Project Title: A Second Life: An Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis of Online Transgender Identity Formation

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A Second Life: an Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis of online Transgender identity construction

Abstract

Social identity theory provides a robust account of group processes applicable across multiple contexts. Based on self-categorisation with typical members, group affiliation can offer protective influences. However, for those such as transgender individuals who feel marginalised and subject to prejudice and misunderstanding, finding identification with suitable group members who may not be directly accessible is problematic. In a digital world, technology offers opportunities to interact with similar others and gain support. Using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis, this study seeks to understand the lived experience of being transgender and the potential of technology. Results suggest that initial confusion can be resolved online while seeking information and support from remote others, rather than retreating into defensive tribalism. More significantly, with authenticity comes a willingness to engage prosocially offline. Despite limitations, this critical interpretation of experience offers an extended view of social identity theory: cyber-technical systems allow the search for identification to extend spatially as well as temporally.

Introduction

Recently, Stonewall identified prejudice and violence against trans people in the UK (Bachmann and Gooch, 2018). Similarly, a Ministry of Justice diversity report recognises solely binary gender categories, quoting statistics only for females and males employed in the judiciary (Lord Chief Justice, 2018). However, in his presentation of what it means to be transgender, Mokobe (2015) simply asks to be understood. Unsurprisingly, trans people feel either threatened or ignored. Under such circumstances, being transgender leads to alienation and social isolation.

Perez-Brumer et al (2015), for example, highlight structural (societal) as well as internal (internalised transphobia) predictors of suicidal ideation among trans people based on a secondary quantitative data analysis in the US. As well as the lack of cross-cultural confirmation, they fail to explore in depth any mediating factors. By contrast, Riggle et al (2011) adopt a qualitative approach using self-reports to identify common positive influences like an authentic self-concept and feelings of self-efficacy. Whilst acknowledging concerns about generalising from self-selecting participants across online GLBTQ communities, they don’t go beyond a thematic description and even doubt that saturation was reached from their
61-strong cohort. Finally, Zimman (2009) focuses on linguistic differences in the narrative of coming out, before and after disclosure. Himself transgender, and without attempting epoché or bracketing which might undermine objectivity, he concludes that once trans people come out, they live in stealth unlike others in the LGB community. These studies therefore focus on well-being or anxiety particularly associated with disclosure.

Research also assumes either direct access to others from the trans community or active participation in online community fora. Turkle (1999; 2017), however, cautions against the virtual world: it can lead to confusion and deliberate avoidance of the real world, even increased alienation. Yet she offers no direct evidence for marginalised groups. So to understand what it is to be transgender and how online participation may affect identity formation, it is important to consider the lived experience of being trans. Further, rather than focus on a single point in time, such as disclosure, exploring the period from denial and identity confusion through transition and beyond would provide a broader perspective on technology use.

Drawing on symbolic interactionism whereby the self is regarded as a social product (Dickerson, 2012; Stryker, 2008) and the relationship between identity theory and social identity theory (SIT) (Hogg et al, 1995), I consider first the implications of self-categorisation with reference to social identity. This provides a theoretical background against which to consider the internal factors of identity formation online and specifically for trans people. Reviewing appropriate literature leads to two research questions addressed via an Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA).

**Social Identity Theory**

Social identity theory provides an understanding for the development of identity through social interactions within one or more groups (Tajfel and Turner, 1979). In essence, identification (*self-categorisation*) with prototypical members leads to affiliation with that group, increasing self-confidence (Hogg, 2018). Group membership is important through difficult times (Haslam et al, 2009; Haslam et al, 2005), health issues (Reicher et al, 2010) and offers social support (Levine, 2012). Social identity may develop with a majority or minority (Martin and Hewstone, 2012; Martin et al, 2008)), is seen as protective and preferable to alienation (Asch, 1956), and may result from prejudice (Drury and Reicher, 2000). The absence
of group affiliation, though, can lead to depression and anxiety (Hogg, 2016; Hogg and Vaughan, 2014), a strong motivator to reduce uncertainty (Grant and Hogg, 2012; Van den Bos, 2009). Specifically for transgender people, social contact is a protective factor against negative outcomes (Riggle et al, 2011; Testa et al, 2014). Even though SIT across multiple contexts is supported by much empirical evidence, experiments may lack ecological validity and participants are largely drawn from Caucasian student populations in Western, individualist cultures. Although involving artificial manipulation of group identity, there is some evidence that external threat may lead to greater group affiliation in both individualist and collectivist cultures (Jetten et al, 2002).

With most empirical work around SIT, categories are typically readily available. Conceptually, individuals can be assumed to recognise the prototypical behaviours of both ingroup and possibly outgroup. Such behaviours would typically be spatially and temporally accessible: there will be those displaying those categories where an individual can reach them easily. Most importantly, perhaps, such behaviours will be socially desirable within the immediate social context. For trans individuals, faced with external prejudice and internalised transphobia, such criteria would not be met. So individual differences especially in terms of alienation and withdrawal need investigation. Identity confusion may even make self-categorisation with a group problematic.

**Online Identity Formation**

Technology is now part of our extended environment and ourselves (Belk, 2013; Norman, 1993; Turkle, 1999). Empirical evidence suggests youths explore identity online (Craig and McInroy, 2014), using social networks as private, manageable spaces (Greenhow and Robelia, 2009). Traditionally, the digital world was thought to allow users greater control and anonymity in how they present themselves, even exploring gender and sexuality (Haynes, 2016). However, complete anonymity is not always possible, dealt with in different ways (Cirucci, 2015; Qian and Scott, 2007). Nevertheless, there are increased opportunities to explore the true self, which may not be possible offline (Bargh et al, 2002). Such exploration proceeds through co-construction in the virtual world as part of our extended environment (Belk, 2013) and a powerful human-machine network (Latour, 2005; Tsvetkova et al, 2015).
Although there is evidence that online identity is closer to offline identity than expected (Marwick, 2013), exploration in the safe context of the virtual world is especially important. Marginalised groups can search for and engage with like-minded groups for support, possibly anonymously (Bargh and McKenna, 2004). On- and offline deliberation may well differ since going online offers increased opportunities to engage and test more contentious issues. Ultimately, online engagement is typically motivated by a desire for sociability, creativity or escape (Eisenbeiss et al, 2012).

Much research into online identity is based on surveys or meta-analyses, identifying nomothetic trends across a given cohort (usually, US-based with greater Internet penetration). Further, virtual environments are confined either to eCommerce or Social Networks. To date, though, there has been little attempt to understand dynamic and interactive online activity including gaming, or even simple applications like search engines. For those motivated by uncertainty or distress, there is little empirical focus on how they might interact online to reduce such uncertainty, other than engaging with extremism (Hogg and Adelman, 2013). Understanding what marginalised groups do online would throw some light onto the potential benefit of technology for identity development for such groups.

Transgender Identity
Gender dysphoria only replaced a diagnosis of mental illness for trans people as recently as the 2013 DSM-V (American Psychiatric Association, 2018). Developmental models for the rest of the LGB community are well established, but not for transgender (Bilodeau and Renn, 2005). Moreover, transitioning does not always involve gender reassignment surgery (Kuper et al, 2012). But unlike the rest of the LGBT+ community, the coming out narrative still involves living in stealth for transgender after transition (Zimman, 2009). Consequently, the virtual world has some attraction. Craig and McInroy (2014) suggest individuals may go online to access resources, explore identity, find like-minded people, come out digitally, and then expand identity offline. However, unless ongoing disclosure can somehow be resolved, Faulkner and Hecht (2011) assert that membership across multiple groupings, including LGBT+, results in only partial authenticity in any of those groups.

There is little transgender-specific research, with findings for LGBT+ as a whole assumed to be valid. This fails to appreciate any differences between individual subgroups. In so doing
there is a danger of conflating sexuality and gender. Since same-sex attraction would be fairly
obvious to the individual themselves there is an assumption that being transgender would
similarly be self-evident. This misses an important part of gender dysphoria, namely identity
confusion. Finally, societal and offline coming out as gay does not include mental health
assessment as transitioning has done. It would therefore be helpful to understand the lived
experience across initial confusion, transitioning and then post-transition social integration or
at least authenticity.

Research questions
To explore the opportunity to develop social identity for marginalised individuals and the
possible affordances of technology, this study therefore poses the following research
questions (RQ).

**RQ1** How do transgender people exploit online resources to construct their identity?

**RQ2** What are the perceived benefits of going online for transgender people?

**Method**
Phenomenology derives initially from Husserl’s rejection of the Cartesian mind-body
dualism: consciousness is not the private domain of the individual, independent of the
external social context, but rather the product of direct experience with that context
(intentionality) (Langdrige and Hagger-Johnson, 2013). This was further extended with
Heidegger’s introduction of hermeneutics, the interpretation of linguistic and non-linguistic
communication (Howitt and Cramer, 2017). These features - lived experience and analysing
communication – dovetail well with symbolic interactionism in sociology as mentioned above
alongside the self-referential perspective of cognitive psychology going back to Bruner (1957;
1991). With its emphasis on the interpretation of experience in phenomenology, IPA was
formalised and has been shown to apply across multiple domains by Smith (1996; 2011), as an
approach for understanding lived experience (Gibbs et al, 2011). Most importantly, it
necessarily involves not only a descriptive account of such experience, but seeks to interpret
it from a critical psychological perspective (Howitt, 2013; Willig, 2013).
Focusing on an analysis of lived experience for trans people as they describe it, with potential marginalisation from social context, suggested a phenomenological approach for this study. However, the addition of an interpretative element seeking to understand that experience against the background of social identity theory, the mediating effect of technology, and potentially negative responses to feelings of alienation all make IPA the preferred method. Whilst giving participants an opportunity to describe their own experience, the onus now lies on the researcher to engage with them, to ask critical questions of what is said and interpret it within the specific context (Langdridge and Hagger-Johnson, 2013; Mavhandu-Mudzusi and Sandy, 2015). IPA assumes a post-positivist, critical realist epistemology for the co-construction of an understanding from an essentially idiographic perspective. For this study, the aim was to engage directly with participants to explore and understand their experience of identity construction both pre- and post-transition. In so doing, it is hoped that an understanding will emerge of broader relevance to the trans community.

Participants
Whereas many of the previous studies described above were nomothetic by nature using existing quantitative data or instruments, the intention here was to engage with a small set of individuals in an attempt to develop an understanding of their experience. Recruitment was via purposive sampling, targeted at those who identify as transgender and who have used or still use online resources for social interaction. It was also hoped this might lead to a snowball effect, with participants supporting the intentions of the study once they had engaged themselves and encouraging others to take part.

Direct eMail contact with agencies supporting the transgender community in the UK did not lead to participation. A local Chrysalis event provided much contextual information, and an intention to engage but still no direct participation. The LGBT Foundation in Manchester highlighted that the trans community are much in demand for research projects and may therefore be reluctant. Ultimately, the initial participants came forward following approaches to university PULSE communities, and a contact with Trans Media Watch. This has yielded three self-selecting participants to date, including two trans women (Part02, Part03) and a trans man (Part01).
Given this experience, and as alluded to by the LGBT Foundation (n.d.), there is a need to engage directly with the target community to understand their perspective on research. Such engagement must necessarily involve an opportunity for the community itself to make its own judgement of the researcher and their intentions (Faulkner and Hecht, 2011). Attending the Chrysalis event was clearly only a beginning. This is now being backed up with further community engagement.

Data Collection
In an attempt to offer as much anonymity as possible, semi-structured interviews were arranged with individual participants via SKYPE. Probe questions were developed based on a preliminary literature search, along with a neutral introductory question and an opportunity at the end to allow participants to add any other comments. (Details of the probe questions for the semi-structured interviews are in Appendix III.) One participant chose to enable video during the call; the others used audio only. The audio was digitally recorded and transcribed by the researcher verbatim with little extra-linguistic or paralinguistic marking (Howitt and Cramer, 2017). The transcripts were anonymised in accordance with ICO (2012) guidelines, pseudonymising names, as well as replacing professional descriptors and similar references whilst preserving the same connotations. Participants were shown and approved the anonymised version of the transcripts.

Data Analysis
The approved transcripts were analysed sequentially, in the order the interviews took place. For the first interview, after multiple readings for familiarisation, an initial set of codes was marked. These codes were transferred to NVivo™ nodes. Subsequent transcripts were also read repeatedly. Each was validated against themes from the first transcript and supplemented with additional nodes where necessary (see Appendix IV). The complete set of codes generated in this way was grouped into a set of major themes and subthemes informing two superordinate themes - Being Transgender and Technology Use – which most closely corresponded with the research questions above (Appendix V). Each of the three participants contribute to eleven of the twelve master and subthemes.

Part01 uses facebook primarily, though has experience of fora and chatrooms. Beyond eMail, Part02 had focused on the virtual world, Second Life. Part01 and Part02 now use technology
must less post transition. Part03 used fora and chatrooms to find information, and continues to be active on Twitter for socio-political discussion.

**Ethics**

Ethics approval was granted by the Department of Psychology at Manchester Metropolitan University in accordance with University Policy and British Psychological Society guidelines (BPS, 2014). Not least in regard to the collection of sensitive personal data, the lawfulness of processing was based on explicit and informed consent from the data subjects (participants) (European Commission, 2016). When no participants had come forward within the first three months, additional approval was sought to extend recruitment to the whole LGBT+ community, and was granted.

Typically, ethical approval focuses on the regulatory requirements of data protection, especially when dealing with sensitive issues. Additionally, it assumes support will be provided if needed. Both the LGBT Foundation and the British Psychological Society (BPS) emphasise the need to avoid harm and minimise risk or distress (BPS, 2014; LGBT Foundation, n.d.). With this in mind, a case can be made in the present study that as soon as the first participant had come forward, recruitment should continue to focus on transgender experience only rather than open up to the broader LGBT+ community. Not least because of documented variations across the wider community (Riggle et al, 2011), transgender-specific themes may be overwhelmed by those of LGB participants. Further, although this exploratory study centres on the first three participants only, recruitment remains ongoing in the hope of validating the initial themes identified and approaching saturation for a homogeneous cohort (Boddy, 2016).

**Analysis and Discussion**

Probe questions (Appendix III) specifically address coming out and what it means to be transgender before going on to technology use. Not surprisingly, therefore, two superordinate themes emerge: Being Transgender and Technology Use. Three master and nine subthemes were identified (summarised in Appendix V). Although not an explicitly narrative approach, the master themes indicate a progression akin to stage theory descriptions of identity development (Erikson, 1959; Marcia, 1966).
Being Transgender
This superordinate theme includes the master theme Identity Confusion prior to transition, and subthemes around societal and community perceptions and their influence on well-being. Similarly, mediated by Technology Use, a second master theme, Identity Achievement, relates to Coming Out and Transitioning as well as consequent self-efficacy allowing participants to Contribute to Society.

Identity Confusion
Participants report difficulty in identifying how they felt, perhaps reaching compromise and temporary conclusions:

…when I was younger, I couldn’t work out why this was happening, so I ended up kind of blaming it on the lesbianism (PART01)

I actually started on … Crossdressers dot com Erm because at the time that’s what I thought I was (PART03)

or even resorting to denial:

You know this was always there inside me if I’d but looked (PART02).

Lacking any direct and accessible group prototype to identify with, they either ignore their feelings or attempt to identify with a group that they can at least recognise. Clearly, compromising on self-categorisation in this way does not lead to authenticity.

Society’s View of Trans People
At the same time, participants report negative perceptions of trans people. Either social stereotypes (in this case, appearance):

I err was still convinced that I was too big err too bulky, too tall to transition successfully … I was still convinced at that stage that if I tried to transition at work that would be the end of my career (PART02)

or misinformation and prejudice prevail:

[my ex-mother-in-law] was there and, you know, apparently had questioned the safety of leaving me with children erm which is not entirely helpful and erm, not based on reality at all (PART03)

But there is also a suggestion that society expects conformity to socially defined categories:

So the idea that one… that someone can cross those boundaries …erm… it really grates on some people… erm they can’t get their head around it …erm or some people get really offended by the idea which I always find really odd <laugher> that you can make that jump over (PART01)
Under these circumstances, feelings of alienation and isolation are bound to develop. But unlike participants in the Drury and Reicher (2000) study, there is no other readily available group to develop identification with.

**Health and Well-Being**

Inevitably, there seem to be negative behavioural outcomes associated with societal hostility. Talking about her pre-transition persona, PART02 suggests this may simply manifest as irritability:

so ‘he’ was renowned for being a bit of a grumpy old sod and I’m anything but (PART02)

alternatively, self-centredness

I’ve seen err gender dysphoria described as a selfish condition … You do very much think about yourself and particularly as you’re going through this... (PART03)

But potentially there are also more destructive outcomes

My mental health was terrible <laughter> it really wasn’t great erm and I’d kind of dug myself into a bit of a hole over a lot of things erm… and it kind of …it proposed an answer to deal with some of that… a lot of the mental health stuff wasn’t related to gender (PART01)

Negative behaviour could be understood as a reaction to misunderstanding or hostility as predicted by strain theory (Agnew, 1992), but more recently with health implications in social psychology (Haslam et al, 2009).

**LGBT+ Community**

Connections with the broader LGBT+ community are at best ambiguous, belonging to but behaving differently from the community as a whole:

we’re trans and we’re 100% with everyone that is LGBTQA (PART01)

LGB people are quite... obviously not all of them but quite a lot are quite happy to talk about the fact that they’re gay … but I think that erm a lot of trans people have got a lot more guarded because the majority, the vast majority of trans people will have had really bad experiences at some point (PART01)

while in some cases there may be direct hostility:

I think there is actually, in some parts, there is some animosity between gay men and trans women (PART03)

So I’ve never understood this kind of ‘them and us’ … but there is, I think, going back a long, long time … there is some animosity (PART03)
Such ambiguity may reflect perceived differences from prototypical norms (Christensen et al, 2004). Indeed PART01 does try to conform in identifying as a lesbian knowing that this wasn’t completely satisfactory:

so I ended up kind of blaming it on the lesbianism, because I knew I was attracted to women that was the only logical thought process going on there (PART01)

Evaluation
Uncertainty around the self-concept has led to social discomfort, even mental health issues for these participants. Describing gender dysphoria in terms of distress and a variety of different behaviours, DSM-V does not recognise some of the strategies that trans people may adopt whilst trying to conform to social norms (American Psychiatric Association (DSM-V), 2013). Rejection from the closest social ingroup (the LGB community) may have significant consequences. It is perhaps time to look more closely at social isolation (MacLachlan, 2018).

Identity Achievement
Mediated by exploration via technology (see below), Identity Achievement results in authenticity:

And this is me … The old me, well I thought it was me, but it was because I was in denial … This is me and it has been me since birth (PART02)

and leads to a sense of relief:

you behave differently when you’re not holding something back; or you’re just generally happier in life… (PART01)

which encourages a feeling a self-efficacy:

But it fairly readily became apparent that I was only functioning fully when I was the real me (PART02)

as well as a sense of excitement about the future:

what probably in my heart I wanted to do which was to get out there and be me (PART03)

Participants audibly changed as they began to describe experiences of being authentic to themselves.

Coming Out
As a result of Identity Exploration online, participants report that there was an inevitability about moving on. Now aware of their trans identity, they have to keep going forward:
So around about the middle of August about six or eight weeks of [dressing as a woman], I knew I could never go back to being ‘him’ (PART02)

Further, there is a realisation that:

it’s kind of your right identity and that felt… that helped me a lot with coming out and kind of really starting on the journey (PART03)

Whatever happens, compromise is no longer an option:

my Dad especially erm couldn’t understand why I couldn’t just … be more butch (PART01)

Unlike the ongoing identity negotiation that Faulkner and Hecht (2011) report, and a life lived in stealth from that point on (Zimman, 2009), participants in this study see no reason to hide.

The relief at knowing who they really are is all that matters.

I think personally I’m fairly obviously trans, so I think anyone that is actually friends with me knows – they’re unlikely to add me if they’re transphobic in any kind of way (PART03)

**Transitioning**

The energy and motivation for authenticity that being ‘the real me’ affords is important in taking on the challenge of transitioning:

something gelled between how I felt and what … what I had going for me effectively. And so, erm, the transition …thing was… it made the most sense for me to solve what I perceived to be as a problem (PART01)

however difficult it might be:

But I started the medical process by telling my GP; my GP referred me to the local Community Mental Health Team, and the Community Mental Health Team referred me to the Gender Identity Clinic at the Charing Cross, which basically meant getting on to the back of a two-year waiting list (PART02)

and despite misconceptions of what transitioning really entails and how all-encompassing it really is:

a lot of people that I’ve spoken to in general seem to think that the transition is… you have the hormones, you have the surgery and bish-bash-bosh you’re done… erm… but it affects every single aspect … of your life (PART01)

But there is also humour in attempting to make up for lost time with a new physical identity:

I think with trans women, they kind of have to catch up on that; so you can sometimes go to extremes and get very, very obsessed about your appearance, and how you act, and how you sound (PART03)
Gender reassignment, though not always undertaken (Kuper et al, 2012), is just part of the experience of transitioning. This is also about exploration and becoming ever more authentic with a new and genuine self-concept.

**Contributing to Society**

With authenticity comes self-efficacy and the discovery of genuine life goals (Bandura, 2012). Participants report being more relaxed socially:

> so I guess being being trans for me was more of the... better way to be ... myself and actually be a functioning member of society (PART01)

and a manager giving feedback from colleagues:

> He said: all of them have said how much easier you are to *work* with than ever you were before (PART02).

In addition, though, authenticity has wider social implications:

> I mean the list goes on... my involvement in real life as me is wide (PART02)

including a willingness to engage on other matters of socio-political importance:

> What that has taught me possibly about how to maybe look at the world in a more critical way, so I do question not just religions, faith, whatever, but also the questions that are put to them. (PART03)

Even to the extent that one participant builds on his experience to help families in the same position and who may not know how best to communicate:

> I’ve been there and I won’t be offended because I understand that you’re asking out of love, you just don’t understand erm that what you’re saying might be offensive ... but I’ll have that dialogue with you and you can walk away and you can have these conversations with your child without offending or hurting your child (PART01)

Identity achievement has therefore led participants to an increased sense of purpose. Whether directly involved with the trans community or simply with society more generally, participants can engage and make significant contribution.

**Evaluation**

In SIT terms, transgender self-concept relies not only on identification with others but also acceptance of being different. Uncertainty has not provoked extreme behaviours (Grant and Hogg, 2012; Van den Bos, 2009). Instead, authenticity for these trans people has led to increased social engagement and contribution.
Technology Use
An interim stage, Identity Exploration, occurs mainly through Technology Use, including Seeking Information and virtual Peer-Group Support encouraging Disclosure online at first. Although there is an awareness of online tribalism, even echo chambers, none of the participants chooses to engage:

anyone that says anything even vaguely shady even in a jokey way or something that someone said like twenty years ago who don’t understand the concept no matter what they’re like now we will hate on them <laugh> forever (PART01)

The radicalisation from personal uncertainty (Hogg and Adelman, 2013) is possible, though not entirely necessary. Instead, Technology Use is exploited for Identity Exploration rather than escapism and to withdraw into a virtual ingroup.

Identity Exploration
Going online does offer different opportunities for self-discovery:

my first faltering steps of trying to have an ID that was female on Yahoo! Messenger (PART03) which over time seems to lead inexorably onto a greater understanding of the self:

so basically, I, I discovered my own gender issues online (PART02) and once a degree of authenticity is found, then there’s no turning back:

As soon as the box got opened in Second Life, I thought: no, no, this is the real me. And at that point … I knew I’m a transgender woman (PART02) Even to the extent of making sense of the past

Oh, I get it – so I’ve actually just been the… slightly camp, queer guy the whole time and I just hadn’t put all the pieces together (PART01) Faced with isolation and marginalisation offline, technology therefore provides an environment within which to explore. This does not necessarily involve deception, but a sense of being accepted:

I suppose a lot of people’re there ‘cos they accept you for who you are (PART03)

Seeking Information
Lacking an uncompromised social identity, going online seems to offer access to similar others. However, participants report initially only a desire to find information:

you’re struggling to find assistance (PART01) though this might include looking to engage:
when I actively went online and specifically looking for erm you know, help, advice, groups and things like that. (PART03)

with very little emphasis on identity:

I was frequenting places where’d I’d meet transgender people, whether they were real life transgender or just Second Life transgender was not particularly relevant (PART02)

Nonetheless, there is a sense of security online which is not found in the real world:

real life isn’t real … because you get more comfort and more acceptance online Erm and that’s why I say I wonder if that’s way some people do just kind of stay with that safety because you’ve got a defence and can shut off the world and you don’t have to look at it (PART03)

The motivation to exploit technology, therefore, is mainly about finding information to help explain uncertainty. Transfer offline may be avoided, though this is perhaps what leads to tribalism (see above).

Peer-Group Support
Although initially seeking clarification for uncertainty, participants do describe group affiliation both on and offline.

I’m part of a couple of erm trans groups based in local area I think they’re just facebook groups; I don’t think people actually meet up ever (PART01)

extending into professional activities:

we’ve got an online community called Transgender erm Engineering Professionals Worldwide … and it’s a secret group, but we basically recruit people by word of mouth (PART02).

Some online friendships may well be instrumental in the coming out process

Robyn was female, lesbian, err she was one of the people that supported my transition, and validated my identity almost… almost more than anyone else in the world (PART02)

and self-acceptance:

it’s all the same kind of people Erm and then you do get the support, you do get people talking to you as if you’re a human being (PART03)

Support from peer-groups is an important part of Identity Exploration, therefore, which may not necessarily be confined online. It is, however, a significant element of self-acceptance.

Ongoing Disclosure
With this support in place, participants exploit technology affordances to control disclosure after coming out.
I [came out] in [Second Life] immediately … and fully, and then slowly added those friends back erm and in there everyone was supportive (PART02)

Though online may not always be as effective as traditional, offline modes of interaction:

if someone I haven’t seen in years comes and speaks to me erm usually there’s that thing where like it’s happened a few times when I’ve gone back home to area someone’s seen me across … town erm and they’re kind of looking at me for a while going: I definitely recognise that person – They’ve no idea why, and I have… it then puts a bit less pressure on the whole thing of… I have the choice to go over and say: Oh hi, it’s me… and this is what’s happened blah blah blah or if they work it out or just try it, they come they sometimes come over with the line of: You look like someone I know, are you related to them? kind of thing (PART01)

However, there is already a sense that once transitioning has begun, the need and motivation to find other trans people is less important:

You know, my interests are normal interests. The whole trans thing is largely irrelevant … unless, unless topics come up. (PART03)

Technology offers some control over disclosure, potentially allowing individuals to live in stealth (Zimman, 2009). However, describing their individual experiences, participants exploit whatever affordances are offered offline as well as online to take control over their own lives.

Evaluation
There is little evidence here that technology use is about deception or the control of self-presentation. Instead, it is about exploration. Any personal uncertainty around identity can be explored with sympathetic others with a view to resolving confusion rather than escape to a like-minded tribe (Hogg and Adelman, 2013). Technology is simply an agent within an existing networks (Kaghan and Bowker, 2001; Latour, 2005).

Impact
Returning to the research questions, trans people exploit technology, seeking information primarily, but also capitalising on a safe environment. Technology use is not about social networks, controlling self-presentation, escape or deception. In this study, the cyber-technical network empowers individuals, encouraging offline disclosure (RQ2). By contrast, gender dysphoria affects both well-being and self-efficacy, undermining identity achievement. Encouraged by online engagement, embracing a trans identity leads to authenticity and personal validation which makes their gender identity no longer an issue (RQ1).
In consequence, providing social- and healthcare should be based on a more specific understanding of what gender dysphoria entails. Behavioural issues such as aggression as well as anxiety and depression turn out to be typical manifestations of this dysphoria. Failing to recognise them as such may lead to additional feelings of inadequacy. Assessment pre-transition should not misunderstand these characteristics as personality disorders, but rather the co-morbid presentation of an underlying confusion and personal uncertainty.

Encouraged and supported during transition via online engagement, personal uncertainty need not lead to extremism and escape into gender-based tribalism. Instead, participants here demonstrate that as self-awareness increases and fosters self-belief. So identity achievement can lead to direct prosocial behaviour at the micro (family), meso (professional group) and macro (socio-political) levels. Accepting and encouraging identity exploration may therefore result in benefits to the individual’s self-concept but also to their social identity.

**Reflexivity**
Although I had some experience with the LGB community, my assumption was that participants would be willing to engage. But I had failed to appreciate the potential sensitivity and reluctance of trans participants. In consequence, and although I still managed to cover all probe questions at some level, there is a sense in reading the transcripts that participants were allowed to talk largely unchecked: interaction between us remained at a minimal level, sometimes with little more than phatic input from my side. It is only now I appreciate that semi-structured interviews involve a negotiation. As the researcher, unlike Milgram’s participants and the issue of white-coat syndrome encouraging uncharacteristic behaviours (Eysenck, 2009; Milgram, 1963), I feel now that qualitative research should be very much a contract between participant and researcher. Especially in IPA and semi-structured interviews more generally, the researcher must offer an obvious unconditional positive regard, as proposed by Rogers, for participants to explore their experience as they decide if a valid interpretation is to be achieved.

That being said, one issue with IPA is the problem of balancing idiographic focus on individual participants and identifying the wider significance of their experience in a more nomothetic sense, the commonality across all participants. Analysis is based on the sequential examination of individual interviews seeking to isolate a finite set of themes characteristic of
everyone’s experience. Boddy (2016) suggests a homogeneous cohort of twelve may be sufficient to isolate the most important themes and reach saturation. But the researcher must therefore successfully negotiate a compromise between respect for individual participants, especially when dealing with challenging and sensitive issues, and what may be seen as characteristic of a whole community. Responding to the participant dignity I perceived during the interviews, I am not certain that I was completely successful in inductively deriving themes from the data itself rather than seeking deductive validation of themes found in the literature.

Finally, this limited study has encouraged me to challenge my own social cognitions. Each participant audibly relaxed as they related their experience post transition. Specifically, neither appearance nor category labels was important: authenticity, being ‘the real me’, is all that mattered. In consequence, and despite believing myself more objective and open-minded, I find that I was unwittingly influenced by binary gender categories and consequent stereotypes. This study has made me rethink: it is important for me now to take time to allow individuals to identify what is important to them before forming an opinion. Although an active member of an equality, diversity and inclusion committee, I believe it is only now that I appreciate what it means to be accepted irrespective of the assumptions of others. Authenticity is in the eye not of the beholder but of the one beheld, and that’s what gives them the right to acceptance.

Theoretical Implications
Based on how participants reported their experience of transitioning and identity achievement, this exploratory study has a number of implications both for social identity theory and the exploitation of technology for online identity formation. With regard to SIT, it is clear that social groupings necessarily extend temporally as well as spatially (Condor, 1996). The participants in this study engage with technology to seek information and end up self-categorising not with local ingroup prototypes but with a virtual community. On- and offline environments connect as an Actor Network (Latour, 2005), where Granovetter’s (1983) weak ties are exploited to make sense of vague offline cues and feelings. As identity exploration turns to achievement contextual cues transfer new-found trust between on- and offline contexts (Tan, 2010). Homophily is sometimes described as a significant social force especially
online (McPherson et al., 2001). Yet, online identity formation in this study was more about exploration and individual authenticity rather than looking for similar others. Technology use as part of an actor network provides a chance for marginalised individuals to benefit from virtual social support. Social identity and self-categorisation can extend via a cyber-technical network to provide relief and support for the alienated they would not so easily find offline.

**Limitations and Future Directions**

Even though this study is confined to three participants at present, reaching saturation is really only about further recruitment (Boddy, 2016). More importantly, that the participants were self-selecting may not be representative of the whole community, either because of an unwillingness due to past experience or hostility and misunderstanding. Indeed, the tribes alluded to by two participants may well relate a different set of experiences. Additionally, reporting from memory post-transition may be coloured by the relief of now living the life they had discovered they’d always wanted. Authenticity may have influenced their perspective on the lived experience. Furthermore, a more diverse demographic might colour the experiences they narrate, for example, participant age, personality type and their individual coming-out progression. Finally, different motivations and exposure to online contexts may influence outcomes. In future studies, it would be helpful to control for potential confounding variables such as experience and online exposure.

**Conclusion**

Despite its limitations, this exploratory story has brought into focus two major findings about the use of technology in identity exploration and achievement. Far from the confusion and isolation which Turkle (1999; 2017) describes, participants exploit technology for their own purposes to explore, find information, and engage with other trans individuals. Previously, the negative effects of identity confusion may have undermined feelings of self-efficacy and well-being. Using technology is not about escape or deception, but rather providing a safe environment for identity exploration. Transferred to the real world, trans identity achievement leads to authenticity and prosociality. The mediating effect of technology in this process suggests exploring available actor networks exploiting weak ties to find authenticity.

**References**


LGBT Foundation (n.d.) *Ethical research: good practice guide researching LGBT communities and issues*.


MacLachlan, T. (2018) ‘Replying to @Tara_Hewitt @mimsdavies @MariaMillerUK’ [Online] [Accessed on 30th April 2018] https://twitter.com/taramaclachlan/status/990704974198919168


Appendix I

Ethics Approval

Submission status

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<td>Due date</td>
<td>Monday, 12 February 2018, 11:55 PM</td>
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<td>Time remaining</td>
<td>Assignment was submitted 6 days 12 hours late</td>
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<td>Last modified</td>
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Submission comments

> Comments (1)

Make changes to your submission

Feedback

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<th>Pass</th>
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<td>Graded on</td>
<td>Friday, 27 April 2018, 3:21 PM</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Graded by</td>
<td>Robert Lowe</td>
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Your ethics application has been reviewed by your first and second marker, and you now have ethical approval to conduct your study.

Feedback files

- ![16025362_Ethics_Application_v3.docx](16025362_Ethics_Application_v3.docx)
- ![Amendment request.pdf](Amendment request.pdf)
- ![Debrief Sheet2.docx](Debrief Sheet2.docx)
- ![Participant info v2.docx](Participant info v2.docx)
Appendix II

Flyer used for Recruitment

Respect and Equality for ALL Trans People

Your chance to tell it as it is

Manchester Metropolitan University

Passion
Do you wish other people would listen to your point of view?

Integrity
Do you use social media and go online a lot?

Empowerment
Would you like to have your own say?

Respect
Are you tired of other people who say they know what it’s like?

If you identify as transgender, are 18 or over, and go online on your phone or your laptop, I’d like to hear from you. I’m currently preparing a psychology dissertation aimed at giving you and people like you a say. Interested? All you need do is chat with me for 45 mins to an hour on the phone. Still interested? Please eMail to find out more at John.B.Pickering@stu.mmu.ac.uk: Have your say!

This research study has been approved by Manchester Metropolitan University 19022018

Image by AnemoneProjectors [CC BY-SA 2.0 (https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/2.0)], via Wikimedia Commons
Appendix III

Interview Guide

For each participant, a record was kept of the interview session:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Date</th>
<th>DDMMYYYY</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Time</td>
<td>HH:MM</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interviewee</td>
<td>Pseudonym</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pronoun</td>
<td>(S)He / They</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Channel (e.g. SKYPE, phone)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>End time</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Part01 (trans male) identified as he; Part02 and Part03 (trans female) as she. All participants are now married to same-sex partners, Part01 and Part03 having met and married their respective partners having identified as transgender.

Verbatim transcriptions were created and given a filename based on the following schema:

Transcription_DATE_TIME

The opening, informal question was: So, tell me what it felt like to go online for the first time

This was followed by a set of probe questions based on assertions from the literature

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Self-uncertainty (Grant and Hogg, 2012; Hogg, 2018)</th>
<th>How did your friends react when you told them?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Acceptability of “Labels” (Ghaziani, 2011; Kuper et al, 2012)</td>
<td>What does it mean being transgender?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Marginalisation / Rejection (Drury and Reicher, 2000; Faulkner and Hecht, 2011; Jans et al, 2012)</td>
<td>Did you feel different from people around you?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Attraction of going online (Bargh et al, 2002; Belk, 2013; Boon and Sinclair, 2009; Tufekci, 2008)</td>
<td>What’s the attraction of being online?</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Advantages of being online (Baek et al, 2012; Craig and McInroy, 2014; Whitty and Young, 2017) | **Is it easier being you when you’re online?**
---|---
Does the virtual world help? (Marwick, 2013; Marwick and Boyd, 2011) | **What did it mean going online?**
Is the virtual world isolating? (Eisenbeiss et al, 2012; Turkle, 2008; 2017) | **Do you think being online is like real life?**

At the end of each interview, participants were asked: *Is there anything else you’d like to add?* and thanked for their time and willingness to engage.
Appendix IV

Sample Coding

Figure 1 shows a sample of the manual coding of Part01 (trans male) talking about category labels.
Figure 2: Initial read-through and coding of Part03

Figure 2 shows an example of the initial read-through and coding of Part03 (trans female) talking about coming out to family and employer.

Figure 3: Full coding with interim set of themes and subthemes (from NVivo™)
Figure 3 shows the initial full coding in NVivo™. Note that the initial codes (shown to the left along with outcome of the literature search (the final main node at the bottom of the column). These were consolidated into the codes shown in Figure 4 in Appendix V below.

Appendix V

Themes

![Thematic Map from initial coding of the transcripts](image)

Table 1: Mapping of Superordinate Themes to Research Questions

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>RESEARCH QUESTION</th>
<th>SUPERORDINATE THEME</th>
<th>TECHNOLOGY USE</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>RQ1</strong> How do transgender people exploit online resources to construct their identity?</td>
<td>(Y) There is nothing specific about being transgender and technology use</td>
<td>(Y)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>RQ2</strong> What are the perceived benefits of going online for transgender people?</td>
<td>(Y)</td>
<td>(Y)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 2: Detailed Table of Themes
### Superordinate theme 1: BEING TRANSGENDER

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theme</th>
<th>Subtheme</th>
<th>Lines</th>
<th>Quotation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Identity</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td>163-165</td>
<td>PART01: So like when I was much younger... I very much... I was known at high school for being the rowdy, political, butch lesbian</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Confusion</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td>189-190</td>
<td>PART01: I found femininity as ... the female femininity and things of it on that side to be very outlandish and quite [scary] I couldn’t really wrap my head around it</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>191-195</td>
<td>PART01: I remember we had to go to a family wedding and I had to wear a dress before I came out and ... and my Dad had to teach me how to walk and sit in a dress because I didn’t understand how to do dress [RESEARCHER: Yeah ...yeah] it was just completely alien to me I just couldn’t wrap my head around it, it felt really weird erm I couldn’t understand it at all ... Erm ... and the photos, looking back, I do look like a really bad drag queen, a really, really bad drag queen &lt;laughs&gt;. It didn’t look right at all... Erm... So... erm</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>204-209</td>
<td>PART01: And, in the sense that I was... I was also erm attracted to men [RESEARCHER: Yeah] telling everyone I was a lesbian because the idea of being with erm what I perceived to be as another man or as a man and I was being perceived as a woman was... it felt quite traumatic – it didn’t feel right at all [RESEARCHER: Yep] Erm really uncomfortable, really unsafe, really just not good, really not loving at all</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>209-212</td>
<td>PART01: I couldn’t work out... when I was younger, I couldn’t work out why this was happening, so I ended up kind of blaming it on the lesbianism, because I knew I was attracted to women that was the only logical thought process going on there</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>212-213</td>
<td>PART01: So I just went: well, I won’t deal with that right now; I’ll just do the gay thing and that’ll be fine.</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>28-30</td>
<td>PART02: At the time, I was identifying as male, but as regards my sexuality, as someone who preferred transgender women.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>116-120</td>
<td>How society perceives trans people</td>
<td>PART01: So the idea that one... that someone can cross those boundaries ...erm... it really grates on some people... erm they can’t get their head around it ...erm or some people get really offended by the idea which I always find really odd &lt;laughter; [RESEARCHER: Yeah, yeah, yeah]&gt; that you can make that jump over</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>163-165</td>
<td>PART01: So like when I was much younger... I very much ...I was known at high school for being the rowdy, political, butch lesbian</td>
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<tr>
<td>168-170</td>
<td>PART01: So it was probably why a lot of my friends, ’specially my older friends when I came out as trans, they were a bit like: Well &lt;laughter&gt; ... you were never particularly feminine</td>
<td></td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>171-173</td>
<td>PART01: But it was part of the transitioning err process, so I had my Dad especially erm couldn’t understand why I couldn’t just ... be more butch [RESEARCHER: Yeah] to fulfil that ...what he perceived as what I was looking for</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>195-196</td>
<td>PART01: Erm ... and the photos, looking back, I do look like a really bad drag queen, a really, really bad drag queen</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>276-277</td>
<td>PART01: Or discussed it and pondered and now suddenly I’m some kind of defective case and they’re trying to show what &lt;inaudible&gt; me</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>278-280</td>
<td>PART01: No, I’ve just had a sex change which to you might seem really strange and outlandish, but this is kind of my life... So, it’s not that shocking to me; it’s just a fact of my life. But some people still find it quite ... [RESEARCHER: Indeed... erm] out there</td>
<td></td>
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</tbody>
</table>
PART01: I’m always expecting … I’m kind of always expecting the worst when someone wants to ask me questions

PART01: still have awkward moments in like when I go to the gym we have a group locker room and I still find that really awkward [RESEARCHER: Yeah] I’m always half expecting someone to notice that erm ma bits aren’t exactly factory standard and for it to cause an issue but erm I think I’m lucky in this country for the fact that Brits will just avoid an argument to high heaven, so [RESEARCHER: Yes… it’s ] <laughs> I imagine it’s harder in America where there’s less bashfulness in that regard but erm yeah

PART01: and err a lot of things, there are a lot of the media output about it doesn’t really… it focuses on what the … more on the sensationalist stuff… obviously the transitions, the physical transitions… that sells more, that’s a better story, that looks better on paper and better in a documentary erm

PART02: in real life, I didn’t transition straight away. I err was still convinced that I was too big err too bulky, too tall to transition successfully

PART02: I was still convinced at that stage that if I tried to transition at work that would be the end of my career

PART03: And it’s the first time I’d seen anything that negative online… apart from like, you know, The Daily Mail or other news stories where they’d picked on trans people

PART03: her mother was there and, you know, apparently had questioned the safety of leaving me with children erm which is not entirely helpful and erm, not based on reality at all

PART03: that side of the family have gone a bit, you know, nuts

PART03: So I never saw her again before she died … and she was also apparently very homophobic and was very concerned about the two rather butch ladies that had moved in across the road: It’s just not right… and all that kind of thing
PART01: I was struggling with a lot of things at the time. My mental health was terrible <laughter> it really wasn’t great erm and I’d kind of dug myself into a bit of a hole over a lot of things erm… and it kind of …it proposed an answer to deal with some of that… a lot of the mental health stuff wasn’t related to gender

PART01: Then after I’d done… I had the surgeries that I had and I’d been on hormones for a while, I ended up actually going back to therapy to deal with other things that weren’t gender related...

PART01: but purely on personal experience the vast majority of trans people have other err mental health things [RESEARCHER: Yep] going on that I don’t honestly believe that it’s directly related to the fact that they’re trans beyond the pressures they’ve had to deal with that has created other issues erm so it’s not directly the trans thing

PART02: so ‘he’ was renowned for being a bit of a grumpy old sod and I’m anything but

PART03: they’d actually had an employee who discovered erm not late in life, maybe slightly younger than me, but with a lot of family, you know, wife, child erm I think they were from somewhere like Portugal or somewhere in Europe, Southern European I think [RESEARCHER: Hmm] Erm, and they just had depression and other depression-like symptoms, and had no concept of what this could be. And eventually, they discovered that they were trans, and, you know, they transitioned to female erm and lost wife and child, because they moved back to where they’d originally come from [RESEARCHER: Yeah] in Europe

PART03: I think before transitioning erm I was heavily in denial [RESEARCHER: Right] which I think is … which I believe is a theme with a lot of trans people [RESEARCHER: Yep] it’s amazing how much denial

PART03: I’ve seen err gender dysphoria described as a selfish condition [RESEARCHER: Yeah] You do very much
think about yourself and particularly as you’re going through this... you know, the initial stages of transition which are often quite rapid and erm even though at the time you think it’s quite slow and you don’t have the confidence and that sort of thing

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Broader LGBT+ Community</th>
<th>334-335</th>
<th>PART01: we’re trans and we’re 100% with everyone that is LGBTQA</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>381-386</td>
<td>PART01: certainly within the gay community erm a lot of... erm... LGB people are quite... obviously not all of them but quite a lot are quite happy to talk about the fact that they’re gay [RESEARCHER: Yeah... yeah] in some manner or other... but I think that erm a lot of trans people have got a lot more guarded because the majority, the vast majority of trans people will have had really bad experiences at some point</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>358-361</td>
<td>PART03: but also more aware of what’s going on in the world or a little bit more aware anyway erm, so while I don’t generally day-to-day think about being trans or think about my social media presence in terms of being trans, erm, news stories that, you know, impact on trans people and any LGBTQi plus whatever acronyms we’re up to today [RESEARCHER: Yeah] erm I kind of pick up on those and I look at them particularly</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>426-427</td>
<td>PART03: I think there is actually, in some parts, there is some animosity between gay men and trans women</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>432-433</td>
<td>PART03: So I’ve never understood this kind of ‘them and us’ … but there is, I think, going back a long, long time [RESEARCHER: Yeah] there is some animosity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Identity Achievement</td>
<td>107-108</td>
<td>PART01: you behave differently when you’re not holding something back; or you’re just generally happier in life...</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>128-129</td>
<td>PART02: But it fairly readily became apparent that I was only functioning fully when I was the real me</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>198-200</td>
<td>PART02: And this is me [RESEARCHER: Yeah] The old me, well I thought it was me, but it was because I was in denial [RESEARCHER: Yeah] This is me and it has been me since birth</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
301  PART03: what probably in my heart I wanted to do which was to get out there and be me

448-449  PART03: Just live and let live. And just be who you are … as far as you possibly can.

Coming Out

171-173  PART01: so I had my Dad especially erm couldn’t understand why I couldn’t just … be more butch [RESEARCHER: Yeah] to fulfil that …what he perceived as what I was looking for

111-112  PART02: in real life, I didn’t transition straight away. I err was still convinced that I was too big err too bulky, too tall to transition successfully

148-150  PART02: So around about the middle of August about six or eight weeks of being me, I knew I could never go back to being ‘him’

156-159  PART02: so I phoned British Aerospace and said: actually it’s going to be Tara that comes back to work, and the response from my manager was breath-taking [RESEARCHER: <laughs>] He said: oh Tara, thank God for that. All the work I’ve done to find out what we’ll have to do if you do come back as Tara is gonna go to waste!

216-218  PART02: before I rediscovered me inside, I thought I was a cis-gender, white middle-class male, pilot, who happened to be attracted to transgender women

44-45  PART03: it’s kind of your right identity and that felt… that helped me a lot with coming out and kind of really starting on the journey

150-151  PART03: my family kind of reacted with a bit of shock <laughs> and I got taken up there because they had to take me in.

151-154  PART03: eventually we kind of resolved it to the point where we felt we could kind of try and carry on with our relationship and I’d keep that part of my life separate. Erm and it kind of trundled along a bit then – it was kind of like the elephant in the room and a bit of a secret

298-300  PART03: my transition as I say in those early stages was really quite exponential so maybe I was not really thinking about real life or online life, I was just trying to get the information and the help and support that I could
Transitioning 65-68

PART01: I came out in the summer between my first and second year at uni
[RESEARCHER: Right] So there weren’t many people around erm physically around... and I didn’t go home for the holidays or anything like that I just stayed at university

109-112

PART01: And there’s a natural change in that sense, but the core of who I am hasn’t really changed for a lot of people. Erm from the outside looking in, you just have to tell them that you’re trans, or transsexual, or transgender.

112-114

PART01: They think that all of you is changing to fulfil ... There’s a perception, you know, that all of you is changing to fulfil what – you’ve been raised as one box, to try and shuffle... [to conform to] everything to this other box.

123-129

PART01: So I was thinking about social constructs as well ... Erm, I felt that I stood in the social construct of erm... in... inside that it was more along the lines of what would be perceived as male – I had other things going on that was suggesting physically that I wasn’t ... I mean you can use the cliché of like ‘in the wrong body’ that kind of thing erm but something gelled between how I felt and what ... what I had going for me effectively. And so, erm, the transition ... thing was... it made the most sense for me to solve what I perceived to be as a problem

147

PART01: So it was... it was kind of ... I suppose it was a solution to a problem to a an extent

176-182

PART01: Erm... and I did do for a very short period of time the very stereo-typical trans guy thing – you start transitioning and you really ramp up trying to be butch and what it actually ends up doing is you act more and more and more like a really butch lesbian – which is kind of ironic in a way <laughs> you get your hair cut short and then you really you weirdly get mis-gendered more <Researcher: Yes... yes> erm <laughter> because it’s like you’re trying too hard, so people notice
PART01: You know relaxing, just letting myself
be me and I would really get ridiculed like hell
for it so I just stopped doing it altogether and
as I got older I started thinking about things
more and started the transition process - it
kind of started to all slot into place a bit more

PART01: No, I’ve just had a sex change which
to you might seem really strange and
outlandish, but this is kind of my life… So, it’s
not that shocking to me; it’s just a fact of my
life. But some people still find it quite …
[RESEARCHER: Indeed… erm] out there

PART01: in terms of understanding the
differences and the difficulties a lot of people
that I’ve spoken to in general seem to think
that the transition is… you have the hormones,
you have the surgery and bish-bash-bosh
you’re done… erm… but it affects every single
aspect [RESEARCHER: Yep] of your life

PART01: they’ve change the rules recently… it
used to be that you had to have erm psych
assessments [RESEARCHER: Yeah] … because
you had to be signed off as mentally sound…
So it’s a joke that I have a certificate on my
medical records that says I’m mentally stable
that had to be all signed off to even be
considered that the whole trans thing was not
just that I was insane ‘cos that’s what the
legislation used to be

PART02: My story was that around about six
or eight months after transitioning in there and
I’d transitioned full time in there straight
away.

PART02: But I started the medical process by
telling my GP; my GP referred me to the local
Community Mental Health Team, and the
Community Mental Health Team referred me
to the Gender Identity Clinic at the Charing
Cross, which basically meant getting on to the
back of a two-year waiting list

PART02: So I was self-medicating with
hormones by this stage. So I went to see a
private gender identity clinic in London and
erm regularised my hormone treatment

PART02: Once I transitioned full time, *Second
Life* lost its importance.
PART03: to be honest with you, none of this is particularly uncomfortable because as part of the transition, I had to er... relive is the wrong word but I had to talk about it a lot.

PART03: essentially, people have to decide that you’re sane [RESEARCHER: Yeah] and that this is really what you want to do and this really is gender dysphoria and ...and I do have paperwork that claims that I’m sane.

PART03: when I was going through transition, I had cause to write a lot of things [RESEARCHER: Yeah] So it’s kind of a useful diary of shit that was going on.

PART03: When I finally kind of moved out er... and lost a few of my friends er... I certainly lost that side of the family, so my wife and her family essentially disowned me and I haven’t spoken to them since. I have spoken to my wife because we do have a son.

PART03: I think it’s like er... young girls growing up anyway. They’ll often you know try extremes of make-up, hair and dress, and all sorts of different things, because you’ve got to learn.

PART03: I think with trans women, they kind of have to catch up on that; so you can sometimes go to extremes and get very, very obsessed about your appearance, and how you act, and how you sound.

PART01: so I guess being being trans for me was more of the... better way to be ... myself and actually be a functioning member of society because I really wasn’t and that’s even like a functioning member of society even in the sense of how I relate ... how I reacted to my close friends or my partners at the time or my own, my own family.

PART01: So even in the really small social groups let alone bigger social groups er... I wasn’t really functioning or just function at all or really not giving much of what I could to those scenarios and it was affecting, it was affecting me and affecting people around me.

PART01: I have more of an attitude of you have a responsibility to either open up and...
PART01: I offer myself up almost sometimes as a guinea pig that’s like… so like my Mum started a group for parents of trans kids [in PLACE] and I went […] there to be like basically look: I know you’ve got questions, that you want to ask your children but you don’t want to ask your children because they’re your children, so you can ask me, because I’m not your child

PART01: but I’ve been there and I won’t be offended because I understand that you’re asking out of love, you just don’t understand erm that what you’re saying might be offensive [RESEARCHER: Yes] but I’ll have that dialogue with you and you can walk away and you can have these conversations with your child without offending or hurting your child

PART01: but if I’m brutally honest, I hadn’t done that previously, because I wanted to have the conversation with you and find out what you were like before passing on to other people that are maybe a bit more vulnerable in this kind of position than myself erm

PART02: He said: all of them have said how much easier you are to work with than ever you were before [RESEARCHER: <laughs>] because to be perfectly honest, the old me, who I persist in referring to as ‘him’, not because I don’t feel like he’s still a part of me, but just as a short hand to say ‘me as I used to be’ [RESEARCHER: Yeah] Erm… so ‘he’ was renowned for being a bit of a grumpy old sod and I’m anything but

PART02: I’ve now taken up a role as a pilot instructor in Wrexham, that’s as a freelance to my consultancy company, I’m a professional public speaker err again through my consultancy company erm and I’m on the board of Race Equality First in Wrexham [RESEARCHER: Yeah] I’m on the board of Trans Media Watch

PART02: I’m err a diversity role model; I’m err governor of the lifeboats, I mean the list goes...
on and on … I’m the chair of the local community cohesion group at the police… I’ve just today…what held me up was the induction was taking a bit longer than I expected, I’ve just been inducted onto the community board of Wrexham and the Wirral College which is a degree granting organisation in Wrexham

PART02: I mean the list goes on… my involvement in real life as me is wide

PART03: somebody who sounded like they were questioning their gender and [RESEARCHER: Yeah] who possibly was trans, and she was being you know quite dismissive of this saying: Oh, it’s just a phase and this is the whole Moreland trans thing – and I was a bit shocked

PART03: I had a huge debate with some kind of friends of friends one of whom was actually trans but that’s irrelevant I think in some ways to the debate about the James Damore memo from Google [RESEARCHER: Yeah] and the whole thing about, you know, equality in the workplace and balance, and they basically start out with me und unfriended me erm because I will argue quite a lot and I have argued on Twitter and it’s… With the Twitter incident, where I was essentially dealing with TERFs which is again a term I’ve never heard of – Trans-exclusionary radical feminists - [RESEARCHER: <laughs>] and… have you never heard of that before

PART03: What that has taught me possibly about how to maybe look at the world in a more critical way, so I do question not just religions, faith, whatever, but also the questions that are put to them.

PART03: but also more aware of what’s going on in the world or a little bit more aware anyway erm, so while I don’t generally day-to-day think about being trans or think about my social media presence in terms of being trans, erm, news stories that, you know, impact on trans people and any LGBTQi plus whatever acronyms we’re up to today [RESEARCHER:
Yeah] erm I kind of pick up on those and I look at them particularly

362-365 PART03: you know, like the bathroom debates that are ranging on in the States and seems to be coming over here as well [RESEARCHER: True] obviously stuff about the gender thing erm you know anything that kind of impacts rational thought in some ways and people being picked on

366-372 PART03: I mean: gay marriage, erm, interestingly when my partner, Gen and I, got married erm I had actually asked if my Mum or my Dad would walk me down the aisle. Erm my Dad refused point blank erm which is strange ‘cos he’s an atheist as well so I can’t see that he’s got any religious objection to gay marriage [RESEARCHER: Yeah] erm, and my Mum had already, when there’d been the gay marriage vote many years ago, she’d already said: Oh, you know, I don’t agree with that; marriage should be more traditional. So, essentially my parents are slightly <laughs> homophobic in some ways

448-449 PART03: Just live and let live. And just be who you are … as far as you possibly can.

Superordinate theme 2: TECHNOLOGY USE

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<tr>
<th>Identity Exploration</th>
<th>100-101</th>
<th>PART01: you find something that more or less serves purpose in describing the general feelings you’re having</th>
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<td></td>
<td>108-109</td>
<td>PART01: you behave differently to when you are holding something back; you’re struggling to find assistance</td>
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<td>185-188</td>
<td>PART01: erm… in general &lt;inaudible&gt; within myself with being able to function just generally within myself but then with that came the freedom to actually be able to … explore erm those social constructs of ..of gender in a way that I hadn’t, that I’d been too scared to do before</td>
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<td>230-231</td>
<td>PART01: Oh, I get it – so I’ve actually just been the… slightly camp, queer guy the whole time and I just hadn’t put all the pieces together</td>
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<td>18</td>
<td>PART02: so basically, I, I discovered my own gender issues online.</td>
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PART02: I joined *Second Life* in 2008, late, and within about 6 months, I suppose, erm I’d transitioned online.

PART02: pretty much as soon as I did, the thought occurred to me that you only live once and I had to give it one last best – you know - possibility of happening in real life.

PART02: As soon as the box got opened in *Second Life*, I thought: no, no, this is the real me. And at that point [RESEARCHER: Mmm] I knew I’m a transgender woman.

PART03: you kind of have what I suppose at the time was a secret identity but in reality is your real identity.

PART03: it’s kind of your right identity and that felt… that helped me a lot with coming out and kind of really starting on the journey.

PART03: my first faltering steps of trying to have an ID that was female on *Yahoo! Messenger* [RESEARCHER: Yeah] that was to try and be a bit me and then… obviously going on to forums, nobody questions your identity.

PART01: on social media there was still a… it still wasn’t talked about much and it was more of a… trying to … if we can get a foundation of the basic concepts of what’s happening, then we can start looking at other things.

PART01: there was an answer to some of the thoughts that I had been having and some of the things I’d been struggling with.

PART01: it was almost like when you get a diagnosis for depression or something like that where you’ve got these really abstract feelings and sensations which you can’t really understand or describe very well and you find something that

PART02: then I met someone outside of *Second Life* who said: no, no, no, no, you just need someone to show you round. So come back in and I’ll show you where the transgender activity is. So I went back online and found the transgender activity.

PART02: when I went online, erm initially for about a month, that was the same; I was frequenting places where’d I’d meet.
transgender people, whether they were real life transgender or just Second Life transgender was not particularly relevant

PART02: And I don’t really feel any different now than I did [RESEARCHER: Yeah] the moment I discovered that this was inside [RESEARCHER: Yeah] I knew that this was me from that moment. And it literally was just a progression from being able to express myself as who I knew I was

PART02: I’d withdrawn into Second Life as my preferred place to be before I transitioned.

PART03: And that’s kinda when I actively went online and specifically looking for erm you know, help, advice, groups and things like that.

PART03: I mean for me it was kind of a sudden thing suddenly deciding I must go and find out about this

PART03: you put a search in and look for something that matches what you think are your search criteria, and that’s what it came up with

PART03: I think the extension to that is that forums allowed me to meet people as well in the same situation and I’ve a very good friends that I’ve met from the forums then that I’m still in touch with now

PART03: my transition as I say in those early stages was really quite exponential so maybe I was not really thinking about real life or online life, I was just trying to get the information and the help and support that I could

PART01: So I think it was part of that but it also meant that I could manage who was told when <to a certain extent> [RESEARCHER: Yes... Yeah] …which was quite helpful erm just for me getting my head around it and dealing with it in stages instead if it all of it at once

PART01: just from general conversations where they will talk about something and someone will bring someone up that’s… someone that’s … like Laverne Cox someone who’s famous that’s trans and a couple of my friends will just be like: Oh, I’d like to meet a
trans person someday – I wonder what it’s like… I’ve got so many questions. And I’m sat there going: Awkward!

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<th>PART01:</th>
<th>‘cos if someone I haven’t seen in years comes and speaks to me erm usually there’s that thing where like it’s happened a few times when I’ve gone back home to area someone’s seen me across … town erm and they’re kind of looking at me for a while going: I definitely recognise that person – They’ve no idea why, and I have… it then puts a bit less pressure on the whole thing of… I have the choice to go over and say: Oh hi, it’s me… and this is what’s happened blah blah blah or if they work it out or just try it, they come they sometimes come over with the line of: You look like someone I know, are you related to them? kind of thing</th>
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<th>PART01:</th>
<th>I’ve witnessed it in person when she’s tried to handle it and she’s forgotten that I’m there because she’s had a few Bailey’s and she’s a bit wobbly erm and I’m consequently going: OK, cool, you’ve just very loudly announced erm my old name, when I transitioned, where I’m at and what I look like &lt;laughs&gt; so that everybody in the pub now knows that, grand!</th>
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<th>PART02:</th>
<th>I did it in there immediately [RESEARCHER: Yeah] and fully, and then slowly added those friends back erm and in there everyone was supportive</th>
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<th>PART03:</th>
<th>You know, my interests are normal interests. The whole trans thing is largely irrelevant [RESEARCHER: Yeah] unless, unless topics come up.</th>
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<tr>
<th>Peer-group support</th>
<th>PART01: But I’m part of a couple of erm trans groups based in local area I think they’re just facebook groups; I don’t think people actually meet up ever</th>
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| PART02: | So, what she did, was to feminise me on Second Life, but she did it in a way which evoked the memories of the fourteen year old. She literally just put a pink latex dress onto my male character [RESEARCHER: Right] And I recoiled in horror really, but it opened Pandora’s box |
PART02: we’ve got an online community called Transgender erm Engineering Professionals Worldwide [RESEARCHER: OK] and it’s a secret group, but we basically recruit people by word of mouth, and we are all transitioned or about-to-transition civil engineers, draughtsmen, err you know all of the allied trades.

PART02: So when I met a couple of pilots in there, they were just setting the group up; one of them is an Chartered Bridge Engineer and the other one works for FedEx at the time as a Senior Engineer but she’s now become a Chartered Engineering Principal, and they’d both transitioned at work successfully.

PART02: I mean you know the bereavement was every bit as strong as with people you know I know in real life and I never met Robyn in real life.

PART02: Robyn was female, lesbian, err she was one of the people that supported my transition, and validated my identity almost… almost more than anyone else in the world.

PART02: She absolutely considered me to be female with no reservations, no label, no other ingredients.

PART02: And I still think of her as ‘her’, despite the fact that I know that the person behind the keyboard is male, balding, fifty-ish a retired naval officer and disabled [RESEARCHER: Yeah] because my friend is none of that: my friend is the person inside; in Second Life you meet the person inside [RESEARCHER: Yeah] because the real self of that person is crystal clear in Second Life.

PART02: She got me into raising money for cancer research [RESEARCHER: Right] The reason being she’d fought off cancer and was in remission; and we raised a little bit over 150,000 US dollars in Second Life [RESEARCHER: Right] for cancer research one year … Erm… pretty much as soon as we’d raised that money, I found out that she was no longer in remission.

PART02: But people tend to cluster in communities that have similar interests.
PART02: I suppose most of my support came from … from people within the transgender community.

PART02: I think I’ve still got a network in there of about five or six hundred friends erm and of those three or four hundred are probably transgender erm the others will be professional contacts.

PART03: I remember spending quite a lot of time erm on you know discussions and it’s kind of like.

PART03: so yeah I suppose a lot of people’re there ‘cos they accept you for who you are.

PART03: it’s all the same kind of people Erm and then you do get the support, you do get people talking to you as if you’re a human being.

PART03: I don’t think I’ve ever had any of those that are really anti-trans because I think personally I’m fairly obviously trans, so I think anyone that is actually friends with me knows – they’re unlikely to add me if they’re transphobic in any kind of way [RESEARCHER: Yeah] or hold any of those opinions.

PART03: it’s kind of like a sort of agreement: you don’t question anyone else’s and they don’t question yours.

PART03: I think the extension to that is that forums allowed me to meet people as well in the same situation and I’ve a very good friends that I’ve met from the forums then that I’m still in touch with now.

PART03: she’s also trans and she went through all this kind of stuff.

PART03: I needed a lot of help and encouragement to kind of erm get out in the real world and actually be me.

PART03: I needed a lot of help online to actually take that step of walking outside the hotel-room door.

PART03: And I actually did it in steps like that; I walked out of the hotel-room door, down the corridor and back again erm and then kind of
eventually got outside to the car and got in the car and eventually drove somewhere, got out and eventually then, you know, went shopping, and all of those kind of steps were with the help of erm people online on the forums.

| 294-297 | PART03: real life isn’t real [RESEARCHER: Yeah] because you get more comfort and more acceptance online Erm and that’s why I say I wonder if that’s way some people do just kind of stay with that safety because you’ve got a defence and can shut of the world and you don’t have to look at it |
| 298-300 | PART03: my transition as I say in those early stages was really quite exponential so maybe I was not really thinking about real life or online life, I was just trying to get the information and the help and support that I could |
| 309-312 | PART03: I was communicating with my friend, Jane, who I mentioned before [RESEARCHER: Yeah] Erm so, that was then the support of a real person, and I didn’t really bother with online too much then |