also emphasises the active role of the researcher and takes a reflexive stance towards what the researcher's own experience brings to the data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). This meant that the researcher's knowledge of relevant literature is used as a resource in the research process and this reflexivity allows the researcher to be critically engaged and takes into account how they impact and shape decisions made in the research process (Lawthom & Tindell, 2011). The aim of thematic analysis is to utilise and acknowledge the researcher's skills and perspective to produce a coherent understanding of the data (Lyons & Coyle, 2016). It recognises that the end result of the analysis is an interaction of the researcher's particular skillset and theoretical positioning actively engaged with the data set. The use of MaxQDA (version 12) was used to aid with the coding of the data.

Data analysis followed Braun and Clarke's (2006) guidelines in six stages.

1. Firstly, the researcher transcribed the data in order to facilitate familiarisation with the data (See Appendix F for transcript excepts). This involves reading of the data multiple times to develop a familiar understanding of the meaning in the data.

2. In the second stage, initial codes were attached to highlight passages that are relevant to the research. This switches the engagement of the researcher to a more systematic reading of the data, utilising codes to capture key concepts in the data. These codes can be either semantic or latent, but should capture the diversity of perspectives from multiple participants.

In this study, a combination of both semantic and latent codes was used to analyse the data. It is worth noting that the nature of qualitative study meant that it is difficult to be purely inductive or deductive, taking into account the researcher's perspectives bringing something to the data and the significance of the data while looking for latent constructs (Braun & Clarke, 2012). Furthermore, the critical realist nature of this study assumes that while there are certain objective realities, there are subjectivities in the way we construct knowledge of these realities. This emphasised the need to give significance to both semantic (i.e. 'giving voice' to participants' experiences) and latent (i.e. examining how knowledge of the world is constructed by the participants) coding.

The topic guide was therefore constructed in a way to elicit both descriptive information (e.g. realisation of gender incongruence) as well as areas where underlying ideas and assumptions can be examined (e.g. using social media to help make sense of gender).

3. In the third stage, these codes were collated and grouped into themes and coherent patterns would start to emerge. Codes are thought of as the building blocks of themes, with themes representing a general pattern of meaning found in the data. Candidate themes are identified which is distinctive and relate to a particular issue, but also relates to other identified themes to tell a coherent story.

4. In the fourth stage, codes and passages are reviewed to check that themes picked out are related back to them. Additionally, any themes that do not appear to be representative of the data were discarded. Sub-themes may also

be identified at the stage, in which it shares a central organising concept with a main theme, but highlights a particular aspect of it.

5. In the fifth stage, themes were given clear definitions and names generated for each of them. This involves developing a detailed analysis of the data for each theme and determines how best to make use of the data to tell a "story" for each theme. Data extracts are chosen to best represent themes, providing clear and compelling examples of what the theme is.

6. The last stage involved presenting the evidence from the data set and forming a coherent narrative that utilises the data to answer the research question. This stage also involves a re-engagement with previous literature discussed in the introduction section to highlight how this research complements or differs from what is already known, extending our insight into this research area.

Researcher's Reflexivity

"No research is free of the biases, assumptions and personality of the researcher, and we cannot separate self from those activities in which we are intimately involved" (Sword, 1999, p.277)

Unlike quantitative research where validity and reliability of the research are the cornerstones of upholding research ethics, qualitative studies are more concerned with rigor in order to establish the study's trustworthiness. In this respect, acknowledging reflexivity by understanding the researcher's characteristics and past experiences are is important. Reflexivity is defined as "the process of a continual internal dialogue and critical self-evaluation of researcher's positionality as well as active acknowledgement and explicit recognition that this position may affect the research

process and outcome" (R. Berger, 2015, p.220). This idea of reflexivity is therefore a challenge to positivist notions of knowledge being produced objectively and independently of the researcher's subjectivity.

This is in line with the broader context of the epistemological underpinnings of the research where there is a belief that the researcher brings with them their own presuppositions and understanding of reality into the study which cannot be detached (Hammersley, 2000). Similarly, Williams and May (2002) said that within a critical realist perspective, while objectivity is considered, the subjectivities of the researcher's world should be integrated with that of the participants and the phenomena being researched.

Furthermore, Lietz et al (2006) suggested that reflexivity enhances the quality of the research by allowing the researcher to explore ways in which they influence the process of co-constructing meaning together with the participants.

Researcher's Positionality

I am a 27-year-old Singaporean of Chinese ethnicity who identifies as a straight, cisgender female. In conceptualising this research idea, my personal experiences and cultural upbringing had a major influence in the way I undertake this research.

I acknowledge that as an outsider to the transgender community, there are disadvantages in the sense that I am unable to fully comprehend how it feels to be in certain situations, as I have not personally experienced them myself. This could impact the rapport and trust within the research relationship, which could allow greater access into their sharing of experiences. I am also aware of certain jargons and sensitivities to the language that is particularly unique to this community. Certain assumptions that I might hold about the population could also unintentionally affect

the research process . Following the APA's guidance on minimising heterosexual bias in research, efforts were made to reduce stigmatising and pathologising language. This was done through reading accounts of trans people as well as attending focus groups at the Tavistock with young trans people.

The closest experience I have that can compare to their status as a minority in community is living as an ethnic minority in England. Although this is where all similarities end and I am in no way comparing the complex psychological impact that underlie our experiences, I am hoping that my own experiences would allow me to bring a more empathetic ear to their stories. Additionally, I am mindful of being open and honest about my unfamiliarity to certain terminologies and to adopt a curious and flexible attitude during our conversations.

For the majority of my life, I grew up in Singapore, which is a society that embraces a contradictory hybrid of Asian culture and Western values. Unsurprisingly, this discourse also applies to the transgender community there. In keeping up with western medical advance, Singapore is historically a world leader in sex-reassignment surgery (SRS), becoming a haven for many transgender individuals in the South East Asian region. However, state discourses around Asian values emphasising family values, morality and the idea of "society above self" mean that queerness is seen as an attack on these values and deemed as deviant and non-normative. Quelling public discussions around sexual and gender identity and policies that aim to criminalise sexual activities amongst gay men in particular are justified on the basis of upholding moral integrity of the larger society rather than championing the individual rights of minorities (Lee, 2016). These issues are still deeply inherent in Singapore society. In as recent as 2015, an interview with the Prime Minister of Singapore on the issue of

gay marriages found him stating that the country is not ready for it as Singapore Society "is basically a conservative one" (Velasquez, 2015).

Growing up in Singapore, the transgender community has always been an invisible one to me. My memories of transgender culture as a child were comical portrayals in the media, often used as a prop for jokes. There were very little serious conversations around the issue of gender identity, especially considering its taboo nature within the more conservative older generation. Suffice to say, I had little to no encounters with anyone who identified as being transgender, with only fleeting notions that this group of individuals exist. I started to realise how little I knew about this population when I encountered videos on YouTube where trans people documented their transition and journey. It evoked feelings of empowerment and admiration for what they are going through and made me wonder if this was how I felt watching as someone partial to their experiences, how must this feel like for someone watching who feels similarly?

Bearing in mind my cultural experiences growing up and the discourses I was used to hearing, I am very mindful of maintaining a non-judgmental stance in my interviews. I am also hopeful that my unknowing, neutral position on transgender issues would prevent role confusion and place the respondent in the role of an expert which can be an empowering experience especially for a marginalised community (R. Berger & Malkinson, 2000; Kemmis & McTaggart, 2000).

During this research, I was a trainee clinical psychologist for the whole study duration and was thus both a researcher and a clinician. Being a trainee clinical psychologist would undoubtedly have an impact on the interviews and it is possible that some participants might view me as an expert or as offering expert advice regarding their narratives. Additionally, as part of my training I am more familiar with understanding

experiences from a clinical perspective and would remain mindful about questioning from a researcher position rather than be drawn into a clinical line of questioning.

Ethical Considerations

Obtaining Ethical Permission for Research

Ethical approval was sought and gained by both the NHS Research Ethics Committee and the University of Essex Ethics board prior to the start of recruitment (Appendix G & H). An amendment was made and approved midway through the study in November 2016 to include the use of phone and Skype interviews (Appendix I).

Informed Consent

Participants and parents/guardians, if under 16, were informed of the nature of the study via an information sheet (Appendix C) which was sent out in an email prior to their participation. This indicated the aim and nature of the study such as what participation would involve, informing them of theright to withdraw from the study at any time, without disadvantage to themselves; and how their anonymity and confidentially would be protected. Participants were also informed that they could be provided with a copy of the interview transcript and a summary of the study's results upon request. They were then given a week to think about whether they would like to participate in the study.

Once participation was agreed, an interview time was arranged. Before the interview, participants were given the opportunity to ask further questions about what the study entailed. The participants (and their parents, if they were under 16 years old) completed a consent form (Appendix D) prior to the start of the interview. By signing the consent form, participants also gave consent to the digital audio recording, transcription of the interview data and to the inclusion of the interview data in the

thesis and any publications. In qualitative research, consent is often deemed as an ongoing process that is reflected upon throughout their study participation (Walker, 2007). Keeping this in mind, participants' consent were checked periodically and they were also reminded that their participation is voluntary with the right to withdraw at any time, without disadvantages to themselves and any clinical care they may receive. Issues regarding confidentiality were discussed thoroughly prior to commencing the interview.

Compensation

At the end of the interview, participants were offered £10 as compensation for their time and to offset any travel costs that they might incur. They were asked to sign a receipt of payment form (Appendix J) to indicate that they have received the money.

Confidentiality

In order to anonymise data from participants, a code was assigned to each participant with all identifying markers removed from the data. The use of an audio recording device is necessary for accurate transcriptions of the interviews to paper. Each participant would have agreed by signing the consent form that the interview will be recorded. The audio files of the interviews with no identifying label are securely and separately stored from the identity of the participants according to the 1998 Data Protection Act.

Audio files and transcripts were stored on a personal laptop under password protection. Internal research supervisors and examiners (unless requested) at the University of Essex do not have access to the details of the participants but can see parts or whole of the transcripts. Once the research is examined and concluded, the digital recordings and transcripts will be destroyed.

Risks and Benefits to Participants

Ethical concerns for this population is two-fold; not only are they vulnerable in terms of being a gender minority group, the age range encompasses youths who are below the legal age of consent.

However, considering the ethical principle of justice (Belmont Report, 1979), research within the transgender adolescent population is crucial as it provides further knowledge about their development needs and excluding them could potentially limit useful interventions. Furthermore, the principle of beneficence requires that measures will be taken to ensure that the well-being of the participants are not being neglected (Belmont Report, 1979; BPS, 2014). In the event of psychological distress caused by participation in the research, there is an ethical obligation to provide or refer the participants to a supportive service (Mustanski, 2011).

Research with gender minority youths under the age of 18 is often limited by ethical concerns about parental permission. Although there have been attempts to mitigate this by inviting adult participants to retrospectively report on earlier life experiences, there were still several limitations that warrant the need for the inclusion of under 18 participants. The rapid societal changes in regards to sexual and gender minorities could mean that current experiences might differ from older generations (Loftus, 2001); furthermore, adolescents undergo massive developmental changes in their later teen years, which could impact the generalisability of individuals who are just a few years apart (Mustanski, 2011).

In order to protect the rights of under-aged participants, steps were put in place to ensure participants were able to consent without possible coercion. Their parents were involved in signing an informed consent form alongside the participants. They were

also assessed on their capacity to make decisions prior to obtaining assent, which involved checking their understanding of the study information. Questions were asked to assess their understanding of what it means to be involved in the research as well as their expression of choice to participate (Dunn & Jeste, 2001).

Although the risk of distress is predicted as being low and of short duration, it is possible that some participants might become emotionally distressed when discussing their experience. Steps were put in place to manage this. If it was felt that participants were becoming distressed, they were reminded that they were free to discontinue their participation at any time or free to take a break and continue at a later time. They were also offered contact details for further support. Participants were also likely to still be seen within the Tavistock GIDS and would be encouraged to speak to their clinicians. After the interview, participants were given the opportunity to debrief and reflect on their experience of the interview.

The limits of confidentiality were also discussed with the participants prior to their participation. They were told at the start of the interview that disclosures related to risks to self or others would result in a break in confidentiality and contact made with relevant parties.

There are no foreseeable immediate and direct benefits to the participants. However, research within the transgender adolescent population is crucial as it provides further knowledge about their development needs and excluding them could potentially limit useful interventions. Thus, greater knowledge of the experiences of this group and how they have made sense of them would enable gender identity services to improve the support they provide to people with gender identity difficulties.

Chapter 3. Findings

Chapter Overview

The results of the study will be presented in this chapter. Firstly, the demographics of participants that make up the sample will be described, followed by a brief discussion of the types of social media that the participants used. Lastly, using thematic analysis, themes and sub-themes that were developed from the data will be discussed and elaborated in detail.

Participant Demographics

A total of 11 participants were interviewed for this study and Table 1 below illustrates the sample characteristics.

Table 1: Patient demographics

Participant Pseudonym	Age	Identified gender	Gender pronouns used	Ethnicity	Interview type
Kyle	16	"Male"	He/Him	White-British	Skype
Charlie	16	"Vaguely male"	He/Him	White-British	Face-to-face
Katie	15	"Girl"	She/Her	White-British	Skype/Phone
Helen	17	"Female"	She/Her	White-British	Skype/Phone
Annabelle	16	"Trans female"	She/Her	White-British	Skype/Phone
Eileen	16	"Girl"	She/Her	White-British	Skype/Phone
Jacob	17	"Male"	Him/He	White-British	Skype/Phone
Aaron	16	"Transgender male"	He/Him/Them	White-British	Skype/Phone
Daniel	18	"Male"	He	White-Portuguese	Skype/Phone
David	16	"Male"	He/Him/His	White-Bulgarian	Skype/Phone
Heather	17	"MTF*"	She/Her	White-British	Face-to-face

*MTF: male-to-female

Study Sample

The age of the research participants ranged from 15-18 years old. There were 6 participants who identified with male gender pronouns "He/Him" and 5 participants identifying with female gender pronouns "She/Her". All participants described their ethnicity as White, a majority of them being from a White-British background with the exception of Daniel who is White-Portuguese and David who is White-Bulgarian. All participants were receiving support from the Gender Identity Development Service at the point of interview, except for Daniel who had only recently seen his GP for a referral to an adult gender service.

Types of Social Media Used

All participants described using a variety of social media in their daily life. The most commonly mentioned social media platforms were YouTube, Facebook, Tumblr, Instagram, Twitter and Snapchat. They often manage more than one type of social media, and the majority of participants tended to make use of two or more social media platforms. Generally, most participants described using Instagram and Snapchat more to connect with people that they already know in real life. Twitter and Facebook were mostly used to connect both with people they already know as well as getting in touch with other trans people, whether that's through Facebook groups or sending private messages. Tumblr on the other hand was described more as a place where they could access information on gender through the process of 're-blogging', sharing, and seeking out other people who have similar identities or interests.

Participants who used YouTube described using it primarily to watch videos that other trans people put up. Heather is the only one who described herself as a "full-time YouTuber", using it as a platform to produce content aimed at trans viewers.

Aaron had just recently started posting some videos on his channel and both Annabelle and Eileen spoke about future plans of making videos on YouTube.

Helen was the only participant who used gender-specific social media platforms as a way of connecting to people in the community. The two websites that she used are Empty Closets and Two Cans and String, which are broadly defined as forums for people wanting to connect or seek advice on LGBT matters.

<u>Analysis</u>

Themes and sub-themes from the data were developed using thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) and these are presented in Table 2 below. What is salient about the participants' accounts of their experience is the idea that their experiences on social media seem to mirror, and perhaps intersect with, the transitional journey that many of them chose to make in changing their gender. From a process of self-discovery culminating in ways of self-representation, the following themes are described in a manner that shows the participants' journey.

Table 2: Themes and sub-themes developed from data

Themes	Sub-themes
1. Coming to terms with my trans identity through social media exposure	1.1. "I've always felt like there was something really off about me"
	1.2. "We have a kind of social circle of our own online"
	1.3. "Social media came in with all its magical explanation"
	1.4. "It can be quite a difficult environment to make mistakes in"
2. Aligning myself with other trans people	2.1. Providing some reassurance to my trans identity
	2.2. "I found out how to be trans on YouTube"
3. Presenting myself to an 'other'	3.1 "I now know what I'm doing"
	3.2 "You do have a responsibility for your audience"
	3.3 "I share things to try and educate people"
	3.4 "It affects real life relationships too"

Theme 1: Coming to terms with my trans identity through social media exposure

Discovering gender concepts that fit with the way they feel was a significant process that all participants feel. The first sub-theme "I've always felt like there was something really off about me" described how participants came to realise that there was an incongruence between their physical bodies and how they felt about their gender even before social media came into play. For most participants, coming to terms and learning about being trans took place on social media, and were played out in two crucial ways: seeking out a community of people who felt similarly to them as

illustrated in the second sub-theme "We have a kind of social circle of our own online" and social media providing information that were otherwise inaccessible to them ("Social media came in with all its magical explanation"). However, social media is not always a wholly positive experience for all of them. The last sub-theme "It can be quite a difficult environment to make mistakes in" thus encompasses some of the difficulties that these participants face on social media.

1.1. "I've always felt like there was something really off about me"

In discussing how they started to recognise that their felt sense of gender did not correspond with their physicality, all participants articulated feelings of knowing something was wrong even before having a word to describe it.

> Katie: It was this time two years ago I began to realise my gender felt different to my body. Well like it's always been like deep down but I never really understood what it meant so I kind of ignored it.

> Jacob: … I just sort of um felt that I had to really sort of put on who I was as a girl like I was never like really telling the truth and it was just really strange and like I was just getting more and more desperate to not be that way.

While for Katie and Jacob, realising that they felt different led to them either trying to ignore this feeling or pretend to "put on" who they were, for many of the other participants, recognising that their gender wasn't aligned with their physical body were associated with distressing feelings of anxiety or depression.

> Charlie: I think the first thought of 'hang on what if-what if I'm trans?' was-it felt kind of like-it's quite an anxious feeling, like similar to I don't know,

forgetting that you had a paper due today and you have no time to do it and you wake up and you're just in a complete panic.

David: When I was about 13 years old I entered a depressive state where I was just trying to sort things out in my head so it just kind of amounted to me realising that wait there's something wrong, I need to look into this more.

For some participants, being able to put a word to their feelings allowed them to retrospectively place their experiences within a context of there being "signs" of being trans. It is therefore likely that some of the accounts of their experiences were reconstructed by new discourses of being trans that they were exposed to. For Helen, it was realising that her experiences of identifying as trans did not fit into a "typical narrative" but rather, learning what trans meant allowed her to slowly reconstruct past instances as what she now knew as trans experiences.

Helen: I guess the typical trans narrative as fed to us by Hollywood and the media is that it just clicks and you just know you're trans (…) for me it wasn't so much of just a click, it was-it was quite a slow realisation, it wasn't like "oh oh that's me", it was more of a "may-maybe this is me?" (…) I guess there's a lot of instance that have happened in my life and at that time they didn't have any special meaning, but in retrospect I can see they're clearly signs of gender dysphoria or being female in some way.

For Annabelle, being given a vocabulary of what trans is also enabled her to reconstruct her experiences and "come back into [her] past", she conveyed a sense of relief at finally knowing who she was.

Annabelle: Well, I first knew uh-I first knew the word trans in Year 7. And by Year 9 I begin to uh realise that I was transgender but I came back into my past and I realise that from a young age I've really um-there's some signs of being trans and being really feminine (…) and it awoken me in Year 9, I finally found the word transgender, I finally knew who I was and how I identify.

1.2. "We have a kind of social circle of our own online"

This sub-theme emphasises that although participants felt that the online trans community is very small, social media allowed for people to seek out others and come together based on similar experiences.

Aaron: Back when I first came out on YouTube there was a very very small transgender community because at the time, still a lot of people have never even heard of the word transgender.

Charlie: I think in terms of the Internet in general, people that are also going through the same thing can kind of congregate at the same place, rather than you know be really sparse and few and far between sort of thing.

For a majority of the participants, finding that initial sense of commonality and community online through social media alleviated feelings of loneliness that came with feeling disconnected from their offline friendships and social environment as encapsulated by Daniel, "it's not like I'm just some sort of alien creature". Despite some participants expressing that this very community of people can later make them feel alienated and different, most participants agreed that the first initial contact with

people who are seemingly similar and like-minded was the main draw to social media. Furthermore, it enabled a sense that "someone out there was actually understanding and, like, know where I'm coming from" (Kyle), harbouring similar feelings to what they have thought was theirs alone.

> Jacob: Social media's definitely been the most useful thing I think because (…) I've never read any books 'bout anyone who's trans, never seen any film or on like television so it was basically like the Internet was sort of the only connection I had (…) and it was like really helpful because um you know in that sense I'm not alone, like it's not just me um who feels this way.

In particular, Aaron attributed this exposure to a sense of hope and possibility.

> Aaron: When you have exposure to this whole network you suddenly feel less alone and you feel like so much is more capable and possible for you.

Interestingly, this feeling of being connected to others does not come about from just getting to know someone else through social media on a personal level. Some participants articulated that even just witnessing others go through similar experiences brought a level of comfort and belonging.

> Jacob: …not like I partake in the community but you know to just sort of observe and feel like you're sort of not alone.

> Annabelle: I found erm a YouTuber erm called Gigi Gorgeous and she was transgender and she talked about some of her experiences and it linked really closely with mine, so I think I felt connected with her.

For Daniel, this level of connection was particularly significant when he compared it to his relationship with his cisgender girlfriend.

> Daniel: There are things that are just not right and [my girlfriend] will never get that whereas Ty or Sam (YouTubers) definitely would and maybe they'd know ways to just lower it, if that makes sense.

Some participants also used social media as a way of building friendships with other trans youth, for Helen, she expressed the friendships that she made online as being like "a special club of people" and described wanting to keep it separate from her real life connections.

> Helen: If we think of it as a double identity, which in reality it's not, but for the sake of an analogy, if my secret online identity is separate from my real life identity, then when I'm online, I can interact with people in my secret identity and when I'm offline, I-I don't want to reveal my secret identity to people. (…) I don't want to be overheard by people in public, like they're not part of the special club of people I trust to be more open around.

However, for other participants, they expressed hesitancy in developing friendships with people that they've met online. For Jacob it was more an issue of having to travel to sustain a friendship.

> Interviewer: Ok. Would you like to know them in real life or are you happy with the way things are now?

> Jacob: Um I feel like I'm sort of happy not to, not because I don't wanna know trans people um but because I feel like if you-when you know people in real life, you know you have to like travel and stuff and travelling is awful –

laughs- traveling far is really horrible, I hate it um and it's expensive um so you know it's sort of a downer.

While for others like Katie and Aaron, there was a reservation in allowing online friends to know everything about them, "I wouldn't share everything with like random strangers" (Aaron).

Katie: I think online friends are always very different. Like I think it's hard for them to see the flaws like in your personality and stuff. But I've never really stayed close to these people online (…) I just get a lot more enjoyment out of being around someone in person. Um so then, there's no point in making friends online.

Furthermore, being exposed to an accepting community online was an aspect that the majority of participants appreciated, with quite a few participants sharing Charlie's sentiments in social media being a "safe environment to explore your gender identity".

Daniel: The Facebook group's pretty much, in my opinion, now after having joined a couple months ago and everything, they work pretty much as a family so if you just-if you wake up and just have an awful day dealing with your feminine side, you can just go there rant, people will come back to you, help you with ways to make it better and you just get on with it.

For some participants who live in small towns and villages, this was helpful as their physical environment often placed a limit on their opportunities to know other trans people while also increasing the likelihood of people being more close-minded.

Katie: Obviously in small towns you don't really get much like different

people (…) People don-people don't want to open their doors I think... I think that's all thanks to social media because like people who live in like small towns just don't really- only find things out on social media that people in cities are so exposed to things. The place like where I live um you don't get exposed to things, um social media is way to sort of do that.

David: Because I live in a more rural area and generally most people it's kind of the first time they've come across a trans person in school or even in their lives um but online obviously there's so many people that everyone has different experiences, everyone's had different experiences of either knowing a trans person or being a trans person so it's kind of been made me more aware really.

In discussing reasons for what makes the online community so accepting, many participants articulated the point that social media is a place where liberal ideas can be freely expressed as captured by Katie's statement about social media and the type of people who use Tumblr.

Katie: It's-it's an extremely like open and like liberal place I think? Like social media is so straightforward, like left-wing liberal kind of open, like everywhere's kind of different to other people, Tumblr's like a very specific kind of person who would use it?

Interviewer: what do you mean by "it's a very kind of specific type of people"?

Katie: I mean the general kind of person who've found Tumblr is this like very

open minded- it's like you wouldn't go there if you're a close-minded person.

1.3. "Social media came in with all its magical explanations"

Social media was also helpful in providing useful information to the participants. Most of them described learning about gender concepts that they otherwise wouldn't have been aware of without the influence of social media. What they have learnt from social media therefore seemed to have provided these participants with a whole new discourse and way of understanding their current and past experiences.

> Kyle: Most of what I learnt, I learnt through like social media mainly Tumblr because I was like quite into Tumblr at that point and like I learnt a lot about like-I learnt most of what I know about my gender and about like just gender in general from Tumblr.

> Jacob: So you know most people, in my experience know about being trans through social media um and it's useful to us because like there isn't-there isn't like a how-to book, there isn't a 'being a trans for dummies' like that's not a thing. Um nobody's written that and nobody probably will. Um so like sort of social media is probably like the biggest source of information we have, maybe like the ONLY source of information we have.

For Eileen, this also had a significant impact in terms of changing the way that she saw gender as more of a fluid concept, beyond just the binary.

> Eileen: That's how I kind of found out about the concept of like being gender-fluid, from Jeffree Star (YouTuber) (…) after that I saw gender as more a spectrum rather than male and female.

The sharing of "scientific" materials through social media was also something that provided the participants with a sense of recognition and legitimised their transgender identity. The way some of these participants present what they come across on social media as factual or scientific seem to imply that there is a "right" way of understanding trans and this can be accessed through social media. For most of the participants, these "facts" seem to be readily accepted and perhaps provide evidence, and comfort to some degree, that their experiences are valid.

> Katie: Um I think I found out most of what I learnt through social media.
>
> Interviewer: Mm could you give me examples of what they are?
>
> Katie: Um just like understanding how like being transgender works and sort of like the science behind it as well, um and just like what is sort of different like gender identities and stuff. Um it's really not much information about it out in the world, but on social media there's a lot of information (…) this is a study that I found really interesting um it was to do with how transgender women's brains were more like cis-women's brains um than they are like a man's brain and I think like- I like things that sort of validate I guess, like I found that validating to sort of know like it's very-it's like science behind it almost.

Some participants also appreciated how social media was able to expose them to more varied perspectives.

> Aaron: On social media you can just access and just see so many different people and you can learn so much more about things you never understood before. Also for example from a single quick app like Twitter you can get

much more answers than I imagine like a Google search cause it'll link you to very different websites with very different opinion and that can also be helpful.

For Annabelle, by getting to know how different trans experiences vary across cultures and countries she was able to appreciate how lucky she was to be living in this country.

Interviewer: Do you find that you get something different from watching these different YouTubers?

Annabelle: Yeah –laughs- I do, um just how different countries react to their faces and how they sort of act and use their lives in their-in their countries, that sort of shines a light on how um either lucky or unlucky in some ways compared to them.

Interviewer: In what way?

Annabelle: I just thought um how certain countries are more reserved than others and how they live their lives it sort of shows me how lucky or unlucky I am in my country in being trans.

Lastly, participants also talked about how social media allowed for information to be disseminate instantly, which meant that compared to the past, they are able to access new and updated "information" almost immediately which impact their ability to make decisions on how they want to proceed with their gender transition. It is again important to note here that information are presented as "answers", rather than acknowledging the subjective possibility of the information. This perhaps speaks to the unquestioning attitude some participants have towards what they come across on

social media.

> Daniel: …the thing is you get answers from all around the world and it's quick, it's not like you have to wait for a phone call, wait for a doctor appointment for them to tell you what to do (…) on Facebook you get more real kind of answers so you get answers from people that are like going through the process at the same time as you're going through and it's not like a video that was posted on YouTube like two years ago cause things change in a matter of two years so it's not accurate, I'll give Facebook that.

> David: …trans issues and happenings get out to the world more quickly, so people can be more aware of what it's about (…) you can make your own judgment about how to go about your own transition faster than you could have before.

1.4. "It can be quite a difficult environment to make mistakes in"

Although engaging in social media appeared to be a largely positive experience for the participants, some expressed that social media have its limitations and how it can indeed be a "scary environment". For instance, while acknowledging the advantages of finding an accepting community on social media, Aaron thoughtfully pointed out that the online community was not a reflection of how accepting society as a whole is yet and there is a risk in assuming it was.

> Aaron: …online you can just go straight in and it's just this whole massive world of people who are understanding…but I find it unhelpful because I feel like it gives especially a lot of young trans people, and especially when I was

younger it gave me the idea that y'know oh well this community's accepting which means everyone else is going to be accepting which unfortunately isn't the case.

There are also others who recognised that despite the liberal environment that social media is generally accepted to be, Tumblr in particular can be an intimidating place and some people they encountered have skewed perceptions on what being liberal means.

Jacob: Basically people on like Tumblr wanna be as different as possible so they just think well if I can't um- if being gay isn't enough, then I'll be trans! It's like a conscious decision like you should do this because it'll make you different and like unique and liberal and stuff and like THAT is not the point.

Further to that, Charlie gave an example of how people on Tumblr seemed to subscribe to certain "liberal" gender assumptions and can be very critical if you do not follow a specific way of being trans, making it difficult to learn when mistakes are made.

Charlie: I mean you're learning about gender and you're learning about trans people and if you kind of make mistakes in doing that, it can be quite um, it can be quite a scary environment.

Interviewer: What sort of mistakes do you mean?

Charlie: So um when you get someone's pronouns wrong or getting definition of something wrong and maybe being like cis-sexist, so you know assuming all girls have periods and that sort of thing. Um it-it can be quite a difficult environment to make mistakes in. so (…) from your peers, it-it's often quite a

lot of targeted sort of you know "that's bad, that's really bad. Why're you doing that, that's really bad" instead of like a learning sort of process.

David also described observing how people on Tumblr can have extreme reactions towards certain narratives that they may not particularly agree with.

> David: They can be really sensitive about um things that are said so if somebody said something that's not meant to be offensive, somebody may take a lot of offense to it and make a massive problem out of it and this gets spread over the website and a lot of people can see it.

Theme 2: Aligning myself with other trans people

Through the relationships formed with people that they come across on social media, participants found themselves aligning with particular trans narratives that were often encountered online. This was mostly described in the ways participants connect and viewed certain trans YouTube vloggers which not only provided some reassurance to their trans identity but also offered a directional map of what a trans identity should look like ("I found out how to be trans on YouTube").

Some participants view these YouTubers that they watch in a celebrity-like way. In describing his relationship with two trans YouTubers, Kyle referred to himself as being "quite big fans of them".

> Kyle: On YouTube, a couple of YouTubers also helped me, um Jake Edwards and Alex Bertie. They were like-they're two trans YouTubers and they like helped me quite a lot to understand who I was (…) I thought they were cool so I just carried on watching them and they kind of yeah- I became quite big fans of them.

While Jacob spoke about how he aspired to think similarly to a particular YouTuber that he follows. On one hand, it seemed that Jacob found common ground with this role model YouTuber that he followed which perhaps made him want to know more about him, however that seemed to then develop into him aspiring to think more like his role model. This could have had an impact on the way he constructed his identity.

> Jacob: At first I didn't know that we were like similar in that way, I just wanted to listen to what he s-to what he say cause he seemed interesting um and the more and more I watched what he-uh like watched his videos and like what he said uh the more I realised uh that I was quite similar and like that I thought the same way and that in some ways I didn't think the same way, but that I wanted to think the same way. Um and that I wanted to know more about what he had to say um yeah.

For David, there was an element of there being some sort of personal investment in how these YouTubers talk about their transition journey. For example, feeling proud about how far he had come as if he was a friend.

> Interviewer: Mm so how-when you say that you feel pride for him, what do you mean by that?

> David: Uh proud that he's come so far, so from being quite upset like I was three years ago, he's overcome some issues and he's gone through the whole process of physically transitioning on the NHS and yeah just kind of-it's kind of like having a friend just watching them grow, so in that sense I'm proud.

2.1. Providing some reassurance to my trans identity

For many participants, there was an initial hesitancy in being authentic to their

identity because of exposure to negative ideas of what trans is.

> Annabelle: I didn't want to be transgender because of the negative things I
> found and all the comments I read and so because of being trans and the idea
> of being trans was really scary to me, I didn't want to be anything to do with
> it.

> Eileen: For a long time I thought like because of films and TV shows that
> people didn't find like transgenders attractive.

However, several participants recalled that these ideas around gender were later challenged when they came into contact with people through social media that did not necessarily subscribe to those ideas.

For Helen, this "skewed perception" affected the way she viewed trans people as a whole and identified how it contributed to an internalised sense of herself, but she credited being on Empty Closets (http://www.emptyclosets.com/) for helping her to challenge these views she held.

> Helen: I always had a very skewed perception of trans people um I guess my
> mum was kind of responsible for that. Because she was-said quite nasty things
> about cross dressers and that. (…) So I guess-I guess I did kind of dislike trans
> people and before I was on Empty Closets, I was on a lot of sites which were
> quite anti-trans, and anti-non binary especially (…) and I guess I did
> internalise a lot of that rhetoric and kind of applied it to trans people, but
> eventually, after reading about the experiences of trans people, I began to see
> them more as humans rather than a kind of monolithic threat.

Some other participants felt that within their trans identity, they still had to subscribe to rigid gender stereotypes. For Kyle, this also manifested in a fear of not being accepted by the community if he didn't present as completely masculine.

> Kyle: When I first came out as trans I tried to be very very masculine because I was-I think I was scared that people wouldn't necessarily accept me if I was anything BUT completely masculine. Like now I've kind of come further in my journey and like (…) I've met other trans people that aren't completely masculine (…) like it's help me to kind of explore what I feel more comfortable with.

However, increased exposure to people who did not fit into those stereotypes on social media allowed some participants to normalise their own trans experience.

> David: When people talk about it more on social media they're normalising the fact that you don't have to necessarily strictly conform to female-male: these body part correspond to being female, these body parts correspond to being male and you have to act in a certain way, I think the mould is being broken now more than before because people are accepting different behaviours and identities.

For Aaron, viewing someone else online who subverts gender stereotypes validated his own feelings as a trans guy who does not prescribe to hyper-masculinity.

> Aaron: Watching another trans guy who is feminine and isn't ashamed to be who he is (…) and can fight back against the idea they have to be the most masculine man is such-it just gives me such positivity knowing that you know as trans men we do not have to fit into this idea in which cis people have

created for us (…) it made me feel so much more comfortable you know being a trans guy and enjoying feminine things.

Majority of the participants agreed that seeing another person describe what they go through reinforced a sense of authenticity "it's definitely nicer to see the real people and not just like information on a screen" (Katie).

> Katie: I like to see the person talk about it. Because I think you just learn it in a different way. You really like see the pros and cons I guess. And I think 'cause a lot of YouTubers talk about it, you can sort of see like a range of experiences. (…) I think like a lot of people are very raw and honest, you can kind of tell (…) they're not lying.

For Heather, who produces her own YouTube videos, there was a sense that, by allowing others to view snippets of her life on YouTube, she gained the confidence to do what she likes through positive feedback from her audience. This normalised her experience of being trans by receiving support and validation from her viewers.

> Heather: No one's ever shown the intimate everyday life of what it is like to be trans, and YouTube has taught me that I can do whatever I do and people still find that interesting and educational without me doing anything other than what I do.

Most participants described a sense of comfort in knowing what their own journey would look like when they see what someone else has been through, "it kinda shows like where my journey could go" (Kyle). For some it was about quelling anxieties by knowing what to expect with practical issues like what happens in your first appointment.

Kyle: Especially with like appointments, [YouTube videos] show like what goes on, it makes it a lot less daunting (…) like it means that like I know what's going to happen and I'm not gonna get like really anxious about it.

For some others, it was also having the knowledge that someone else has achieved something they are working towards that makes the outcome prospect more enticing.

Daniel: On YouTube I get information with actual details, so say there is this really famous female-to-male YouTuber Ty Turner and he has a lot of like before and after pictures and that just really helps cause he shows what he actually did to get to that point so it's more informative in that manner. It's like more fulfilling and more achievable.

Interviewer: What is it about these YouTubers that appeal to you the most?

Daniel: Honestly their results, they're incredible! They just had really good results so Ty Turner for example managed to go on about it and just reduced completely his chest size just based off exercises without any surgery whatsoever, so that was something I really-I'm looking forward to.

For David, he found that seeing people who are further on in their journey describe the process allows him to make a decision on steps that he would like to take himself and how he wants to view himself.

David: From time to time, they make personal posts where they describe their feelings, negative or positive, about their transition, or their sexuality or anything like that and it was just quite interesting to look at that and make a sort of judgment about what it is to be trans and what I can expect of myself.

2.2. "I found out how to be trans on YouTube"

Viewing YouTubers talk about their experiences of being trans consolidates an idea of there being 'a' way to be trans, in which they are sometimes seen as an authority figure on how to be trans, often through a process of self-disclosure in terms of how they are feeling and the kinds of procedures and actions they have taken to further their gender transitioning process. What these YouTubers portray seem to be placed within the context of an objective truth that they can learn about rather than being seen as a reflection of their subjective personal experiences.

> David: On social media it's mostly just been advice and experiences that helped kind of shaped people's ideas of what it is to be trans and that's quite helpful.

Kyle spoke specifically about following a particular YouTuber (Alex Bertie) who created a series following his medical transition (A quest for Alex's Beard) and described that it's "like helpful in terms of like really talking about what they've gone through and HOW they've dealt with it so it kinda gives me coping mechanisms on ways to deal with things".

For some participants, they found it helpful to look for advice on standing up for themselves and building self-confidence through these YouTubers presenting their own experiences of being discriminated against. Eileen encapsulates this point below.

> Eileen: I do sometimes look at [YouTube] for like advice, like I've definitely found like you've got to be more like brave when people are not treating you fairly and stuff because of being transgender, like you've got to kind of like stand up and say like "that's not right" and stuff whereas when I was younger I never did.

For Daniel, these YouTubers provided opinions on practical issues like types of exercise work to get certain physiques and expressed how it can be gratifying to have someone else's opinion informing your decision of what to do.

> Daniel: So we get information on exercises we can do to reduce honestly any sort of thing in your body, I did not expect that much um and products that people buy, they do a lot of reviews on them so you get a sense of ok that one's better than that one so I'm just gonna go straight to buying that one instead of that one.

There was also an element of trustworthiness and specificity that these YouTubers are able to provide in answering the kind of questions that participants want to know. These answers were often taken as facts that the YouTubers hold and disseminate, rather than being seen more subjectively as something that could be constructed out of their own unique experience.

> Daniel: Whilst people think like yeah Google it, if you don't know it Google it, I go on YouTube and I Google it on YouTube because that's where you find the answers and you get shown what to do exactly and it gets feedback even from those YouTubers (…) you actually get to see how it's like and honestly it's less scary seeing it like that.

> Jacob: …Cause you know sometimes when you're like reading things online it doesn't feel like they're a real person, like it's just like you know this is just information like nobody wrote this (…) whereas like YouTube like you see their face like you know they're a person, they're like THERE, you can't deny

that they are so it's like these people are same as me, so that's like a relief.

Jacob seemed to ascribe more significance to a single person expressing their experience online than to a piece of written information that could potentially be based on more objective sources. There appear to be an inherent attraction for him towards anecdotal "evidence" rather than something less personal.

In terms of knowing who to look for on YouTube, participants seem to view YouTubers as a more credible source of information if they have a lot of viewers.

Interviewer: Would you say that you trust the kind of information on YouTube more than you would sort of in a written form?

Jacob: Um sometimes, I think it-it depends on sort of like um how credible the channel seems, like how many videos they've got, how many followers they've got um how like sort of how the quality of their content is like that sort of stuff.

From the perspective of someone creating content for YouTube, Heather reiterated several points made by participants who take on a more viewer role on YouTube. For Heather, who builds her livelihood on making YouTube videos, she had to be strategic in order to build up a consistent viewer base. She first spoke about noticing a positive shift in her viewer count when she posted videos that were more targeted at the trans community and for her that seemed to be the working strategy to improve her viewer and subscriber base.

Heather: I started off talking about my transition and talking about trans-related matters and that definitely got a lot of transgender youth involved with my kind of life.

She then went on to explain how she engaged with her viewers. As other participants have articulated, how they connect with certain YouTubers was based on a need for authenticity and validation, Heather showed how as a Youtuber, this could result in a pressure to be as unique and authentic as possible in order to target her audience.

> Heather: YouTube is known for having click-bait videos which are very misleading titles, completely over-exaggerated but how else are you gonna get those views, you have to do something amazing for people to see it and be like wow I'm going to click on this (…) if you're going to make a makeup tutorial, you've already got ten million other videos on YouTube make up tutorials, you put the word trans you're going to get a lot more views other than if you just title it make up tutorial.

She described that when she strayed towards doing other more 'typical' YouTube videos, she "saw the following views decrease so I started doing trans things again and it grew and grew um quite a lot more than I was expecting and so I was like well trans content's working, other content not so working".

Trans YouTubers therefore seem to set up a reciprocal relationship with their viewers in which they are able to provide some sort of support and advice in response to what viewers express they need, thus establishing themselves as an authority for their viewers on how to be trans (i.e. whether it's through different ways of presenting yourself through make-up or building up confidence and self-esteem).

As a consequence to this reciprocal relationship, participants who view YouTube videos seem to set up an expectation of the kind of videos they like to see.

> Katie: I really like to look at um just like people who are much more, living

like a real and happy life. And at the end of the transition are kind of like hap-

sort of complete and like comfortable in their skin.

This is reiterated by David who said that the videos he tend to watch are "generally most of the time positive because people want their followers to feel good when they watch their videos". For Aaron, who is just starting out putting videos of himself on YouTube, he encapsulated the struggle to be authentic in remaining open and honest while trying to be a positive influence for others.

Aaron: When you communicate, a lot of the time YouTubers have to put on –pause- when you're being on camera you have to present sometimes as a much more positive or relaxed, or the most YOU way you possibly can.

Whereas Heather appeared to be more invested in showcasing a more positive side to her videos as she is aware that being positive attracts people to her videos and sees it as extending part of her personality.

Heather: I seemingly got a bubbly personality and people are attracted to the kind of uplifting, positivity that I can bring into a room (…) I do try and make every single video positive, energetic and child-friendly.

Theme 3: Presenting myself to an "other"

The final theme explores the ways in which participants make use of social media to present their trans identity towards an audience, which consisted of both people within the trans community and people whom they also have offline relationships with. The sub-theme "I now know what I'm doing" explored how participants learn to become comfortable and confident with their identity through experimenting on social media. However, with that are certain responsibilities that come with presenting a

trans identity online, these responsibilities are encapsulated in the sub-themes "You do have a responsibility for your audience" as well as "I share things to try and educate people". The final sub-theme "It affects real life relationships too" described how presenting themselves online can positively or negatively affect their offline environments as well.

3.1. "I now know what I'm doing"

Participants expressed using social media as an opportunity to express themselves freely. For some, they used it as a way "to get things off [their] chest" (Kyle).

> David: Posting [on Tumblr] kind of gets my voice out there because when you're going through loads of things, you kinda wanna tell someone and I didn't like to say things to my parents that much and my friends I could only see them in school so when I was at home, I just kind of made use of the comment sections or the ability to express yourself how you want online.

For others, it was a chance to let people see them as how they wish to express themselves

> Aaron: I do talk a lot about being trans on them [in reference to Twitter, Facebook, Tumblr, YouTube and Snapchat], I use it to express things which y'know-I talk about transphobia and I also talk about what's like to be trans.

> Katie: I wanted people to sort of treat me how I'll be treated straightaway so being more open on social media made people used to [me being trans].

A lot of participants also felt that they learned to deal with issues of anxiety and

confidence about their identity through social media, whether as a consequence of positive interaction with others or observing the way other trans people present themselves.

> Charlie: It's kind of helped me calm down a bit more, helped my anxieties a lot less. Made me almost quite a bit more confident in knowing that you know I'm ok socially. And knowing that I can you know socialise with people that maybe don't completely know that I'm trans, um and just kind of talk to people really.

> Eileen: I thought for a long time that transgenders just weren't attractive but obviously watching these YouTubers like they've got like boyfriends, and men find them attractive, and women as well, so (…) that's changed the way that I see myself a bit cause I realised I'm lovable as well.

A number of participants also positioned their use of social media as helping them go through a journey, from a place of uncertainty to one where they "now know what [they're] doing" (Jacob).

> Helen: I would say that exploring my gender has mostly finished. Like I'm pretty comfortable in my gender, I'm-I guess I'm fairly comfortable in myself in some ways.

> Aaron: I feel like I'm just someone who's become a lot more experienced in social media and just someone who's in a transition socially a lot y'know I've-

I'm less more of someone who's confused.

For David, this was most noticeable in the way that different social media platforms were helpful to him at different points of his journey.

> David: Right now if I were to go on Tumblr I wouldn't be able to um relate with someone who's really depressed and feeling like hopeless because I've moved on from that part of my life and I just don't want-when I go on social media I don't really want to see that negativity I prefer to go on there for entertainment or to kill some time.

In feeling secure about their gender identity, some participants felt it necessary to defend their trans identity and show a more positive aspect to being trans. For Annabelle, this is in the form of contemplating setting up her own YouTube channel, as she "really wanted to advocate with a platform and to show that we can do just as much as cis-gender people".

Although for most participants, this journey cumulated to a point where they accept and feel secure in their identity as a trans person, for some other participants, they prefer to distance themselves from the trans label online as a way of defending their identity.

> Eileen: I don't tell people that I'm a transgender, it's kinda like a secret (…) um I always get scared that somehow people are gonna find out from social media and that yeah- I just don't want people to know unless- until I'm ready, I don't want people to know, find out any other way, other than me telling them.

Daniel expressed similar feelings around wanting to keep people online from knowing

that he is biologically female.

> Interviewer: Yeah so on Tumblr you said you follow some sort of more gender-related female to male transition-people who've transitioned, um do you reblog any of their stuff or how do you use Tumblr in that way?

> Daniel: I normally save it on the drafts cause it keeps my Tumblrs from knowing that I'm actually a female cause I only use my male counterpart more.

In talking about his views on the word transgender, Daniel also said "I understand why the term is there, I just don't understand once you're fully transitioned, so you sound like a man, you look like a man, why are you called trans man and not simply man?"

As Charlie puts it "all trans people's experiences and opinions are different". Although for a majority of the participants, navigating through this journey of self-discovery ultimately led to identification with a transgender label, for others like Daniel and Eileen, the word transgender seemed to take on a more fluid understanding; it represented something that they might identify with temporarily but not something that they would eventually want to associate with once they've reached the end of their gender journey.

Eileen also spoke about not wanting her gender to be what defines her, implying that once you identify as a trans person, people stop paying attention to your subjectivities as a person and instead focus entirely on your gender as a reference to the person you are.

> Eileen: I wanna be able to be known as like funny or clever or whatever, rather

than just a transgender or gender fluid. I don't want my gender to be like my defining quality because at the end of the day, everyone or most people (…) have a gender or no gender or whatever. So that shouldn't be the thing that defines you.

3.2. "You do have a responsibility for your audience"

Some participants acknowledged that being on social media entailed a sort of social responsibility that what you put out there would have an impact on others. For some, this meant providing accurate "information" on what it is like to be trans, while for others this meant living up to an (sometimes self-imposed) expectation they have towards their audience.

> Aaron: I feel like when you are someone with an audience, you DO have a responsibility for your audience because sometimes what you can say can lead um your viewers or your audience or whoever is reading or watching your content, they can take that as a way of they have to then go to the other side and tell them why they're wrong.

Looking back on how he made use of Tumblr, David reflected that the negative environment on Tumblr further reinforced his already depressed feelings about being trans and made him think that things wouldn't get better. He attributed that to the influence people on Tumblr had over his mood.

> David: When I was 13, I kind of saw how people acted on Tumblr and y'know the whole kind of being depressed I think that kind of made me feel worse being on there, it didn't help me out because I was depressed as well, so seeing uh people act like that all the time kind of, it didn't really reflect well on me.

Speaking from a perspective of a content producer, Heather expressed this sense of responsibility in her need to create content that is in line with what viewers want to see. Corresponding to the idea of a reciprocal relationship between viewers and YouTubers, this suggested that often people who produce contents do not act in isolation and are instead very much guided by what is requested by viewers.

> Heather: I couldn't get out of bed but I was like I've dedicated this amount of time to YouTube I'm still gonna make a video every single day, so through those two weeks of me not wanting to get out I would still make a film of some sort (…) They're like "make a hair tutorial", and then you make that video, they see that you're engaging in that comment, they see that you're reflecting on what people are writing so they don't feel like worthless or whatever.

3.3. "I share things to try and educate people"

Several participants articulated taking up a role within social media to educate others on what transgender meant to them. They expressed sharing subjective experiences of being trans in order to encourage people on their social media to think differently. For some participants, the knowledge that they have gained about gender issues through social media almost placed a need within them to share that information with others. Annabelle conveyed the point that being able to create content to educate people "could change their perspective and become more accepting towards trans people".

> Kyle: I don't want to kinda sound big headed but I feel like I know quite a lot about gender, about sexuality and I think because (…) it's not taught like to people, like in mainstream schools and things like that. There needs to be someone out there who's educating people and I feel like with the information

I know I can be at least a help in THAT education (…) I want to try and like make it obvious to people, and people aren't necessarily aware of certain things they're doing can cause hate or hurt to trans people. Or is like not directly but indirectly backing trans violence, some people aren't necessarily aware of that through like the language they use and things like that.

The rationale for sharing information thus seemed to be aimed towards people outside of the trans community, to raise awareness and encourage a more understanding attitude towards trans people.

Daniel: …being a part of this movement and making people more aware, that's what we should be focusing on in the community because some people are just uninformed and y'know the best way to educate people is to honestly tell them about what it is to be trans.

For Jacob who also identified as being a writer, part of his role is to help others represent trans experiences in media better.

Jacob: If people have questions, like cause I'm a writer, sometimes people would be like I'm writing a trans character but "I don't know if this is real because I'm not trans", and like sometimes I'll be like "this is true, but this isn't true" and like just try and explain to them (…) talking about like why representation of trans people is important in media because that's something I'm like really interested in. Like I'm writing a novel where the love interest is trans (…) so I feel like represent-representation of trans people in media is very important, regardless whether it's social media or um television or print media or anything like that.

In addition to educating the wider non-trans community on what being trans is like for them, some participants also feel their role consisted of helping other trans people in the community.

> Heather: For someone like me who is very knowledgeable about trans matters and has been in the transgender game for a long long time, still playing their cards and whatever –laughs- I seemingly am a good place for advice, like trans friends of mine will be like "what are your opinions on this, what are your views on this".

For some, it was feeling "like I've swapped places with who I used to be online" (Aaron) where they started off seeking out advice and knowledge from other people on social media, and now that they are in a more secure place in their gender identity, have come full circle and taken up the position of being able to advice others.

> Jacob: … when they would ask me about like hormones and stuff, like I had information that I can give them because I'd done a lot of research on the Internet through like social media and like stuff like that.

Katie also expressed how the experience of helping other had affected the way she chose to be open on social media.

> Katie: I think helping people whether it's like online or anything, is really sort of like, makes me happier, knowing that people that are in a position I was in are in a better place because of me. So I think that's sort of why I'm like I'm very open on social media because I like to know I've helped someone.

3.4. "It affects real life relationships too"

A number of participants talked about how the way they present themselves on social

media often had an impact on their relationships in real life too. For instance, people that they know in real life showing support for these participants through social media brought some comfort in knowing that these people would be understanding in real life interactions too.

> Katie: I think it's just like um like I can talk to people a lot easier, who I haven't seen for a while. They're just like letting me know they're supporting me, that's made it a lot easier and more helpful so I don't have that- people can just like message you all the time. So yeah I think that's helped with the support mostly. I get a lot of support online.

However, this merging of offline and online dimensions is not always associated with positivity and support. For Eileen, who is keen to keep her trans identity a secret and presents as a "normal" girl at school, the prospect of aligning herself with a trans identity by making friends with other trans people on social media is scary.

> Eileen: …I guess scared that somehow people at school are going to find out because I don't like- I get scared people at school are going to like find out and then um like people will think of me differently.

While for David, he expressed feeling cautious around how he might come across on social media to his friends and relayed an example of a trans friend who has alienated conversations around being trans.

> David: Other people are more vocal but if you're so vocal to an extent where it can put people off then I don't think it's very good (…) it's honestly making some people feel like he's (another trans friend) unapproachable and hard to talk to because they don't know so much about the topic yet that's what he

talks about most of the time and I think that's come from social media.

Additionally, he also talked about how starting a YouTube channel would open up criticism and judgment from off-line friends based on the content you choose to put up.

> David: there's that stigma about starting a YouTube channel um that your friends will kind of judge you and your content might be a little bit cringy (...) just kind of thinking to myself oh that like could be me if I start my own channel.

Chapter 4. Discussion

Chapter Overview

This chapter will summarise and review the research findings in the context of the main study aims and the existing literature reviewed in Chapter 1. The strength and limitations of the study will also be considered in this chapter, as well as clinical implications and recommendations for future studies. Lastly, this chapter will conclude with the researcher's reflections throughout the journey of this research.

Overview of Findings

This study attempts to answer the broad question "what are young transgender adolescents' experiences of social media?" A thematic analysis method employed in this study identified 3 main themes that mirror, and intersect, with the transitional journey towards changing physical attributes of their gender that most of the participants are (or are planning to be) on. The journey looks at how they build upon their understanding of gender expression, the importance placed on seeking other like-minded people online and eventually culminating in choosing how to present themselves both online and offline. This is particularly significant when considering the context of this generation of adolescents growing up in a time where "being online" is a pervasive part of one's life. The participants involved in this research are likely to have been made trans-aware online, which makes for a different experience from older generations where trans-awareness was developed in various other ways. It is therefore important to consider how social media plays a role in the trajectory of identity development for the young trans people of today and for future generations to come.

Participants described a period of coming to terms with their trans identity, often with the sense that there was something wrong with how they felt about their assigned gender before having a word to describe it. Access to social media provided some answers to these incongruent feelings by extending their social network beyond physical geographical boundaries to other trans people who understood how they were feeling. Additionally, social media also provided what they perceived as factual and objective information about being trans that authenticated their felt sense of gender. This introduced a whole new discourse and way of understanding when reflecting on their experiences. Although the participants generally viewed social media positively in helping them to gain a better understanding of themselves, there were some uncertainties expressed about social media platforms, such as Tumblr, that promote a rigid way of thinking, making it a difficult environment to learn how to express themselves.

A crucial aspect of developing their trans identity seem to be formed through how the participants connect with influential trans people online. Through watching videos put up by well-known trans YouTubers and describing them as people that they look up to, these participants aligned themselves with some of the trans narratives that were commonly articulated. This normalised and legitimised some of the experiences that they had and brought reassurance to their identity, while also establishing these trans YouTubers as being seen as an authority on how to be trans. Their subjective experiences and advice are therefore sometimes taken as truths that should be followed.

Participants also made use of social media as a way of presenting how they want to appear to others. Using social media as an experimental ground to explore their

identity allowed them to feel more secure and confident in how they wish to be perceived by others. Participants acknowledged that presenting themselves in a certain way on social media has an impact on others which entailed a social responsibility towards them. This social responsibility is demonstrated in the form of being as "accurate" with information presented or living up to certain expectations either self-imposed or from the audience. They also articulated picking up an active role of educating others, both within the trans community and their wider social network, on being transgender by sharing their experiences online. Lastly, several participants reflected how their offline relationships are, or can be potentially, affected as a result of the way they presented themselves on social media.

Study Findings in Relation to Existing Literature

The themes developed in this study will be discussed in relation to the existing literature. Consistent with what is found in the literature review set out in Chapter 1, this study depicted similar findings and themes with the papers that were identified. Within the literature review, a majority of the studies conducted were ethnographic in nature, this study approaches the subject from a different perspective by looking at first-hand accounts of young trans people's experiences of social media, rather than analysing what is already presented on social media. This section is organised around the themes in relation to the theories and literature that was discussed in Chapter 1.

Coming to Terms with my Trans Identity Through Social Media Exposure

The first sub-theme "I've always felt like there was something really off about me" relates to social constructionist theories around how we construct our identities based on the way that people around us react to us (P. L. Berger & Luckmann, 1966). Internalising implicit societal rules around what constitutes gender norms and

realising that how they feel about themselves does not fit into these rules brought about feelings that something is wrong with them. This sub-theme also constitutes discussion around the critical realism nature of this study. It acknowledges the body as being a real objective entity with its own objectively independent structures (S. J. Williams, 1999), one in which the participants have an embodied sense of incongruence from. The process of realisation and identity development that they go through, albeit partially socially constructed through coming into contact with new discourses of gender, is embedded in their physical body. As such, the ontological assumptions of the body preceding the epistemological claims of how they came to terms with their identity underpins the critical realist nature of this study. This point of view is supported by Jay Prosser (1998), a trans writer who posits that the body is the primary source of discomfort, where the incongruent relationship between one's gender identity and body creates psychological distress that is medically termed as gender dysphoria.

The second sub-theme "We have a kind of social circle of our own online" is consistent with most of the literature where the Internet has been defined as a space where various marginalised groups of people, especially trans communities, are able to come together and develop a sense of common identity (MacKenzie, 1994; Mehra et al., 2004; Smith & Kollock, 1999; Stryker & Whittle, 2006; van Zoonen, 2002). Indeed, within the literature reviewed, all except one study discussed the impact of how the social aspect of being online bolstered a sense of belonging and aided in forming new in-group categories through being able to connect with a larger trans community beyond their physical reach.

Furthering our understanding of how a new sense of community is redefined, this sub-theme explored how social media platforms such as Tumblr allowed for the freedom to create more nuanced labels beyond the gender binary of "male" or "female" (Oakley, 2016). Tumblr is known for being an outlet for people wishing to express their gender and sexuality freely (Fink & Miller, 2014), it is described as a micro-blogging website where its users experience "certain freedom from sexual and gender roles (they) have been socialised with (Tiidenberg, 2012, p.43). Participants described how using Tumblr exposed them to other users who expanded the discourse around acceptance of varied gender and sexual expressions. Coming into contact with these terms helped in the realisation that the initial "wrongness" they felt about themselves and their bodies was not unique to them and allowed them reconstruct their experiences of feeling wrong in their own body to one that they can put the label of "transgender" on.

The idea of Tumblr being a safe environment to explore their gender identities was discussed by many participants. Amongst the reasons why was the notion of it being a liberal place and that they would be accepted regardless of how they identify. Zamanian's (2014) study looking at the construction of queer identities and communities on Tumblr provided a plausible explanation for the appeal that Tumblr holds. She argues that in finding an alternative community on Tumblr, people seek out others that would support their point of view and reinforce their way of thinking. This notion is aptly encapsulated by what is defined as a counterpublic (Fraser, 1990; Warner, 2005); a community formed out of a conflicting relation with their social and cultural norms. The politics of "safe spaces", prolific among queer activists online, are a consequence of a counterpublic against hetero-normative practices and is actively being maintained on platforms such as Tumblr through sharing of advice

posts and promoting a certain way of thinking. Online "safe spaces" have come to mean an environment in which people should feel able to express themselves without the threat of feeling unsafe or judged for who they are and perhaps contribute to the way participants feel accepted and free to express themselves.

The next sub-theme "Social media came in with all its magical explanation" contribute to the literature of social media being used to seek out information that would not be readily accessible offline. However, it also suggests that the participants value "scientific facts" that would validate their trans feelings and these facts are readily assimilated into how they understand their transgender experiences. Contrary to the emphasis placed on recognising the subjectivities of trans experiences within trans studies, it appears that for these young participants, objective "facts" and "evidence" help them to construct a fixed and coherent narrative around their transgender identity, rather than accepting the view of a deconstructed and fragmented gender self (Hines, 2006; Wren, 2014).

The final sub-theme "It can be a difficult environment to make mistakes in" is not something that has been discussed in previous literature. Despite feeling that social media platforms provide a safe and accepting space to explore their identity, some participants acknowledge that often there is a pressure to be a certain kind of liberal person. Social justice movements, such as fighting for transgender rights, spreading across these social media platforms, are often seen as the catalyst for creating an "us vs. them" ideology, a victim framework that justifies ideological dichotomy towards oppressing social norms (Goldberg, 2014). Showing how liberal you are is sometimes conflated with how much perceived oppression and disadvantage you have in society according to several media sources online (E. Butler, 2014; Goldberg, 2014; Kesvani,

2017; Young, 2016). Social justice movements have therefore been criticised as being elevated to an exaggerated form of identity politics that encourage the intolerance of any conforming thought. For these young participants who are looking for learning opportunities to understand their identity through social media platforms, the use of fear-mongering in the name of advocating for social justice (Orginos, 2015) has created a hostile atmosphere in which "mistakes" made are heavily criticised as anti-trans practices.

Aligning Myself with Other Trans People

This theme relates to the way that participants adopt trans narratives that are typically espoused by influential trans people online through the form of YouTube videos. Feeling like they are able to connect with influential trans people that they encounter online relates to social identity theories that emphasise the relational aspects of negotiating a sense of self (Hogg, 2006; Hogg & Abrams, 1988). Developing a sense of identity involves aligning oneself with a social category (Fearon, 1999) which can mean adapting to the use of a shared discourse around what it means to be trans.

Watching YouTube videos of other trans people provided some reassurance to the trans identity of these participants as increased exposure to people who they can relate to normalised and validated their own trans experience. This relates to Turkle's (2011) idea of "hyper other-directedness" in which there is a sense of comfort that the participants feel by virtue of someone else's virtual presence. Wuest's (2014) study provide further support for this sub-theme, suggesting that queer youths match their own distinct experiences to representations on YouTube as a way of developing an understanding of themselves. This shared identity that is perceived by the viewer is then employed to challenge previous negativity felt about their identity.

The participants also relayed the importance of having an authentic representation of a trans person by watching these YouTube videos. This supports previous literature findings in which social media allowed for the subjectivities of trans people's lives to be attended to and this resonated more with trans viewers compared to mass media portrayals of trans people. (Dame, 2013; Farber, 2016; D.B Hill, 2005). Having a "narrative of realness" (Gray, 2009) by connecting a human face to an experience fostered a greater sense of emotional authenticity perceived by the participants. YouTube videos comprise of communication cues that are often associated with physical interaction, this allows for messages that are conveyed through the trans vlogs to be received in a more personal and real sense (Baym, 2015). These trans YouTube videos can therefore be regarded as "videos of affinity" (Lange, 2009) where viewers feel connected to the person behind the video and not just to the content that is being said. Further to that, participants also found that witnessing how others further along in the transition process dealt with issues along the way was comforting. Green-Hamann & Sherblom (2013) postulated that this helped to facilitate feelings of affinity while better understanding potential challenges that might lie ahead for the participants.

The way that participants view YouTubers as being authority figures in the sub-theme "I found out how to be trans on YouTube" concurred with previous literature findings in that expert roles can be assumed within the community as a way of helping newer members (Dame, 2013; Gauthier & Chaudoir, 2004; Jimenez, 2014; McInroy & Craig, 2015). While privileging "scientific" facts and evidence in understanding their identity, these participants also seem to acknowledge the importance of subjective accounts in providing expert advice on how to present their trans identities. Indeed, Ben Metz's (n.d.) review of online health communities found that although there were

more acknowledgement of objective truth in the modern world, this is no longer the case with the existence of online communities. Social outcomes within health communities, such as people's subjective opinions and experiences, can often sit alongside or even take precedence over objective, clinical outcomes.

Miller (2017) suggested that YouTube's capability to publish largely unfiltered context allowed for the generation of self-proclaimed experts using their subjective lived experiences to construct a discourse around being trans (Miller, 2017). This gave way to a systemic process in which a dominant trans narrative is manifested on YouTube and these YouTubers are perceived as being experts on the "right" way to be trans . These dominant discourses contextualised how trans youths are represented on YouTube, fixing in place an expectation that trans youth viewers are meant to be follow the dominant trajectory of identifying (O'Neill, 2014). This is perhaps linked to Lacy's (2014) notions of an increasing commodification of queer identity. She proposed that queer identities are commodified (and exchanged) online through constructing an identity for the viewers to consume. The knowledge and expertise held by the influential trans vloggers are what is passed on to the viewer; in exchange the vloggers are rewarded with notions of popularity and celebrity statuses. The act of commodification, in this context, is therefore based upon the need of becoming something, i.e. gaining knowledge and mirroring a lifestyle that will enable them to fit into a dominant representation of being trans.

Presenting Myself to an 'Other'

This last theme discussed the ways in which participants present their trans identity to others on social media. The sub-theme "I now know what I'm doing" encompassed how they learned to be confident in their trans representation towards others on social

media. This can be considered in the context of literature around digital communication allowing for gender creativity (Ehrensaft, 2011). Online communication technologies have been credited with making it easier for people to experiment with different constructions of themselves, in a concept that Turkle (1995) described as being a social laboratory. In this way, online environments are thought of as transitional spaces (Winnicott, 1953) in which the participants test out an identity that is perhaps based on unconscious motivations of wanting to express a lesser known side of them (Balick, 2013).

This is perhaps not surprising as it corresponds with the participants being in the moratorium stage of adolescence (Erikson, 1971) where they are in the developmental process of exploring and seeking ways to define themselves. As such, social media appears to be an environment in which gender creativity is allowed to take place, where, in Ehrensaft (2011)'s view, they learn to make their 'true' gender self more dominant while make their 'false' gender self more adaptive in social situations.

Participants expressed feelings of responsibilities that come with how they choose to present themselves online. This is captured in the sub-themes "You do have a responsibility for your audience" and "I share things to try and educate people". It is suggested the awareness of real and imagined audiences inform the choices that we make in presenting ourselves by influencing the way we see ourselves, how we want to see ourselves and how we wish others would see us (Balick, 2013; boyd, 2008). Indeed, the participants articulated different types of pressures they face. Varying from taking up a role to educate others on trans matters, wanting to appear knowledgeable by providing accurate information on being trans and wanting to be seen as engaging reliably with their audience and producing content based on what

the audience seem to want or expect. Walther (1996) also refers to this as a hyperpersonal self, where people craft an online identity that selectively presents a version of themselves that is more socially acceptable. There is therefore a performative aspect (Goffman, 1956) to how these participants choose to reflect certain attributes of themselves online in order to manage different audiences (boyd, 2011; Rettberg, 2017).

Lastly, the sub-theme "It affects real life relationships too" where participants described the impact of their online presentation to their offline self is captured by the notion of these social media platforms being a holding space which opens up the opportunity for participants to be held in the mind of the "other" (Balick, 2013). In our current society where technology is integrated so seamlessly into our lives, Elwell (2014) suggest that online identity exploration has to maintain a level of authenticity that was less commonly employed in the earlier days of the Internet. This is significant in that people in our offline sphere are increasingly able to access online representations that we choose to put. Indeed, participants acknowledged that they often have to consider how people in their offline world would react to their online self.

Strengths and Limitations of Study

Accessing a Typically Hard-to-Reach Population

Generally most of the research involving the transgender population has been conducted within clinical settings, due to easier access to a larger sample of the population. Having access to a clinical population means that this study is potentially limited to only the perspectives of participants who are seeking medical or psychological interventions for their transition, discounting the experiences of trans-

identifying gender fluid individuals who do not necessarily meet the criteria for a diagnosis of GD.

Several attempts were made to involve adolescents from other gender non-conforming voluntary organisations however permission to speak to their members was declined. Although this study's population largely consists of a clinical sample, with the majority of the participants being seen at the GIDS, efforts were undertaken to circumvent the issues of a homogenous sample albeit not without its challenges. These efforts are detailed here with a discussion of its strengths and limitations.

Snowball Sampling

Being aware of the limiting perspectives afforded by only recruiting from a clinical sample, ethical approval was sought to include snowball sampling in addition to direct recruitment from GIDS. Snowball sampling is often advantageous in seeking access to difficult to reach populations. A study by Shaghaghi, Bhopal & Sheikh (2011) reviewed different sampling approaches used to increased participation in these population. They described snowball sampling as relying on initial participants for referral to recruit additional participants. This is useful in hard-to-reach population research due to the assumption that participants would have a link to the target population that the researchers otherwise wouldn't have. For instance, there might be prior insider knowledge needed to identify respondents which may not be readily available to researchers (Levine et al., 2011). In this study, some participants mentioned being involved in a closed online group, which needed permission from group moderators to facilitate access. This posed an issue with the researcher's status as an "outsider" to the target population and was not given access to post in the

groups. However, several participants agreed to post about the study in these groups on behalf of the researcher.

The snowballing method was used to a small degree of success. One participant contacted the researcher having given the study information by a friend. Although several people contacted the researcher expressing interest in taking part through a Facebook group, only one person was within the age of 14-19 years old required for the study. However, out of these two participants recruited, one is already seeing a clinician at GIDS, while the other was awaiting a referral to an adult gender service by his GP. Therefore regardless of efforts made to increase the sample characteristics beyond the clinical sample, the majority of the participants ended up having some form of contact with clinical services.

It should be noted that snowball sampling also has its own biases in terms of limiting the validity of sampling (C. Kaplan, Korf, & Sterk, 1987; van Meter, 1990). This method emphasises the inter-relationship between participants, indirectly isolating parts of the population which are not connected to any social network (Griffiths, Gossop, Powis, & Strang, 1993) and may have an impact on the representation of participants and generalisability of findings. This issue of participant representation will be discussed further in a section of its own.

Online Means for Recruiting

With social media as the main interest of this study, it seemed apparent that in order to reach out to participants who made use of social media, we had to make use of online methods to recruit. More significantly, previous research has shown the Internet's popularity among the transgender population due to geographical dispersion and stigma faced in the real world (Horvath, Iantaffi, Grey, & Bockting, 2012). Using

online means for recruitment thus mean that a broader sample of the trans population can be reached (Miner, Bockting, Romine, & Raman, 2012).

However, this too posed a problem in limiting the representation of participants as access to the Internet is often shaped by unequal social opportunities brought about by socio-economic status and racial and ethnic differences (Willis, 2012). Protecting participants' rights is a potential issue, however care was taken to ensure that participants could speak to their clinicians if conversations left them feeling distressed.

For the participant who was not accessing mental health services at the time of interview, the telephone number of services such as the Samaritans was provided to them.

Representation of Participants

Within the literature review, only qualitative studies were included. By excluding quantitative studies, this could have inherently omitted some useful studies that could have further informed the rationale for this study.

This current study is limited by its small sample size, which is in the lower suggested range for thematic analysis. However, as most of the studies reported in the literature review used an ethnographic method, being able to directly access individual experiences, albeit a small sample, was still beneficial in enriching the literature. Furthermore, research within the transgender population has generally lacked representativeness (Rosser, Oakes, Bockting, & Miner, 2007), not least because of the additional limits placed upon snowball sampling and using online methods as mentioned above. In discussing whether research samples should reflect the diversity of the population, Allmark (2004) proposed that the number of different cultures,

coupled with the typical small sample sizes of qualitative research, mean that it is challenging to try and represent diversity in their samples.

Although GIDS is a nation-wide service that provides services for transgender children and adolescents of all backgrounds across the country, all the participants in this study described their ethnicity as being White-British, with the exception of one participant identifying as being White-Bulgarian and another as White-Portuguese. This is a major limitation in this study as it reflects the "usual suspects" (Braun & Clarke, 2013) that tend to dominate psychological research-"Western, Educated, Industrialized, Rich and Democratic" (WEIRD) societies (Henrich, Heine, & Norenzayan, 2010). Arnett's (2008) study found that 96% of research participants in the top journals of Psychology were from Western industrialised countries, questioning how representative our scientific knowledge about human psychology is of the human race. Often research done with these participants is taken to represent the whole population, i.e. being culture-less and enduring. However, taking this for granted perpetuates the notion that this is the only point of view that matters while over-representing their experiences and not giving sufficient voice to people who do not fit in to this particular (WEIRD) category.

The sample that makes up the research is a vital factor of what the findings consist of. It should therefore be highlighted that the findings from this study is not generalised to represent experiences of trans youth, but rather more indicative of trans youth that are from a White background in England. This is a significant limitation when considering that historically, trans theorising is often constructed though the lens of "whiteness", giving rise to an ethnocentric understanding of the lived experiences of trans people (Roen, 2001).

Although certain experiences may be felt across the landscape of trans people, racial and cultural positioning might mean that managing these experiences could be different. There was a slight acknowledgement to differences with the inclusion of Daniel as a participant in this study who, despite living in the UK for the past four years, still holds a strong Portuguese identity and references his cultural positioning to how his ideas of gender were shaped, "*I'm Portuguese and in my culture we don't really speak very openly about these things so when I started first realising that actually changing gender was a thing and not a matter of just changing the way you dress and everything, it kind of made me start questioning.*"(Daniel). However, this is still insufficient when taking into account the over-representation of White-British experiences in this study and further consideration should be taken to include participants of more varied cultural and racial identities to "inspire more critical thinking about the racialised aspects of transgender bodies" (Roen, 2001, p262).

Ethical Considerations in Researching a Trans Youth Population

Understanding the trans population

Throughout the duration of the study, I was acutely aware of my status as an "outsider" to the trans population and whether this would impact on how I was viewed as a researcher as well as how well I could relate to the participants' experiences. This has been discussed in further detail in my reflections on my own positionality within the previous chapter. However, one advantage to 'outsider research' allows for an element of "analytic distance and detachment" (Denzin, 2003, p.8) that may be helpful when taking a more uncertain stance in questioning taken-for-granted assumptions within the trans population.

When considering participants that are within the LGBT population, Martin &

Meezan (2003) stipulated that researchers must be careful to ensure cultural competence within the population and referenced the APA code which states that psychological research should "consult those with expertise concerning any special population under investigation or most likely to be affected" (APA, 1992) during the planning phase of the study. Several steps have been taken to ensure that people with expertise were involved in the planning of the study. Firstly, this study is jointly supervised by a senior clinical psychologist within the service who has years of clinical experience working with transgender adolescents and regular meetings were held to maintain the ethics of the study. Secondly, prior to recruiting for participants, I attended several youth groups organised within the service to speak to key stakeholders about the research idea. The meetings were fruitful as I got a sense of how receptive they were to this research idea and was also able to gain a better understanding of appropriate language to use in my interview topic guide. Rachlin (2009) suggested that the way in which questions are asked would indicate to participants how familiar the researcher is to their experience and in a way, how well the researcher would be able to represent their experience. Being able to check the appropriateness of the language used in the topic was therefore especially helpful considering the constant change of terminology and language that are acceptable to the trans community.

Issues of Power and Coercion

The nature of qualitative research means the relationship between researcher and participant is amenable to certain unique risks and dilemmas. For instance, it is suggested that the direct contact between both parties could lead to participants being more likely to disclose sensitive information to a research interviewer (Rice & Ezzy,

1999), while at the same time making it more difficult for participants to voice a withdrawal from the study (Mishna, Antle, & Regehr, 2004). Similarly, Grzyb & Chandler (2008) emphasised that not being able to assert ourselves in the face of an uncomfortable situation happens frequently in social settings and is not immune within a research setting. This then poses an ethical risk of participants responding to a question even though they are reluctant to answer or to proceed with the research interview out of a perceived social obligation.

Specifically when research involves adolescents, Duncan, Drew, Hodgson & Sawyer's paper (2009) postulates that young people may lack the life experience and therefore confidence to claim their rights within the research context. Although adolescents are an undeniably rich source of data, differences in their capacity to hold emotional and cognitive information have consequences in the way that research information is processed, in particular their rights within the research context. The social asymmetry that occur as a result of the researcher taking a higher social position to the participant means that a power imbalance in the research relationship is inevitable (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992; Richards & Schwartz, 2002). However when considering further the already unequal power relations between adults and young people in society, this issue should be more carefully reflected, as a lack of power experienced by the adolescent could further complicate the research process (Kirk, 2007).

To minimise potential coercion effects, participants were encouraged to ask questions regarding the study both after being given the information sheet and at the start of the interview. The voluntary nature of the study was also emphasised and it was reiterated

to the participants that they can withdraw from the study at any point and there would be no negative consequences for it.

Another consequence of perceived power imbalance was encountering different forms of resistance from participants. This was most commonly in the form of non-response following initial agreement to participate. Participant resistance emerge as a consequence of the power imbalance and hierarchical nature of research (Beaunae, Wu, & Koro-Ljungberg, 2011; J. Butler, 1990). Further to this, Visweswaran (1994) showed that the process of research involvement places participants in certain roles in relation to the perceived more powerful researcher. She argues that resistance is often used as a strategy against submitting to the inherent power relations. Specifically in regards to the trans population in this study, a history of trans people being disparaged and invalidated might produce certain fears within the potential recruitees whereby their views could be subjugated, and potentially used against them by someone with more authority. Taking into account the complexities of what a non-reply could mean, a decision was therefore made to have a maximum of two follow-up contacts with participants following their initial agreement to participate. This would help to prevent coercion effects but also in respect of the participant's choice of representing their resistance through not replying.

Use of Skype Interviews

With GIDS being a nation-wide service, recruitment of participants who attend the service was likely to come from all over the country, which meant that arranging for face-to-face interviews might be difficult, or even pose as a deterrent to taking part. An amendment to the protocol to include Skype and Face Time as an interview medium was made mid-way through the study.

Although face-to-face interviewing is often touted as the "gold standard" (McCoyd & Kerson, 2006) of interviewing, the emergence of Skype and other video-based software provided a valid alternative without compromising, to some extent, the inter-relational aspects of the interview (Evans, Elford, & Wiggins, 2008). There are several practical benefits to Skype interviewing, such as the ease and freedom of scheduling the interview to fit around the lives of participants (A. Holt, 2010). Furthermore, interviews can easily be conducted in the comforts of one's home, making the interview venue more fluid (Deakin & Wakefield, 2014). This removes the need for travel but also affords both the researcher and participants the comforts of remaining in a safe and comfortable space, without the threat of imposing on personal space (Hanna, 2012).

There have been several critiques for the use of Skype interviews, for instance it has been suggested that technical difficulties such as dropped calls have a negative impact on maintaining good interview rapport (Seitz, 2016) or interruptions to the interview. This was mitigated by ensuring that a good Internet connection is established and that trial runs of using Skype were conducted prior to the actual interviews. Also, with some participants using mobile devices to access Skype, the issue of a dropped connection due to low battery was reduced, as participants were able to keep their phones on charge for the duration of the interview. In the interviews conducted, there were rare occasions of the interview being interrupted by a lost connection. When it did happen, there was no problem re-establishing conversation and I didn't find it to negatively impact on our rapport. Asking the participants prior to the interview to consider a quiet setting for the interview was also a mitigating factor in minimal interruptions being made during our interviews.

Clinical Implications

Historically, there have been studies conducted in the past where findings have resulted in more harm to LGBT communities by increasing stigma and fostering negative and dangerous stereotypes of lesbian and gay men (for e.g. Cameron, 2006; Cameron, Proctor, Coburn, & Forde, 1985). I was therefore mindful about what the implications the findings from this study could mean for not only the adolescents that took part in the study, but also the wider trans adolescent community within the UK. In working with transgender youths in a professional or educational context, the findings from this study may inform clinical interventions and ways of understanding young trans individuals.

The findings from this study show that social media use intersects with the way trans adolescents form their trans identity in a variety of ways. This generation of trans adolescents differ from previous generations in ways that they are able to access unfiltered information much more quickly through the Internet. For many of the participants, their first encounter with the word transgender was through online social media. This has implications for the way that objective 'truths' and subjective experiential information can be assimilated into their knowledge of what transgender means. It is therefore useful for clinicians working with young trans individuals to have a discussion around what constitutes their awareness of trans matters and to distinguish facts from opinions.

This study suggests that different types of media platforms are being considered an important aspect of the ecological system, both as a source of risk and support (Craig, McInroy, McCready, Cesare, & Pettaway, 2015). This thus supports a shift away from more individualistic models of intervention towards grounding evidence-based

therapeutic interventions in an ecological framework (Bronfenbrenner, 1977, 2009) which considers the multi-level systems around an individual (Craig, McInroy, McCready, & Alaggia, 2015). A contextual understanding of how social media fit into the lives of these young people and impact on the development of their trans identity would help in identifying areas of clinical consideration. It is suggested that learning more about how trans identities are portrayed on social media could offer useful insights for clinicians seeking information on how their clients understand their transgender identities. Similarly, Mallon & DeCrescenzo (2009) found that using media representations of trans identity can be useful in connecting with clients in a therapeutic setting. This would not only indicate that the clinician is willing to understand more of their clients' world and experiences but it could also help these young trans people to foster a more secure sense of identity by exploring alongside them how information presented on social media could be beneficial or a risk, and how this could change over time.

In taking on an ecological framework for interventions with young trans individuals, there are implications for the role of parents and clinicians working together in ensuring that social media use does not pose as a risk for these adolescents. We cannot deny the role that parents play while working alongside adolescents. It is important for parents to be equally aware of the nature of social media platforms and the potential benefits and risks posed (O'Keeffe, Clarke-Pearson, & Media, 2011). However, parents are often not as up-to-date with the ever-evolving technological landscape as their children (Palfrey, Gasser, & Boyd, 2010). As this study shows, adolescents' online experiences are increasingly intertwined with their off-line relationships and parents may lack an understanding of how entwined their children's online and offline lives are. This can result in a widening knowledge and

technological divide between parent and child, with parents being unaware of the information that their child is being exposed to online (Jenkins, Purushotma, Weigel, Clinton, & Robison, 2009). Clinicians are therefore well placed to facilitate open conversations within the family unit in understanding their child's experiences of social media, while discussing the complexities and challenges of the online digital world. Clinicians can also help parents to understand how online interactions extend to these young individuals' offline world and to introduce strategies for managing the consequences of what takes place either online, offline or increasingly both (O'Keeffe et al., 2011).

This study also furthers our understanding in how the use of social media changes significantly over time for these young people. At times feeling a sense of belonging to a minority group and receiving emotional support and advice from other seemingly like-minded individuals, and at other times, an increasing sense of discomfort in encountering extreme views in the name of social justice online. Clinicians could therefore benefit from asking more nuanced questions about these young trans people's relationship with social media, remaining mindful about whether opportunities online for more troubling kinds of interactions and information have influenced these young trans people's perceptions. They could perhaps then encourage a more balanced viewpoint on the subjectivities of people's expression of opinions online and have a discussion on the risks posed by the exposure to more extreme interactions online.

Lastly, it would also be helpful for clinicians to bear in mind the dangers of how social media use can induce a false sense of how accepting society is. As discussed in the findings, social media platforms create a safe space where trans individuals can

congregate without being exposed to the real-life social consequences of being trans (E. Shapiro, 2004). This is even more pertinent in this generation of 'digital native' trans youth who grew up within a strong trans and social justice movement online. Clinicians should therefore be encouraged to notice when this is happening with their clients and have a realistic discussion about the different discourses that they could be exposed to in offline settings.

Further Research

This current study has furthered our understanding of trans youths' experiences of social media. However, future research is necessary to deepen our understanding of how the ubiquity of technology has an impact on trans identity development. Limitations acknowledged in this study could also help future research endeavours to circumvent these issues.

Although the age range for this study spanned from 14 to 18 years old, a majority of the participants were between the ages of 16 and 17, thus limiting the perspectives to individuals within a very narrow age range. It would therefore be helpful to focus future efforts on recruiting more participants from the lower end of the age range (i.e. 14 year old) to gain a more varied perspective of social media use amongst trans adolescents. Younger adolescents, being more susceptible to different kinds of influence, might use social media in ways different to older adolescents (Sumter, Bokhorst, Steinberg, & Westenberg, 2009). Furthermore, with the majority of participants accessing services at GIDS, future research could focus more recruitment efforts on involving participants who do not require services but self-identify as being trans.

Future studies on different cultural groups could also be useful to compare the extent of commonality and distinctions across different cultures (Allen, Ryan, Gray, McInerney, & Waters, 2014). For instance, it can be speculated that trans adolescents in more collectivist cultures (such as Asian communities) could use social media in ways that are different from Caucasian trans adolescents. Cultural norms may shape one's own perception of their trans identity as well as pressure to assimilate into the larger majority community. This might have an influence on their experiences of using social media to navigate a sense of self and how they engage with information online and it would be interesting to see whether this differs from the population in this study.

Limitations of this study point out that due to the demographics of the participants, the findings are therefore only able to represent the experiences of trans adolescents within the UK from a mostly White background. Future research can therefore expand on this and investigate the online experiences of trans adolescents with intersecting identities, for example trans women and men of colour. Additionally, reflecting on the initial difficulties in recruiting for participants along with my uncertain position as an "outsider researcher", a youth-led participatory action research method could be considered for the future. Involving trans youth as active collaborators in research which concerns them would not only help to side-step issues of research being done "onto" them but also hopefully motivate other trans youth to participate in research that would represent them.

Lastly, thematic analysis as a method was appropriate in this research as an initial exploration of trans youth's experiences of social media. However, in the course of analysing what the participants say, it was interesting how perhaps learning about new

vocabulary and discourses that they encounter online enabled them to reconstruct certain past experiences (i.e. learning about the meaning of trans online made a type of discourse available in which they can re-examine how their past experiences made sense to them). Future research could therefore employ a discourse analysis methodology in examining how coming into contact with a different way of understanding their experiences through social media play a role in shaping their trans identity.

Personal Reflections

It was difficult to separate out the global impact of the United States political climate in the midst of writing this thesis. Although there was a hopeful progressive narrative in recent years with laws changing for transgender rights, the 2016 USA elections and results seemed to have brought this progress to a halt. For instance, laws were reversed by the passing of bills that went against trans rights to use toilets corresponding to their felt gender. Being so deeply engaged with my thesis at the time, I felt a great sense of injustice for the trans community that I thought was coming from a place of empathy. Alongside my own status as a foreigner within the U.K. at the time of the Brexit vote, my heightened sense of insecurity and fear of what it meant to belong in an "outsider" category in society possibly fuelled how I felt about the regressive turn of politics.

However, as I engaged more with data from the participants and the idea of "social justice", expressed by some participants, being taken by different minority groups as an absolute insistence of their needs, I couldn't help but wonder if part of me was also being swept up by the social justice movements that were rampant on social media, an experience that was articulated by some of the participants. It struck me how complex

it was to separate out my own individual feelings towards the issue and how I could be influenced by various news and personal accounts on social media. This perhaps offer some insight into how enmeshed the participants' own feelings can be with opinions and 'facts' that they encounter on online sources.

As I got more engaged with the research topic, it also made me more aware of any inherent biases I held from my own experiences about gender, influenced both by my own cultural background as well as societal "norms". This made me notice how our society is saturated with products and ideas around the gender binary, from body washes and deodorants labelled specifically "for men" to how gender stereotypes are continually being portrayed in movies.

As a Trainee Clinical Psychologist and a cis-gender person, I was initially worried about whether my status as an "outsider" to the community would adequately give voice to their experience as I might be perceived as occupying a position of relative power. This reminded me of Pickering's (2001) view of the "other" from a more privileged perspective, attempting to dictate a culture or community different from yours from a particular and privileged perspective. However, it also made me think about how subjective the idea of privilege is. Drawing on the seminal work of Peggy McIntosh's (1998) white privilege as an invisible knapsack, although there are certain ways that I can consider myself more privileged than these participants, there are also distinct privileges that most of them hold which I, as a minority in this country, wouldn't experience. This enabled a process of acknowledging where my own privileges begin and end, and helped me gain a more nuanced understanding of different disadvantaged perspectives that were shared.

I often found myself noting and keeping check of my emotional responses in response to the participants' experiences. There were times when I felt uncertain about my position and maintaining neutrality within the research. For example, a participant asked me about my opinion on trans people at the end of the interview. Although at this point I felt that my answer would not influence how he responded in the interview, I was conflicted between wanting to show that I am a good "ally" of the community while not appearing too patronising. It also felt like that question had a deeper complexity to it. Although on the surface it appeared fairly innocuous, being asked to give a general comment on the trans community, however having spoken to the participant at length, I could also detect an underlying vulnerability to the question: "what would people think of me?" Perhaps my training as a clinical psychologist helped me to consider this question in a more sensitive manner. While trying to be as honest and open in my answer, I recall feeling very tentative in approaching the question, however I also appreciated the open curiosity of the participant which allowed me to feel comfortable sharing my personal thoughts.

Conclusion

The findings of this study indicate that these trans adolescents take into account aspects of the medical discourse when it came to understanding and legitimising their sense of gender self. On social media platforms, information that are perceived as factual, and having a scientific basis, was used to validate trans feelings about themselves. This had the effect of participants assimilating an already fixed and coherent discourse into understanding their transgender experiences. This finding, alongside the sample characteristic of the participants, are perhaps testament to how strongly the medical discourse still holds clout presently; evident in the way of

thinking (i.e. wanting to change aspects of the physical body to fit a 'known' gender identity) as well as in the legal aspect (i.e. having to be diagnosed and assessed by a professional team prior to any transitional procedures).

Despite privileging "objective facts" while seeking to understand their trans identity, subjective accounts perceived as expert advice appear to be more significant when it comes to learning how to present themselves physically. There appears to be a systemic process developing in which trans identities are increasingly being commodified on social media platforms, with online trans personalities being seen as the experts and authorities on how to "be" trans by the viewers. In exchange, these trans personalities are being rewarded with popularity and celebrity statuses. For these young trans participants, it therefore appears that they seek some level of certainty when using social media to navigate their trans identity, whether in the form of basing their identity on scientific facts, or finding a "right" way to present as trans.

This study is consistent with previous literature on social identity theories suggesting that the Internet, and more recently, social media platforms are utilised as a new way for marginalised communities to develop a common sense of identity. Especially on Tumblr and YouTube, the idea of a counter public is particularly prevalent, with this study showing that participants actively sought out others that support and reinforce their ways of thinking. This is encapsulated in the politics of "safe spaces" where certain online environments strive to make people feel able to freely express themselves, without the threat of feeling unsafe or judged. Furthermore, participants articulated feeling connected to the authentic representations of certain influential trans YouTubers. This emphasised that increased exposure to people they can relate to helped these adolescents to normalise their own trans experiences. This perceived

shared identity is therefore useful in helping them challenge their previous negativity towards themselves.

This study also reinforced the idea of online environments as transitional spaces. Most participants in this study acknowledged that after going through an initial period of uncertainty, they eventually learn ways of representing themselves through testing out identities that is perhaps based on unconscious motivations of expressing a lesser known side of them, both on social media and in real life. Being aware of both real and imagined audiences when projecting a representation of themselves also allowed opportunities for participants to be held in the mind of an "other" and informed the decisions to reflect certain characteristics of themselves depending on different audiences.

Lastly, this study furthered our understanding in the nuanced way that trans adolescents view social media, which had not been touched on in previous literature. Although the participants mostly saw social media platforms as being beneficial to their navigation of their trans identities, there was some hesitation expressed about certain platforms, especially on Tumblr, where a rigid and boundaried way of thinking about gender identity made it difficult for them to express themselves. The idea of these platforms being used for extreme social justice movements were frequently expressed and there were acknowledgement of having to fit into a certain type of liberal person in order to be accepted into a community where mistakes are not tolerated.

The implications highlight a need for clinicians to be more aware of how "objective truths" and subjective discourses are assimilated into trans adolescents' awareness of what it means to be trans and be able to help them distinguish facts from opinions.

Furthermore, an ecological, systemic framework is recommended in working with these young trans individuals, with an emphasis on a contextual understanding of how social media fit into their lives. This would also inform the role of parents and clinicians working together with the young clients to become more aware of the influences of social media. Further research could benefit from including more perspectives from younger adolescents (i.e. 14-15 year olds) as well as self-identifying trans individuals who do not require services. Lastly, comparative research across different cultures as well as exploring experiences of trans adolescents with intersecting identities would add invaluable insight into this growing body of research.

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Appendices

Appendix A: Literature Review Search Strategy

Appendix B: Advertisement Poster

Appendix C: Participant Information Sheet

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Appendix E: Semi-structured Topic Guide

Appendix F: Transcript Excerpt

Appendix G: NHS Ethics Approval Letter

Appendix H: University of Essex Ethics Application and Approval Letter

Appendix I: NHS Ethic Amendment Approval Letter

Appendix J: Receipt of Payment

Appendix A: Literature Review Search Strategy

Databases searched	CINAHL Complete, eBook Collection (EBSCOhost), E-journals, MEDLINE with full text, PsycARTICLES, PsychINFO	
Search run	26 November 2016	
Dates	2004 onwards	
Limiters	Full text available, peer-reviewed articles	
Search	**Search Terms**	**Results**
1	"content communit*" or "social networking site*" or "online social network*" or "online communit*" or "online forum*" OR "online support" OR "online resource*"	6, 381
2	"social media" or blog* or Facebook or Twitter or Wikipedia or Tumblr or YouTube or Instagram	12,028
3	internet OR online OR virtual	92,386
4	#1 OR #2 OR #3	98,022
5	"transgender*" OR "transsexual*" OR "transvestite*" OR "cross-dresser*" OR "MTF" OR "FTM" OR "GID" OR "gender identity disorder" OR "gender dysphoria" OR "gender queer" OR "gender non-conforming" OR "bi-gender*" OR "gender fluid"	8,284
6	#4 AND #5	411
7	Duplicates removed	355

Inclusion criteria:

Peer reviewed journals
Qualitative research only
Studies that included transgender persons or within LGBTQ population but reported data separately for the transgender group
Data reported focused on impact on social media or the Internet

Exclusion criteria:

Studies that use social media as data collection method
Impact on LGBT population as a whole

```
┌─────────────────────────────────┐
│  Articles identified by searches │
│              N=355               │
│                                  │
└─────────────────────────────────┘
                │
                ▼
┌──────────────────────────────────────┐     ┌─────────────────────────────┐
│           Studies excluded           │     │        Manual search        │
│               N= 351                 │     │      [Google Scholar,       │
│  • Non-transgender focus [include    │     │   References from articles] │
│    LGBT or general population]       │     │             N=4             │
│    N=98                              │     └─────────────────────────────┘
│  • Social media as data collection  │                     │
│    method                            │                     ▼
│    N=180                             │     ┌─────────────────────────────┐
│  • Studies without a focus on        │     │      Studies included       │
│    transgender experiences           │ ──▶ │             N=8             │
│    N=35                              │     │                             │
│  • Not original articles             │     └─────────────────────────────┘
│    N=38                              │
└──────────────────────────────────────┘
```
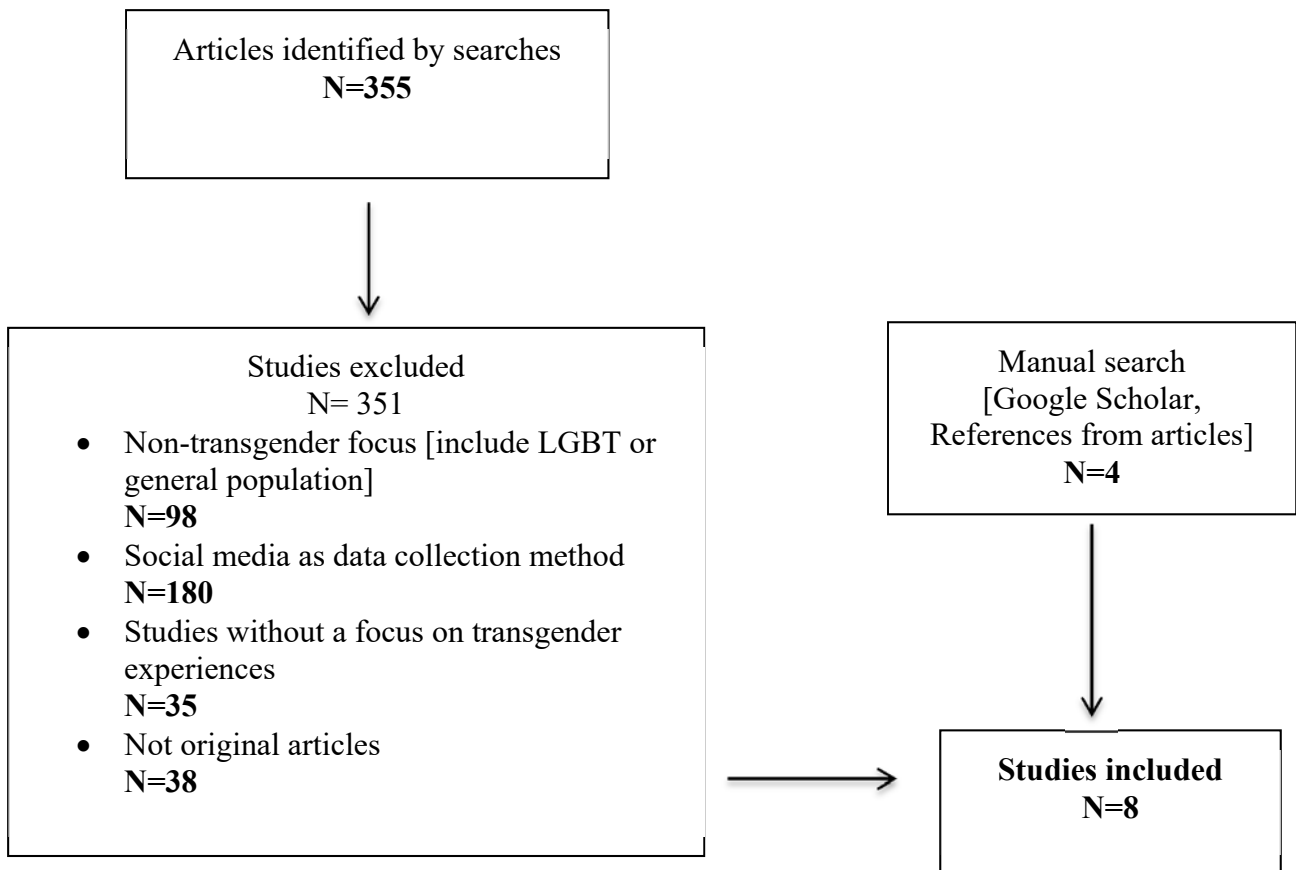
Figure A1. Flowchart of search strategy

Appendix B: Advertisement Poster

University of Essex

Gender Identity Development Service
The Tavistock and Portman **NHS**
NHS Foundation Trust

Transgender youth's experience with social media advertisement version 2 dated 11 Oct 16

Volunteers needed for research study

Do you identify as a transgender individual? Are you a frequent user of social media platforms?

This research study, which is being undertaken as part of a professional doctorate, is seeking self-identified transgender individuals aged 14-18 years old who are willing to explore their experiences of using social media.

Your participation will involve an hour-long interview that will take place either:
- **Face-to-face** at the Tavistock and Portman NHS Foundation Trust
- Or over the **phone/Skype**

Participants will receive £10 as compensation for their time.

Participants should be:
- A self-identified transgender individual between 14-18 years old
- Able to speak English fluently
- Users of at least one social media platform (e.g. Facebook, Youtube, Twitter, Tumblr, Snapchat, etc)

If you are interested to participate, please contact the researcher Xinyi Lee at ▆▆▆▆▆▆▆
or xylee@essex.ac.uk

**The research study has received a favourable opinion from an NHS Research Ethics Committee. Study ID: 16/WA/0078

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Appendix C: Participant Information Sheet

University of Essex

Gender Identity Development Service
The Tavistock and Portman **NHS**
NHS Foundation Trust

Transgender youth's experience with social media PIS version 2 dated 13 Feb 2016

PARTICIPANT INFORMATION SHEET

1. **Study Title**

A qualitative study to explore transgender youths' experiences of using social media

2. **Researcher Contact Details**

Xinyi Lee

Trainee Clinical Psychologist

University of Essex, Wivenhoe Park, Colchester CO4 3SQ

xylee@essex.ac.uk

3. **Purpose of the Research Study**

You have been invited to participate in a research study which is being undertaken as part of a professional doctorate in clinical psychology. Dr Susan McPherson at the University of Essex and Dr Bernadette Wren at the Tavistock and Portman NHS Foundation Trust are supervising this study. It is important that you take some time to read through and understand the information that is provided on this sheet. Before you agree to participate, this study will be explained to you in detail and you will be given the opportunity to ask any questions. After you are certain that you understand this study, and that you wish to take part in this study, you will be provided with a consent form to sign. If you are under 16 years old, this study will also be explained to your parents and their consent for your participation will also be taken. A copy of the signed consent form will also be given to you to take home.

You are invited to take part in this study as we are looking for self-identified transgender youths above the age of 14 to find out more about how they use social media. This study is an exploratory one and would involve interviews to generate conversation about how social media influences the way that you see yourself.

Transgender youth's experience with social media PIS version 2 dated 13 Feb 2016

4. Study procedures

If you take part in this study, you will be asked to participate in a one-to-one interview regarding your views on social media. This interview will be roughly an hour long.

All interviews will be audio recorded as part of the research process. However, none of the materials will be made available to anyone outside of this research's involvement. All participant information will also remain anonymous.

5. Your responsibilities in this study

If you agree to participate in this study, you should be prepared to be involved in an hour-long interview. As this is a research study involving a conversation about social media influences, we hope that you would treat these discussions as a platform where you are able to voice your honest opinions.

6. Possible risks and benefits

As this research does not involve any intervention, there are minimal risks in participating. However, certain questions in this study may cause you to feel distressed. If there are any questions that make you feel uncomfortable, please do not hesitate to discuss this with the researcher. You may also choose not to answer these questions. If taking part in this study causes any lasting psychological distress, a referral to appropriate psychological service can also be made.

You may not directly benefit from taking part in this study, however your participation will contribute to knowledge about the transgender community and this may have important future clinical implications.

7. Costs and Payments of Participation

We will provide a small token of appreciation of £10 for any inconvenience caused by your participation in this study.

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Transgender youth's experience with social media PIS version 2 dated 13 Feb 2016

8. **Voluntary Participation**

Your participation in this study is <u>voluntary.</u> This means that even though you have been invited to take part in this study, you can decide not to participate. You may also change your mind and stop participating in this study <u>at any time</u>. Your decision not to take part in this study, or to stop participation, will not affect you in any way. If you do decide to stop taking part in this study, you should inform the researcher of your decision as soon as possible. All information collected prior to your withdrawal will be destroyed.

The researcher may also stop your participation in this study at any time if they decide that it is in your best interest, for example if you are experiencing psychological discomfort.

9. **Confidentiality of Study Records**

Information and audio recordings collected for this study will be kept confidential. Your records will not be made publicly available and only people involved in this study will have access to your research data.

However, this research study is subjected to audit checks and audit bodies may be granted access to your research information to check on study procedures and data. However, these data will not be made public. By signing the Informed Consent Form, you are also authorizing that such access will be made available to external auditing bodies.

In the event of any publications that arise from this study, your identity will be kept anonymous and confidential. Any quotes that we use by you will be referred by a pseudonym.

10. **If there is a problem**

If you need to make a complaint, please contact Dr Bernadette Wren, Consultant Clinical Psychologist (BWren@tavi-port.nhs.uk) or Amanda Hawke, Complaints Manager (AHawke@tavi-port.nhs.uk) from the Tavistock and Portman NHS Foundation Trust.

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Transgender youth's experience with social media PIS version 2 dated 13 Feb 2016

11. Results of the study

This study will be written up as thesis for a Doctorate in Clinical Psychology for the University of Essex. Upon completion of the thesis, it will be placed in the Albert Sloman Library. A summary of the research findings will be made available to the participants if they wish to have one.

12. Review of the study

All research in the NHS is looked at by independent group of people, called a Research Ethics Committee, to protect your interests. This study has been reviewed and given favourable opinion by Wales Research Ethics Committee 6 Proportionate Review Sub-Committee.

13. Further information and contact details

If you have any questions about your involvement in this study at any point in time, please do not hesitate to contact me, Xinyi Lee at xylee@essex.ac.uk.

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Appendix D: Informed Consent Form

University of Essex

Transgender youth's experience with social media Consent form version 2 dated 13 Feb 2016

CONSENT FORM

Study Title: A qualitative study to explore transgender youths' experiences of using social media

Researcher Contact Details

Xinyi Lee

Trainee Clinical Psychologist

University of Essex, Wivenhoe Park, Colchester CO4 3SQ

xylee@essex.ac.uk

Please initial box

1. I confirm that I have read and understood the information sheet dated 13 February 2016 (version 1) for the above study. I have had the opportunity to consider the information, ask questions and have had these answered satisfactorily. ☐

2. I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw at any time without giving any reason, without my medical care or legal rights being affected. ☐

3. I understand that relevant sections of my medical notes and data collected during the study may be subjected to audit checks by regulatory boards. I give permission for these individuals to have access to my records. ☐

4. I agree for my participation in this research to be audio-recorded for transcription purposes. ☐

5. I agree to take part in this study ☐

_____ _____ _____

Name of participant Signature Date

_____ _____ _____

Name of parent/guardian Signature Date
(if applicable-aged 16 and below)

_____ _____ _____

Name of researcher Signature Date

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Appendix E: Semi-structured Topic Guide

Sample interview guide

Hello, my name is Xinyi Lee and today I will be asking you some questions related to how you experience your gender and the role that social media platforms might play in it.

Explanation of information sheet and discuss confidentiality

Before we begin, I would like to talk to you about what this study is about.

[Go through information sheet with participant]

I would also like to emphasise the confidentiality of our conversation. None of what we discuss today will be shared with anyone outside of the study team, all of the data collected is anonymous, which means that we won't be able to identify who has said what. However, if at any point you speak about an incident in which you or someone have been placed in danger, we have the obligation to speak to someone in authority about any concerns we may have about you, or anyone else's, well-being. This interview will be recorded for data-collection purposes, however all the data will be stored securely and again, there will be no way of identifying who you are. Do you have any questions?

I will give you some time to look through the information sheet and if you are satisfied and willing to take part, we can sign the consent form.

[Signing of consent form]

Introduction to interview

The Internet and the various social media platforms available have really improved the ways that we receive and attend to a huge array of information. I am interested in finding out whether this has had an impact in your identity and in what way this might have affected you.

<u>Potential topic guide*</u>

- Demographic information (age, school, preferred gender pronoun etc.)
- Realization of gender incongruence
- Making sense of felt gender
- Difficulties understanding it
- Making use of social media
- Specific websites
- Active/passive role
- Use of social media in helping make sense of gender
- What purposes social media served
- What they look out for

*A variety of prompts and probes will be use to elicit further explanation and clarification. Topic guide is subject to change following input from service users engagement

<u>De-brief</u>

Thank you for your time and participation in this study. Your participation is not only greatly appreciated by us the researchers, but we are hoping that this would benefit the transgender community and have further clinical implications. We would also appreciate it if you would refrain from discussing any part of the study with anyone else who are currently, or might be, participating in this study. If any part of the conversation that we have just had had upset you in any way, please do let me know. If you are interested to find out the results of the study after it is completed, I would be able to send you a summary of the findings upon completion.

Please do not hesitate to contact me if you have any further questions about this study.

Appendix F: Transcript Excerpt

	Chase Ross urm two guys called Alex Bertie and Jake Edwards, Aydian Dowling are the trans youtuber I mostly watch
46	X: what's appealing about-about these youtubers?
47	AE: I think it's just nice to watch and understand some-watch someone's videos who's going through similar experiences to you and is talking about something in which not many other people can talk about or really understand so it's just it's a very comforting thing and it's something which is very relatable and it's makes me feel better and it just feels good to connect with a wider range of people.
48	X: Ok, do you watch each of them for different things? Are they useful for different things or?
49	AE: nah just just watch them for-enjoy them and lots of trans stuff
50	X: ok um do you-do you do any youtube videos yourself?
51	AE: uh yeah I have a youtube channel and I'm using it to document my transition, so that way when I'm older I can look back at how far I've come
52	X: mmhmm mm so is-so you've mentioned using it to document your transition, what what are-what else do you think your youtube channel can be used for? Or what are you hoping that you can use it for
53	AE: um I guess just to build maybe an audience um set-same way that a lot of trans youtubers have build an audience and just have a (.) connection with people that y'know currently I watch people, they help me and maybe I could help someone else and that would be amazing @
54	X: mmhmm so what's your experience so far with your youtube channel?

..it's not just me who feels this way

we have a kind of social circle of our own online

..using social media to document life and transition

we have a kind of social circle of our own online

..i've swapped places with who i used to be online

5/26

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55   AE: um pretty good experience so far um it's just mostly positive

56   X: it's just mostly? Sorry?

57   AE: uh positive reactions mostly and it's just it's going well so far @@

58   X: ok, do you ever erm engage with the people who watch your videos? Do they leave comments and do you reply and things?

59   AE: I reply.

60   X: oh ok

61   AE: I don't have many followers so I'm just- it's easy to reply.

62   X: mmhmm, um and what about the youtubers that you watch do you-do you engage with them in any way or do you mostly watch their videos?

aligning with a trans identity through interactions with ot

63   AE: I mostly watch them and I have actually talked to a few of them over twitter um just sort of sending things back and forth so they're very respondent to their fans so it's- it's nice to be able to- you can have like a little conversation with them

..implicit sense of responsibility and influence when y

64   X: mmhmm, do you find that it's different watching them on a screen and actually sort of communicating with them?

..present as much more positive as you possibly can

65   AE: um a little bit cause when you- I guess when you communicate a lot of the time youtubers have to put on (.) just sort of a very (.) when you're-when you're being on camera you have to present sometimes as a much more positive or relaxed or the most you way you possibly can while over social network things like twitter you can just be a bit more relaxed with who you are so it isn't the biggest change, it seem very similar to the way they are on camera but I notice a little different way they seem a bit more

we have a kind of social circle of our own online

6/26

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relaxed over social media like twitter.

66　X: mmhmm so which would you say you enjoy more? In terms of I guess your-your relationship with these youtubers?

we have a kind of social circle of our own online

..the second you make a trans video, you'll get a lot r

67　AE: um I guess over twitter cause you're directly one-to-one with someone while on youtube it's more about everyone joining in at once.

68　X: mmhmm um so what sort of things would you-would you speak to them about on twitter?

aligning with a trans identity through interactions with ot

69　AE: um just mostly to say if I've enjoyed a video or it's helped me in a way to say a thank you or if there is an issue going on with the transgender community I would put my input in and they would respond to me so it's just more of response more than starting a conversation

70　X: ok so what sort of videos then do you find most useful to you?

..provide a sense of validity to my tran identity

..establishing authority on being trans through help

..when you're online you can see more viewpoints

71　AE: um mostly videos about transphobia and also trans man and trans misogyny and um trans man and femininity cause those things apply a lot to my life so it's good to get different perspective and also ways which I can help myself.

72　X: mmhmm could you tell me a little bit more about that? So when you say sort of transphobia what specifically are you looking out for?

..establishing authority on being trans through help and

73　AE: um how to deal with bullying in school, how to deal with transphobia online and also how-if someone's being transphobic to you how to in a way debate them and be able to like you know try and stop them from being transphobic by opening their minds more

74　X: mmhmm have you ever encountered any online?

..I just got this massive thread of hate comments

..it affects real life relationships as well

..establishing authority on being trans through help and

..an argument isn't the way to change opinions

..effects of preconceived ideas of what trans people a

75 AE: uh yeah um mostly on fa-on facebook when I first came out, I got a lot of comments from people from school-from the school I used to go to and from the school I go to now being very disrespectful and (.) making me feel very uncomfortable I got a lot of pretty gross messages

76 X: mmm so how how have these videos on dealing with transphobia help you to deal with that?

77 AE: um they help me to learn that um – clears throat- I shouldn't waste my time with people being so disrespectful and also um (.) which I can-it just how I can learn to ignore hate and how I can learn to challenge them so I'll respond back asking why is being trans a bad thing and usually after that they just wouldn't respond cause they have no answer

78 X: mmhmm ok. Um so I'm quite interested to hear about what you-what you said ab-earlier about sort of trans guy and femininity and that's something that you said that the youtube videos address.

79 AE: yeah

80 X: is that something that's quite common then or is it something that one youtuber specifically had-had talked about

81 AE: um one youtuber who's talked about it was like a youtuber called Jake Edwards who is a feminine trans guy and myself also being a feminine trans guy and there's this whole massive-in a lot of time when someone comes out as transgender they expect if a trans-all trans woman to act as feminine as possible so she can fit into the binary and trans man to act as masculine as possible to fit the binary and to me that's just such an oppressive i-oppressive idea that you know that we have to be a certain exact way to be taken seriously so watching another trans guy who is feminine and isn't ashamed to be who he is and doesn't you know- and can

8/26

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..provide a sense of validity to my tran identity

fight back against the idea they have to be the most masculine man is such-it just gives me such positivity knowing that you know as trans men we do not have to fit into this (.) idea in which cis people have created for us to be so it made just-it made me feel so much more comfortable you know being a trans guy and enjoying feminine things

82 X: mmhmm so it's almost like not fitting into stereotypes of what men and women are

83 AE: yeah. Yup.

84 X: ok um and was that something that you felt like you related to? Was it something that like was it a concept that uh you you felt what was sort of being named by someone else?

85 AE: yeah

86 X: ok so you know you mentioned quite a lot of different social medias that you use, um was there any in particular that you-that you were using as you were sort of going through your gender identity sort of transition?

..tumblr: both a safe and hostile environment at the s

social media providing information that wasn't accessibl

87 AE: Um I was mostly using tumblr at that time cos it was the social network which I was VERY into and also on tumblr they have a very large LGBT community so I would sometimes look through different blogposts talking about pronouns and gender identity and orientation and all that stuff so just that was what I mostly used at that time, just-it was just more of so I can read up more about things and so I can try and like help myself figure things out.

88 X: mmhmm um how is it different from from youtube then? In the way that you use it?

we have a kind of social circle of our own online

89 AE: well during back when I first came out on youtube there was a very very small transgender community because at the time (.) still a lot of people have never even heard of the word transgender it was only after

Appendix G: NHS Ethics Approval Letter

03 March 2016

Ms Xinyi Lee
Trainee Clinical Psychologist
North Essex Partnership University NHS Foundation Trust

█████████████

Dear Ms Lee

Study title:	A qualitative study to explore transgender youths' experiences of using social media
REC reference:	16/WA/0078
IRAS project ID:	195881

Thank you for your email of 02 March 2016. I can confirm the REC has received the documents listed below and that these comply with the approval conditions detailed in our letter dated 01 March 2016

Documents received

The documents received were as follows:

Document	Version	Date
Participant consent form	2	13 February 2016
Participant information sheet (PIS)	2	13 February 2016

Approved documents

The final list of approved documentation for the study is therefore as follows:

Document	Version	Date
Copies of advertisement materials for research participants [advertisement poster]	1	26 November 2015
Evidence of Sponsor insurance or indemnity (non NHS Sponsors only) [Sponsor evidence]	1	07 August 2015
Interview schedules or topic guides for participants [topic guide]	1	09 December 2015
IRAS Checklist XML [Checklist_24022016]		24 February 2016

Letter from sponsor [Sponsor letter]	1	14 January 2016
Participant consent form	2	13 February 2016
Participant information sheet (PIS)	2	13 February 2016
REC Application Form [REC_Form_24022016]		24 February 2016
Research protocol or project proposal [Thesis proposal]	1	13 February 2016
Summary CV for Chief Investigator (CI) [CV]	1	15 February 2016
Summary CV for supervisor (student research) [Supervisor CV]		15 February 2016

You should ensure that the sponsor has a copy of the final documentation for the study. It is the sponsor's responsibility to ensure that the documentation is made available to R&D offices at all participating sites.

16/WA/0078	Please quote this number on all correspondence

Yours sincerely

Penny Beresford
REC Manager

E-mail: penny.beresford@wales.nhs.uk

Copy to: Ms Sarah Manning-Press, University of Essex
              Ms Angela Williams, Head of Research & Development

1st Floor, Bloomsbury Building
St Pancras Hospital
4 St Pancras Way
NW1 0PE

Tel: 020 3317 3045
Fax: 020 7685 5830/5788
www.noclor.nhs.uk
12 April 2016

Ms Xinyi Lee
North Essex Partnership University NHS Foundation Trust

Dear Ms Xinyi Lee,

This NHS Permission is based on the REC favourable opinion with conditions given on **01 March 2016** and the approval conditions met on **03 March 2016**.

I am pleased to confirm that the following study has now received R&D approval, and you may now start your research in **the trust identified below**:

Study Title:	A qualitative study to explore transgender youths' experiences of using social media
R&D reference:	195881
REC reference:	16/WA/0078

Name of the trust	Name of current PI/LC	Date of permission issue(d)
Tavistock & Portman NHS Foundation Trust	Dr Bernadette Wren	12 April 2016

If any information on this document is altered after the date of issue, this document will be deemed INVALID

Specific Conditions of Permission (if applicable)

If any information on this document is altered after the date of issue, this document will be deemed INVALID

Yours sincerely,

Mabel Saili
Research & Development Manager

Cc: Principle Investigator(s)/Local Collaborator(s), Sponsor Contact

NCLET018T - 4.0.0 - 29.07.15 - Research Site NHS Permission Letter,   IRAS R&D Reference: 195881

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noclor
RESEARCH SUPPORT

1st Floor, Bloomsbury Building
St Pancras Hospital
4 St Pancras Way
NW1 0PE

Tel: 020 3317 3045
Fax: 020 7685 5830/5788
www.noclor.nhs.uk

May I take this opportunity to remind you that during the course of your research you will be expected to ensure the following:

- **Patient contact:** only trained or supervised researchers who hold the appropriate Trust/NHS contract (honorary or full) with each Trust are allowed contact with that Trust's patients. If any researcher on the study does not hold a contract please contact the R&D office as soon as possible.

- **Informed consent:** original signed consent forms must be kept on file. A copy of the consent form must also be placed in the patient's notes. Research projects are subject to random audit by a member of the R&D office who will ask to see all original signed consent forms.

- **Data protection:** measures must be taken to ensure that patient data is kept confidential in accordance with the Data Protection Act 1998.

- **Health & safety:** all local health & safety regulations where the research is being conducted must be adhered to.

- **Serious Adverse events:** adverse events or suspected misconduct should be reported to the R&D office and the Research Ethics Committee.

- **Project update:** you will be sent a project update form at regular intervals. Please complete the form and return it to the R&D office.

- **Publications:** it is essential that you inform the R&D office about any publications which result from your research.

- **Ethics:** R&D approval is based on the conditions set out in the favourable opinion letter from the Research Ethics Committee. If during the lifetime of your research project, you wish to make a revision or amendment to your original submission, please contact both the Research Ethics Committee and R&D Office as soon as possible.

- **Monthly / Annually Progress report:** you are required to provide us and the Research Ethics Committee with a progress report and end of project report as part of the research governance guidance.

- **Recruitment data:** if your study is a portfolio study, you are required to upload the recruitment data on a monthly basis in the website: http://www.crn.nihr.ac.uk/can-help/funders-academics/nihrcrn-portfolio/recruitment-data/

- **Amendments:** if your study requires an amendment, you will need to contact the Research Ethics Committee. Once they have responded, and confirmed what kind of amendment it will be defined as, please contact the R&D office and we will arrange R&D approval for the amendment. If your study is Portfolio Adopted, amendments must be submitted for R&D review via the NIHR CRN (CSP), please refer to the Amendments Guidance for Researchers: http://www.crn.nihr.ac.uk/can-help/funders-academics/gaining-nhs-permissions/amendments/

- **Audits:** each year, noclor select 10% of the studies from each service we have approved to be audited. You will be contacted by the R&D office if your study is selected for audit. A member of the governance team will request you complete an audit monitoring form before arranging a meeting to discuss your study.

Appendix H: University of Essex Ethics Application and Approval Letter

University of Essex

29 March 2016

MISS X. LEE
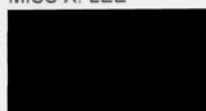
Dear Xinyi,

Re: Ethical Approval Application (Ref 15020)

Further to your application for ethical approval, please find enclosed a copy of your application which has now been approved by the School Ethics Representative on behalf of the Faculty Ethics Committee.

Yours sincerely,

Lisa McKee
Ethics Administrator
School of Health and Human Sciences

cc.   Research Governance and Planning Manager, REO
       Supervisor

University of Essex

Application for Ethical Approval of Research Involving Human Participants

This application form must be completed for any research involving human participants conducted in or by the University. 'Human participants' are defined as including living human beings, human beings who have recently died (cadavers, human remains and body parts), embryos and foetuses, human tissue and bodily fluids, and human data and records (such as, but not restricted to medical, genetic, financial, personnel, criminal or administrative records and test results including scholastic achievements). Research must not commence until written approval has been received (from departmental Director of Research/Ethics Officer, Faculty Ethics Sub-Committee (ESC) or the University's Ethics Committee). This should be borne in mind when setting a start date for the project. Ethical approval cannot be granted retrospectively and failure to obtain ethical approval prior to data collection will mean that these data cannot be used.

Applications must be made on this form, and submitted electronically, to your departmental Director of Research/Ethics Officer. A signed copy of the form should also be submitted. Applications will be assessed by the Director of Research/Ethics Officer in the first instance, and may then passed to the ESC, and then to the University's Ethics Committee. A copy of your research proposal and any necessary supporting documentation (e.g. consent form, recruiting materials, etc) should also be attached to this form.

A full copy of the signed application will be retained by the department/school for 6 years following completion of the project. The signed application form cover sheet (two pages) will be sent to the Research Governance and Planning Manager in the REO as Secretary of the University's Ethics Committee.

1.	Title of project:
	A qualitative study to explore transgender youths' experiences of using social media

2. The title of your project will be published in the minutes of the University Ethics Committee. If you object, then a reference number will be used in place of the title.
Do you object to the title of your project being published?   Yes ☐ / No ☒

3. This Project is: ☐   Staff Research Project   ☒   Student Project

4. Principal Investigator(s) (students should also include the name of their supervisor):

Name:	Department:
Xinyi Lee	Health and Human Sciences
Dr Susan McPherson	Health and Human Sciences
Dr Bernadette Wren	The Tavistock and Portman NHS Foundation Trust

5.	**Proposed start date**: Mar 2016

6.	**Probable duration**: 1 year

7. Will this project be externally funded?   Yes ☐ / No ☒
If Yes,

8.	What is the source of the funding?
	N.A

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9. If external approval for this research has been given, then only this cover sheet needs to be submitted

External ethics approval obtained (attach evidence of approval) Yes ⊠/ No ☐

Declaration of Principal Investigator:

The information contained in this application, including any accompanying information, is, to the best of my knowledge, complete and correct. I/we have read the University's *Guidelines for Ethical Approval of Research Involving Human Participants* and accept responsibility for the conduct of the procedures set out in this application in accordance with the guidelines, the University's *Statement on Safeguarding Good Scientific Practice* and any other conditions laid down by the University's Ethics Committee. I/we have attempted to identify all risks related to the research that may arise in conducting this research and acknowledge my/our obligations and the rights of the participants.

Signature(s): ....

Name(s) in block capitals: ....XINYI LEE...

Date: ....3 March 2016.................:..

Supervisor's recommendation (Student Projects only):

I have read and approved the quality of both the research proposal and this application.

Supervisor's signature: ....

Outcome:

The departmental Director of Research (DoR) / Ethics Officer (EO) has reviewed this project and considers the methodological/technical aspects of the proposal to be appropriate to the tasks proposed. The DoR / EO considers that the investigator(s) has/have the necessary qualifications, experience and facilities to conduct the research set out in this application, and to deal with any emergencies and contingencies that may arise.

This application falls under Annex B and is approved on behalf of the ESC ☑

This application is referred to the ESC because it does not fall under Annex B ☐

This application is referred to the ESC because it requires independent scrutiny ☐

Signature(s): ....

Name(s) in block capitals: ......WAYNE WILSON.............

Department: ......S.HIts..

Date: ......24/3/16...

The application has been approved by the ESC ☐

The application has not been approved by the ESC ☐

The application is referred to the University Ethics Committee ☐

Signature(s): ....

Name(s) in block capitals: ....

Faculty: ....

Date: ....

Appendix I: NHS Ethic Amendment Approval Letter

Ymchwil Iechyd a Gofal Cymru
Health and Care Research Wales

Gwasanaeth Moeseg Ymchwil
Research Ethics Service

Ariennir gan
Lywodraeth Cymru
Funded by
Welsh Government

Wales REC 6
First Floor
Institute of Life Science 2
Swansea University
Singleton Park
Swansea
SA2 8PP

Telephone : 01792 606334
E-mail : penny.beresford@wales.nhs.uk
Website : www.hra.nhs.uk

21 November 2016

Ms Xinyi Lee
Trainee Clinical Psychologist
North Essex Partnership University NHS Foundation Trust

Dear Ms Lee

Study title:	**A qualitative study to explore transgender youths' experiences of using social media**
REC reference:	**16/WA/0078**
Amendment number:	**1 (AM02)**
Amendment date:	**18 October 2016**
IRAS project ID:	**195881**

The above amendment was reviewed at the meeting of the Committee held on 16 November 2016.

The members of the Committee taking part in the review gave a favourable ethical opinion of the amendment on the basis described in the notice of amendment form and supporting documentation.

Approved documents

The documents reviewed and approved at the meeting were:

Document	Version	Date
Copies of advertisement materials for research participants	2	11 October 2016
Notice of Substantial Amendment (non-CTIMP) [Interview strategy to include phone/Skype interviews in addition to face-to-face interviews]	1 (AM02)	18 October 2016
Research protocol or project proposal	2	18 October 2016

Membership of the Committee

The members of the Committee who took part in the review are listed on the attached sheet.

U:\Lawmary\ETHICS\CORRESPONDENCE\2016 CORRESPONDENCE\195881 16WA0078 favourable opinion of a sub amendment 21-11-16.doc

Working with NHS Care Organisations

Sponsors should ensure that they notify the R&D office for the relevant NHS care organisation of this amendment in line with the terms detailed in the categorisation email issued by the lead nation for the study.

Statement of compliance

The Committee is constituted in accordance with the Governance Arrangements for Research Ethics Committees and complies fully with the Standard Operating Procedures for Research Ethics Committees in the UK.

We are pleased to welcome researchers and R & D staff at our NRES committee members' training days – see details at http://www.hra.nhs.uk/hra-training/

16/WA/0078:	Please quote this number on all correspondence

Yours sincerely

[signature]

pp
Dr Mark Turtle
Vice Chair

E-mail: penny.beresford@wales.nhs.uk

Enclosures:	*List of names and professions of members who took part in the review*
Copy to:	*Ms Angela Williams, Head of Research & Development*
	Ms Sarah Manning-Press

Wales REC 6

Attendance at Committee meeting on 16 November 2016

Committee Members:

Name	Profession	Present	Notes
Mrs Jill Burgess	Lay Member	Yes	
Ms Anne Cowper	Lay Member	Yes	
Dr John Francis Doran	retired - Consultant Chemical Pathologist	Yes	
Prof Roy L. Evans	Hon Assoc Professor - Chairman	No	
Dr Iveta Garaiova	Senior Research Manager	Yes	
Mrs Sharon Jones	Research Midwife	Yes	
Dr Matthew Lawrence	Research Officer	Yes	
Dr Ryan Lewis	Clinical Scientist	Yes	
Dr Nadja Melo	Andrologist	No	
Mr Amol Pandit	Urologist	No	
Mrs Roberta Parker	Retired	Yes	
Dr John Rees	GP - retired	Yes	
Dr Ahmed Sabra	Cardiology Registrar	Yes	
Dr Mark Turtle	Consultant Anaesthetist & Pain Management Physician	Yes	
Dr Alan Watkins	Senior Lecturer in Statistics	Yes	
Professor Paul Willner	Emeritus Professor of Psychology	Yes	

Also in attendance:

Name	Position (or reason for attending)
Ms Penny Beresford	REC Manager

Appendix J: Receipt of Payment

University of Essex

Study Title: A qualitative study to explore transgender youths' experiences of using social media

I acknowledge that I have received £10 as inconvenience fee for taking part in the research study above.

_____	_____	_____
Name of participant	Signature	Date

_____	_____	_____
Name of researcher	Signature	Date