

A visible absence: Transmasculine people on the screen

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Abstract:

While transgender people are underrepresented in many screen cultures, transmasculine and trans men face further erasure. Using small focus groups, this study asks transmasculine people how they identify with television and other screen cultures; how they see the representation of transfeminine people; what screen characters and masculinities they identify with, and what representation they would like to see in the future. This population did not relate to or seek out the few representations that existed; instead, categories developed that logically followed the use of José Esteban Muñoz' concept of disidentification and George Gerbner and Larry Gross' idea of symbolic annihilation. The focus group participants saw the presence of trans women as objectification and their own absence as a means of invalidating non-dominant masculinities. Disidentification with television/screen characters moved outside of media and manifested in day-to-day masculinities and gender ideas.

Keywords: Transgender, Audience, Screen Cultures, Masculinities, Representation

Introduction

'We're starving; anything will do,' Darius says to me, his hands placed on the table, making sure to lock eyes to stress importance. He has on an oversized, black knit sweater with a generous neckline. His hair is curly with dark locks that tend to dangle in front of his face while he speaks. Kevin and Adam nod their heads in agreement, echoing the same sentiments. Almost any representation of trans men and transmasculine ('transmasc' as an umbrella term) people on television - or most media - would be welcome. Right now, it's a desert.

Screen representation is not keeping pace with the number of people who are increasingly identifying and understanding themselves as transgender and/or genderqueer in the United States. According to the 2017 Accelerating Acceptance Harris Poll, millennials

who identify as transgender or non-gender-conforming form 12 percent of the population, which is twice that for the Generation X population (6 percent). And, not surprisingly, few studies ask transgender people about the representation they do have (Cavalcante, 2016; Cavalcante, 2017; Cavalcante, 2018; Gamson, 1998; and Gagnes & Tewksbury, 1999).

The absence of transmasculine people is not just known to this corresponding population; it is present in GLAAD's 'Where We Are on TV Report.' In the 2017-2018 television season, 17 regular or reoccurring transgender characters appeared on broadcast, cable, and streaming services. Of those 17, four were non-binary, and four were trans men. It was the first year the annual report was able to count non-binary/genderqueer characters (GLAAD, 2018) and marks the time this study took place. By the 2019-2020 season, the number of regular and reoccurring transmasculine characters increased to 12; nonbinary accounted for 5; and the total number of trans characters clocked in at 38 (GLAAD, 2020). While recent progress in numbers is being made, at least on television, transmasculine representation has been slow to develop in mainstream screen cultures.

Even recurring main trans cast members can be scarce on many shows that feature them. *Orange is the New Black's* (Kohan, 2013) Laverne Cox, who appeared in 39 of the series' 91 episodes, is barely present in 2017, 2018, and 2019 seasons of the series, appearing four times total. Ryan Murphy's *Pose* (2018) helped increase transfeminine and trans women representation significantly with its trans-centered cast. Transmasculine and nonbinary people have not had that boost yet. For clarification, transmasculine will be used for transgender men and masculine-leaning trans people. Nonbinary and genderqueer involve occupying the space between the binaries and can overlap with transmasculine or transfeminine if one is inclined to identify as such.

This study explores how transmasculine people engage with screen characters. Television provided a starting point from which the conversations expanded. Because television permeates society and its boundaries have expanded, the interviews naturally segued into other screen characters in films, advertising, video games, and YouTube videos. To understand transmasculine reception of screen representation, small focus groups were formed to inquire how they view transmasculine representation, how it differs from transfeminine, how they see scripted masculinities, how they historically identified with screen culture characters, and what would they like to see in the future. Through these various paths of inquiry, a broader picture of their screen reception and idealized characters emerged.

Representation influences how marginalized groups see themselves and what they can become (Hall, 1997). Given the structural inequalities transgender people encounter, such as lower employment and higher suicide rates, they are in a precarious position within the United States society. Transfeminine, transmasculine, non-binary populations, and mixtures thereof can provide the most critical feedback about the portrayals of transness and how those affect them. This study begins with a call for people that fit under the transmasculine umbrella because they experience less representation (Capuzza & Spencer, 2017), to explore screen culture's impact on their sense of identity and what can be improved in those portrayals.

For this article and the focus groups' timing, this piece draws from television and screen cultures leading to the end of 2018. José Esteban Muñoz concept of disidentification and George Gerbner and Larry Gross' idea of symbolic annihilation (1976) provide the theoretical basis in pursuing this study. The aforementioned people – Darius, Kevin, and Adam – participated in focus groups to discuss transmasculine representation.

Literature Review

Transgender audience reception studies could help understand the importance of representation and help better grasp the media's role in identity and as a tool for development. It seems vital to reveal more and understand the benefits of realistic representation from the people it purports to portray and their viewpoints on-screen portrayal so far. To begin exploring these ideas, it is useful to start by exploring gender.

Gender categories within themselves are problematic, never encompassing an individual experience and too often relying on binaries. As Judith Butler (1989) points out, the body is not a stable site for gender. Intelligible genders are ones that follow existing norms because people are socialized to replicate them – other ways of being become incoherent and are therefore unintelligible genders. The nebulous nature of gender is also on display in Raewyn Connell's *Masculinities* (1986). Hegemonic masculinity exerts control over women and other men. Men can choose to participate in it or not. This type of masculinity is culturally constructed and reflective of social values. There are multiple masculinities, but they do not have the same cultural currency and power as the hegemonic ones. Butler and Connell's theories around gender are broad in their application.

Julia Serano (2007), Jack Halberstam (1998), and Miriam Ableson (2019) begin with trans/gender non-conforming people in mind, adding a more specific take on transgender identities. Serano noted that transgender studies are ripe for feminist studies because it shows the degradation or disdain for the feminine. Cisgender people, nonbinary, and trans people who display feminine characteristics are demeaned and degraded. In the realm of masculinity, Halberstam (1998) outlined how masculinities outside of white cisgender masculinity are culturally rejected, considered illegitimate. Looking to transmasculine people throughout the US, Ableson found what she dubbed Goldilocks' masculinity, striking a balance between being too masculine or too feminine.

These ideas are considered when looking at transmasculine populations to understand further how they view their portrayal and transfeminine people. The study starts by asking for personalizing definitions of masculinity and societal definitions, too, allowing participants to define their genders and how it is placed within US culture. It gives insight to transmasculine reception.

Historically, the transgender population has experienced symbolic annihilation, a term coined by Gerbner and Gross (1976). Symbolic annihilation occurs when specific populations are either not represented or underrepresented in the media; it perpetuates social inequalities. Gaye Tuchman (1979) added omission, trivialization, and condemnation as elements of symbolic annihilation. Omission is the complete absence of representation;

trivialization involves treating the marginalized populations as unimportant or a joke; and commendation includes the degradation/villainization of the underrepresented people. It is easy to see these three occurrences in the history of transgender representation.

By documenting trans-identifying people's reception, it opens the door to a nuanced understanding of spectatorship and audiences, which is witnessed in the field of audience studies time and time again. Hall's (1980) model for encoding and decoding provides three ways to watch the screen: dominant, negotiated, and oppositional. This essentially allows people to accept the media's premise at face value (dominant), to allow the message to a degree while recognizing its limitations (negotiated), or to dismiss the premise all together (oppositional). The message encoded by the production is not necessarily the one received or accepted.

An example is Jacqueline Bobo's (1988) piece '*The Color Purple: Black Women as Cultural Readers.*' Bobo notes that many black women identified with the book's film adaptation despite being a white, male Hollywood product. The film version is encoded with dominant ideology, which provided a mixed reaction but a relatively positive one from black female viewers. Bobo posits that Black people are so accustomed to racists' depiction that they could filter those, gathering parts from the film to which they could relate.

Another form of viewing for marginalized audiences is 'disidentification' (Muñoz, 1999). Disidentification allows marginalized people to see their identities in places that might seem unlikely because they are so rarely, if ever, the target audience (Muñoz, 1999). This process occurs in groups that face erasure and phobic reactions in the broader public sphere. Muñoz refers to this type of identity recognition as coming from identities-in-difference. These identities-in-difference emerge from a failed interpellation within the dominant public sphere. This disidentification practice allows people to work both inside and outside of dominant public spheres (Muñoz, 1999).

Audience agency for marginalized/underrepresented groups appears in plenty of other literature. Its importance is evident: it allows for an expression of self and an understanding of place in the world. Alexander Doty (1993) looks at how people can read media as queer when heterosexuality is not explicitly stated, even experience queer even when not identifying as such. Exploring how women read romance novels, Janice Radway (1984) found the books served several multiple purposes, from reclamation of time to compensation for unexciting opposite-sex relationships. And the list continues, but not so much for transgender people. There are, however, a few exceptions.

There is little doubt that the recognition of oneself on the screen helps shape who we are. Trans-identifying people are no different. In the late 1990s and early 2000s, studies demonstrated connections between trans identity and media representation (Ringo 2002; Gagne & Tewksbury 1999). According to one study by Patricia Gagne and Richard Tewksbury (1999), people gained the tools to articulate their identity as transgender (or often-outdated terms like transsexual and transvestite) when they encountered visual media representation. That study cited pictures of trans icons Christine Jorgensen and tennis player Renee Richards as impetuses for identification. While these studies show a

correlation between seeing oneself reflected on the screen and better understanding oneself, the language used to interpellate the participants and understand gender has shifted, as has the media landscape. Still, the studies are useful, even if older terminology cannot be neatly grafted to current language.

Because semi-regular appearances of transgender people on television are recent (Capuzza & Spencer, 2017), it is valuable to understand how the identities portrayed recognize or/and misrecognize these constructions. This supplies greater insight into who the audience is and the motivation for the representation. It also gives the marginalized group space, even if just a small window, to speak about their portrayals. This moves beyond championing representation to asking why now, why in this way, and how did people understand their identities on the screen before somewhat regular representation.

Perhaps the most large-scale transgender audience study was performed by the British Organization Trans Media Watch in 2010. It surveyed 256 self-identified trans people. Of the participants, 95 percent felt that the media was indifferent to them, and 70 percent saw the representation as negative or very negative. Approximately 93 percent said they felt better about society or more included when they saw a positive representation of a trans person in the media (Kermode & Trans Media Watch, 2010). The study clarifies that transgender people benefit immensely from positive representation, but they have come to expect indifference or harmful portrayals. Even more so, these portrayals often reflect the binary, dictating the expression of gender to traditional male and female.

For example, Kay Siebler (2012) found that digital cultures portrayed transgender as transsexual, pushing trans bodies to a destination that mirrored cisgender bodies and gender binaries. In recent years, regular transgender characters have appeared on television, not just one-off episodes on medical shows as it was in the past (Capuzza & Spencer 2017). This random, special-episode portrayal relegated trans to medical plotlines only, often taking a reductive, totalizing approach. According to Capuzza and Spencer (2017), transgender narratives are evolving past one-note characters who are framed as deviant or suicidal. The often overly essentializing discussions about being born in the wrong body have subsided to a degree. However, trans men, overall, are still markedly underrepresented (Capuzza & Spencer, 2017).

Andre Cavalcante (2016, 2017, 2018) applied an ethnographic approach to transgender media studies from 2008 to 2012. Through this work, which relied on transgender audience reception studies, Cavalcante established that transgender people learn how to transition through the internet, the relief that comes from first-of-their-kind transgender movies, and the complicated relationship transgender people have with the media and their identity formation. While the book – *Struggle for Ordinary* (2018) – effectively highlights individual experiences and accounts for an overall experience, it does not distinguish the difference in the variety of genders. There is space to be explored in genderqueer, transfeminine, and transmasculine reception.

The L Word was used to understand how representation provided positive identity reinforcement (Kern, 2014). While most of the characters were cisgender people, Max was a

prominent trans male character. Max was the first regular trans male on a television show. In this study, a trans man expresses how grateful he is for the media portrayal and seeing a reflection of his gender on a popular series in a primary and recurring role, not just a special episode. Similar results were emerged from a transgender audience in response to showings of the trans-themed films (Cavalcante, 2017): *Boys Don't Cry* (Pierce, 2002) and *TransAmerica* (Tucker, 2005). Many participants mentioned how surprised they were that these films were made and how progressive they are in their representation at their time of release. Again, the audiences were pleased to see images in their likeness on the screen, even in often-considered problematic works, such as *Boys Don't Cry* (Pierce, 2002). With the rise in trans representation, these attitudes may have shifted.

One of the issues in trans screen representation is the nature of trans itself, as Cael Keegan notes (2016). Transitioning can erases readings of transness, leaving the possibility of trans readings of various contents. Through this auto-ethnographic piece, Keegan reflects on a 1990s milk ad featuring a small teenage boy talking to his high school senior self in the mirror about what he will become if he keeps working out and drinking milk. The senior boy's girlfriend steps into the mirror, putting her arms around the older self, and says, 'I'll be waiting.' Keegan saw the female as a threat of what he could be and the senior self as a possibility. Keegan's conception of transgender spectatorship opens the doors to reading more texts as trans, one that might be more beneficial than trans characters for the sake of visibility.

In a conversation between Sam Feder and Alexandra Juhaz (2016), Feder notes the shift in visibility of trans characters in film and television. He did not see a correlation between visibility and an improvement of transgender lives, perhaps one that extended to a few actors and made room for Caitlyn Jenner to come out. While more trans people are getting cast and well-rounded trans characters have emerged, the rate of violence against trans people – particularly trans women of color – has also increased.

The problems of visibility are expounded upon in the anthology *Trap Door: Trans Cultural Production and the Politics of Visibility* (Gossett, Stanley, & Burton, 2017). The introduction lays forth the issues of trans visibility and the problems it presents. While this representation seems to have opened a door, there is more transgender violence, the narrative tropes continue to be the same, and therein lies the trap.

Within these questions about transgender spectatorship and representation, one question continues to emerge: where are the transmasculine people? '... I've also been questioning the lack of trans masculine visibility in dominant media,' Feder said (2016). 'Is it about a threat to masculinity or simply due to misogyny or something else entirely?'

With these ideas in mind, how do transmasculine people identify with the representation they do have? How do transmasculine/male people identify with screen characters when they are mostly absent? How do they see this in comparison to transfeminine/trans women populations? What kind of representation do they want in the future?

Methodology

This study applies Muñoz's performance-based theory of disidentification (1999) and Gerbner and Gross' symbolic annihilation. These theories are bolstered by ideas surrounding trans spectatorship and gender as groundwork. Categories emerged with the examination of the data. Focus groups provided the means to explore ideas and gather information.

Focus groups put this oft-overlooked population in conversation. Focus groups, as George Kamberelis and Greg Dimitriadis (2005) articulate, have the potential to exist 'at the intersection of pedagogy, activism, and interpretive inquiry' (p. 1). This method can actively engage people in conversations and inquiry that positively transforms their existence. Exploring how people from a standpoint might agree or disagree can help achieve insight into the groups, given that they have a safe space for discussion. This approach moves past the idea of focus groups as an instrument, often technically and efficiently oriented (Kamberelis & Dimitriadis, 2005).

Every effort was made to ensure the focus groups participants knew the risks and benefits of the study. Part of this involved seeking out people who were open about their identity, so they would not find the group setting a potential threat to their being or safety. Participants were recruited from Facebook posts in trans-friendly or -focused organizations in Eugene, OR. The attendees received a \$20 Visa gift card at the end of the session. Participants contacted me through an email address supplied in the posting. Some participants were recruited through snowballing.

The three focus groups consisted of seven people ranging from 18 to 31; five identified as Caucasian, one as Latinx, and one as Pacific-Asian Islander. Names were changed for the article to ensure participant anonymity, a process that began in transcription. To provide a key for reference, the pseudonyms and demographics are as follows:

- Adam, 23, white
- Casey, 18, white
- Darius, 21, white
- Gabe, 31, Latinx
- James, 29, Pacific-Asian Islander
- Kevin, 22, white
- Marcos, 26, white

The focus groups lasted an hour to an hour and a half and used an interview script and a semi-structured interview approach. In addition to questions, participants were shown images of trans male screen portrayals to help with recognition and video clips to discuss the portrayals. While I looked for common threads, I wanted to avoid homogenizing because gender identity and life experiences are unique to the person. To highlight the distinctness, I choose to balance the individuals' voice with addressing strong focus group results.

The sessions established trust and sharing in a brief time. I am a transmasculine person, which I believe contributed to a safe and open environment. Participants mentioned how nice it was to talk about representation in this setting. The groups spoke of how they were tired at the end of the discussion due to continually talking and thinking through answers. The size of the groups provided an intimate atmosphere and allowed for in-depth interviews/conversations.

Results

Patterns rapidly emerged from the focus groups. The results indicated screen characters for identification; the group's response to transfeminine visibility and the absence of transmasculinity; and future ideas for improved representation. To understand their vantage points, participants were first asked to identify their gender and operationalize masculinity to ground their standpoint and societal views.

Masculinity

At the start of the focus groups, participants were asked how they identify in terms of gender. While the call for participation was for transmasc/trans men, this line of questioning provided the group with the opportunity to share their identity instead of just responding to limited categories. One participant identified as male and had felt that way since birth; other participants understood their identity over time with their identity emerging as their lives unfolded and considered themselves more genderqueer and nonbinary, not aligning entirely with males or females. Most participants felt that they realized their gender late, expressing a sense of being behind other trans-identifying people.

When asked to define masculinity, each group jumped to what they understand to be the United States' societal definition: toxic masculinity. This type of masculinity involves entitlement or superiority tied to it, often at the detriment of others, speaking to Connell's (1995) understanding of dominant masculinities and power over others. Connell's concept of multiple hegemonic masculinities was further explained by James and Gabe. Both participants spoke of how masculinities change with culture, citing Mexican and Japanese masculinities. They said there are aspects of those masculinities that would be considered effeminate in those cultures and visa-versa. The participants' definitions of toxic masculinity had little variance. In addition to entitlement and superiority, people described toxic masculinity as stoicism, unable to ask others for help, aggressiveness, and being stressed.

On a personal level, only one participant, Adam, saw value in the traditional conception of masculinity, pushing against the idea of toxicity, because he said he strove to solidly fit into a masculine category; therefore, he emulated it. He added that it is important to approach masculinity with an understanding of feminist ideology, though, a conception that undercuts the ideas of the dominant and toxic brand.

Several participants said they practiced forms of toxic masculinity when they first began to identify as transgender, but this shifted as they became more comfortable with

themselves and their gender expression. Essentially, they learned their type of masculinity and found a balance, much in line with Abelson's Goldilocks' idea of striking a balance between enacting masculinity through the balancing of selves.

As Gabe noted, pulling the toxic elements out of masculinity can be challenging. 'I try to make it retain being strong, being assertive, but not in dominance over others, but in your own safety, in your own emotional needs,' he said. 'I tend to think a lot of it entails being vulnerable, which tends to not go with how society defines masculinity.' For him and most of the participants, masculinity is a societal language that conveys how one wants to be seen and treated in the world. It is about how you adorn your body, how you present to others, and how you want others to perceive you. Their articulation echoes Butler's gender performativity (1990). That is, gender is something you do instead of something you are.

James said toxic masculinity is bound to masculinity for too many people. People have told him he does not seem trans enough, meaning he does not exude what masculinity means to other people. They do not like how he enacts gender, one that inhabits an unintelligible gender (Butler, 1990). It is even at a point where he must explain that he is transmasculine/genderqueer to his therapist, a professional who claims to specialize in transgender mental healthcare. James is happy with an androgynous look, but others, he noted, tend to have binary views of gender, many transgender people included. Gabe was quick to agree, adding that he has had trans men talk about taking testosterone shots through the thigh muscles to show a threshold for pain, making fun of the subcutaneous stomach injections.

Muñoz's idea of disidentification expands to the day-to-day masculinities and outside of screen cultures. All but one participant had to parse out what they wanted from masculinity from the world around them. Through this, they were able to piece together their ideas of masculinity and how they wanted to interact with and be in the world.

Responding to Representation

All the participants noted that the limited transmasculine representation they have seen reinforces gender binaries, too. 'They want the characters to feel cis as trans,' Marcos said. Some pointed out that when trans men appear on the screen, it is as muscular, motorcycle-riding men. Though, they often could not name a transmasculine person or trans man on television. For example:

- 'I can only think of one example if I think really hard: *Orphan Black*. They showed them doing their testosterone shots, that's like...*sighs*...problematic.'
- 'I can't really think of any out there.'
- '*The Fosters*. It's one-note, but I like it. It's an ABC family show. Two transmasculine characters.'
- 'Honestly, I can't think of any. Like the closest I could come to trans masculine representation would be gender-bending K-Pop dramas, but even then, that's

not really it because it's more of this woman-wants-to-pass-as-a-man-for-maybe-romantic reasons or whatever.'

- 'I saw a Coca-Cola commercial before a movie, and there was a them, a non-binary person. In just my everyday stuff, and because we're in Eugene, and there's a local celebrity thing, I did see a lot of coverage of Aidan Dowling in The Register-Guard [local newspaper]. Men's Fitness cover. Max from *The L Word*. 'At the time, I was like 'Oh cool, this person wants to be a dude.' Now when I go back and watch it, I go 'Oh no, they could have found an actual trans dude to play this person to do this job. They also didn't do a good job of portraying a lot of things at all. So, I would say it's [transmasculine representation] scarce.'
- 'I heard there was a trans man on *Queer Eye*, but I haven't watched it yet.'

This sparse representation left participants searching for an example or giving up on the idea that there is representation. They showed signs of viewer apathy, too. While all were self-proclaimed avid screen consumers, they mostly were not seeking out what little representation is present because they are expected to be disappointed by it. As shown in the *Orphan Black* response, it's boring and overly simplistic to show testosterone shots for transmasc characters. *The L Word's* Max, a prominent trans character, proved to be unrelatable and a poor representation for those who did know about him.

As the conversation opened to other screen mediums, the groups were still left searching for trans characters. While all had viewed time-lapse transition videos on YouTube; they could not name the people in them. Because *Men's Fitness* model and YouTube personality Aiden Dowling is from Eugene, two participants identified him, one of whom remembered him 20 minutes after being asked whom he could identify. Participants understood the symbol and stereotypes of transmasc in screen cultures; they just struggled to name them. The idea that they could see themselves – or overtly coded transmasc people – reflected on the screen just was not present.

Adam and Kevin were the only two participants who explicitly mentioned transgender television characters. Adam watched *The Fosters* (Bredeweg & Page, 2013), a cable series that had two supporting trans male characters during its run. While he finds the series to be simplistic, he still enjoys it and believes it is an adequate representation, though not a particularly relatable one for him. Two participants mentioned Chaz Bono, but they could not place him with a project or show.

Adam was the lone fan of the 1999 film *Boys Don't Cry* (Pierce, 2002). While the other participants knew of the film, and most had watched it, they did not describe themselves as fans; it was more like viewing the film was a shared trauma. 'I forgot about that movie,' Marcos said, shifting in his seat. 'I shouldn't have watched that alone.' Based on a true story, the lead character, a trans man, is brutally beaten, raped, and killed in the final scene. This response showed a substantial shift from Cavalcante's (2017) study on first-of-its-kind representation and trans viewers' appreciation of it. The viewers in the focus groups are – overall – younger than the viewers who watched *Boys Don't Cry* in that study. The

violence in the film eclipsed its historical significance for these younger-leaning focus groups. They did not praise the film for its trailblazing.

Adam recalled seeing long-time trans advocate and pornstar Buck Angel on the daytime talk show *Tyra*. After seeing Buck Angel, he said he fixated on him. ‘People would ask me why I was so obsessed with Buck Angel, and I would ask them “how are you not,”’ he said. ‘He was the only trans man you would see.’ Buck Angel proved to be an exception for identification, but only for Adam, who tended to seek out representation more than other participants.

Not only was it difficult for participants to name transmasculine portrayals and presence, but most of the ones named were only in passing familiarity. These representations did little to draw the participants into seeking them out. The combination of not knowing the trans characters, being vaguely familiar with the stereotypes, and not searching for transmasculine characters illustrates a distrust and disappointment in transmasculine screen characters and the industry’s ability to create them. Perhaps, it even speaks to US society’s ability to care about transmasculine people. Symbolic annihilation is clearly at work with this population. Within Tuchman’s expanded definition of symbolic annihilation, the groups were accustomed to being omitted and trivialized, though not necessarily mocked. The dismissal of transmasculine over transfeminine shows the continued intolerance for alternative masculinities (Halberstam, 1998) and the exploitation of the feminine (Serano, 2007). To clarify, there is no competition between transmasculine and transfeminine in this comparison.

In order to aid with identifying, participants viewed multiple images of trans male characters on television from *Transparent* (Solloway, 2014), *The Fosters* (Bredeweg & Paige, 2013), *Shameless* (Wells, 2011), and *Grey’s Anatomy* (Rhimes, 2005). Only Kevin and Adam could identify *The Fosters*, as previously established. A participant guessed an image was from *Grey’s Anatomy* because of the setting, but he did not know there was a trans male character on the series. Gabe said he thought he recalled hearing something about it. James gasped when he heard *Grey’s Anatomy* was still on the air.

When asked why they do not know about these characters, Gabe replied: ‘Probably because they didn’t have a big part in the show, they showed up for a few scenes, or because it’s a show that isn’t really watched.’ In a different group, Marcos said something similar. ‘Premium channels, established shows that have been going on for a long time, so they can do things like that while newer shows can’t.’

The estimates were correct except for *Transparent* (Solloway, 2014). *Transparent* is a critics-darling, award-winning show on Amazon and focused on a trans woman (played by cis actor Jeffery Tambor who was fired for the sexual harassment of two women on set, one of them trans) with little and some problematic transmasculine representation. While it was well-received, the series will end with its fifth season. Otherwise, *Shameless* (Wells, 2011), *The Fosters* (Bredeweg & Paige, 2012), and *Grey’s Anatomy* (Rhimes, 2005) appear to have semi-regular trans male characters who place transgender issues at the forefront when the character gets screen time. Personality appears to be second to gender identity.

The participants had low-to-no expectations for mainstream screen cultures to reflect their identities and to do it well. Instead, the participants developed an apathy and wariness of these images, noting an over-medicalization, sharing viewership trauma, and seeing the perpetuation of trans masculinities they find unrelatable.

Relatable Characters

While trans-identifying television characters proved to be mostly un-relatable for the focus groups, the participants had a rich history of screen characters with whom they identified. After understanding their lack of connection to explicitly transmasculine characters, the discussion opened to screen characters they do relate to. The characters shared distinct traits and illustrate Muñoz' disidentification at work. The groups saw their identities in differences or overlapping traits, some appearing to be more relatable than others (David Bowie). When speaking of these characters, the atmosphere in the rooms shifted from fumbling for names to rousing discussions of favorites. Three categories emerged from this line of questioning: female warriors and leaders, androgynous/feminine males, and transformational/shapeshifter characters. Some characters appeared in more than one category.

Female warriors and leaders

If there was a winning character from the focus groups, it would be Disney's Mulan. All participants expressed a strong affinity for Mulan, which is likely due to the 18-to-31-age range present. This cross-dressing Disney warrior elicited an enthusiastic response from the table when someone inevitably mentioned the name. Gabe talked about the queer reading of the relationship between Mulan and the captain. Darius called Mulan his jam. One group enthusiastically said it was time for trans men to take Mulan back. James expressed bewilderment at Disney only having a princess version of Mulan in costume at the theme park, wondering how Disney so profoundly misunderstands the character.

No other female-assigned character was mentioned even twice. Instead, a list of warriors and leaders continued to unfold, a combo of weapon-wielding women, leaders, and intellectuals, but ultimately all-powerful fighters. Television was quickly discarded as a silo category as participants thought of the characters they related to over the years: Ripley from the *Alien* movies (Scott, 1979, etc.), the cartoon *Powderpuff Girls* (McCracken, 1998), Lexie from the *Jurassic Park* movie (Spielberg, 1993), Lara Croft from the *Tomb Raider* (Core Design, 1996) video game, Hermione from the *Harry Potter* series (Columbus, 2001), Leslie Knope from *Parks and Rec* (Daniels & Schur, 2009), and Cammy from the video game *Street Fighter* (Capcom, 1987).

Casey and Darius spoke about how much they were drawn to tomboys. 'I mostly identified with girl characters who have masculine traits because I subconsciously identified with them,' Casey said. 'It wasn't ok to identify with male characters because I wasn't like that, so when I identified with characters, it was girls' characters who are stronger,

outspoken or intelligent. And whether we realize it or not, those are traits we inherently associate with masculinity.'

The participants found themselves drawn to women who are physically strong and often intellectually astute. The presentation of independent, trailblazing women spoke to their genders and what parts of the feminine they wanted to be included in their lives. They could read that these characters were being something different than the regular narrative. It also shows how often female characters are secondary figures, not in charge of their own stories, but were support for other people.

Androgynous/Feminine men

James and Gabe were quick to mention Mowgli from *The Jungle Book* (Reitherman, 1967) movie. Both participants did not like wearing shirts when they were young children. Mowgli only sports a loincloth. They saw this character as genderqueer, lacking a lean toward masculine or feminine. Marcos listed Peter Pan or 'pretty much any twinkie Disney protege.' Marcos and Casey spoke about queer-coded Disney villains, such as *Aladdin's* Jaffar (Clements & Musker, 1992) and *The Lion King's* Scar (Allers & Minkoff, 1994), a label they have because of their trill vocals and physical movements. Two participants listed some androgynous anime characters, such as Byakuya, Sasuke, and Ash. Androgyny is common in anime, so it is not surprising to see some characters present. Another participant mentioned the musician – and sometime actor – David Bowie, whose career is built around reinvention and placing his genderqueerness front and center.

Again, the identification with and reading of these characters helped shape how the participants see their gender in places that were not coded for them. The named characters signaled gender-bending readings by being endowed with feminine or androgynous characteristics, either by being coded as a feminine villain or not adhering to a binary identity. Two of the characters – Peter Pan and Mowgli – are not men but boys. Because they have not hit puberty, their bodies maintain an androgynous look.

Transformational/Shapeshifter Characters

These characters are steeped in transformation, be it evolving over time, pretending to be someone they are not, or a classic rags-to-riches story. They include Ron Swanson, He-Man, Cinderella, and Dexter. David Bowie, Mulan, and Ripley belong here as well because of the changes the characters undergo. Bowie's career is one of transformation.

Darius mentioned Ron Swanson as someone he views as a masculine figure. 'Ron Swanson is the most manly man. Rugged and reserved without being horrifyingly misogynistic,' Darius said. 'I mean, I think early in my transition that would have been a really good role model for me to have had. Had I seen that early in my transition, I think it would have affected the way I stepped into masculine adulthood.' Swanson's character evolved throughout the series from a do-nothing administrator to a less guarded and more

sensitive guy. This reflects how the participants found themselves shifting in their relationship to masculinity during their initial phases of transitioning.

Gabe said he liked He-Man because he was just really buff. I asked if he remembered He-Man's alter ego, Prince Adam, who wore pink. He did not recall that. Still, it's key to He-Man. The sword transforms him from Prince Adam into his superhero self.

Adam and Kevin both noted *Dexter*. They were watching the series together. They were also the only participants who knew each other before the focus groups. While acknowledging that the character is a murderous psychopath, they were both intrigued by his performance of self. Kevin said he saw the character as very masculine with his fit body and cut jawline and anger. 'He's trying to fit in,' he said. 'He's trying to do what a normal man does, which is kind of interesting. He's trying to do what males do.'

James said he felt odd about it – verging on apology – but Cinderella was the first character he really loved. *Cinderella* is a staple when speaking of transformative stories, be it pumpkins, clothes, or socio-economic status. Cinderella also benefits from a strong mentorship, having a fairy godmother, which falls outside of traditional family structures.

Transfeminine Representation

Every participant was quick to support trans women/feminine people when asked if there was more screen presence for transfeminine populations over transmasculine ones. The answer was a clear yes; there is more trans female/feminine representation, but the groups considered it a spectacle for cisgender people, representation derived from sexism, and, to a much lesser degree, an act that invalidates trans masculine/male identity. Many participants spoke of the animosity cisgender people feel toward trans women yet noted more representation. They did not see this duality as emerging from a place of positivity. Serano's ideas about the degradation of all that is feminine and Halberstam's dismissal of alternate masculinities threaded throughout the conversations without ever being explicitly mentioned.

'Yes, trans women have more representation right now, but that's not to say that it's better,' Darius said. 'That's not to say they have any kind of privilege over trans men because they definitely don't. I think if someone wants to talk about trans issues – whether that is for better or for worse – they might be more likely to pick trans femininity because there is more of a shock value or just more outside the idea of what's culturally ok.'

The concept of shock derived from the idea that women can play with ascribed guys' toys or wear men's clothing in Western society without the same controversy as a boy playing with a baby doll. As soon as Darius mentioned this, Kevin and Adam added to the idea. Kevin said trans men are not viewed as threatening. Adam mentioned that no one ever talks about trans men using the bathroom. 'I've been asked if I was in the wrong bathroom twice,' Darius added. 'I said "no," and it was fine.'

When exploring the roots of aggression and this element of 'shock' with trans women, the groups spoke of sexism. Darius said it is more socially acceptable to harass people who are perceived as feminine. In another session, Gabe labelled it sexism against

femininity. 'The reason that there is less of a big stink around trans men just confirms that people see trans women as surrendering their manhood, which is super not ok,' he said. 'I feel like – as messed up and problematic as it is – is probably thinking that it's more ok for a woman to become a man because masculinity is more desirable because who doesn't want it versus why you would surrender your masculinity and become a woman. We [transmasculine/trans men] aren't seen as curious enough or controversial.'

James held the one dissenting opinion about this topic. He felt he was perceived as a spectacle, one that is not taken seriously. He viewed the underrepresentation of trans men as a form of erasure. 'I tell people I'm trans, and their impression of me is ...like... you're still a woman. The first thing they are going to think about is you still have breasts and a vagina. It's a dis-acknowledgement of me because it's not a real thing.'

In a different session, Kevin wondered if trans men just go undetected with more frequency, both on the screen and in real life. He noted that Laverne Cox is a significant character on *Orange is the New Black* (Kohan, 2013-2019), while all the trans male/masculine characters the groups were shown or addressed were secondary in storylines at best.

The exploitation of trans women and their bodies frequented these conversations, be it naming examples of transgender representation in the media and the targets of transphobic legislation. Trans men/transmasculine people, they said, are often ignored because they are not easily sensationalized and, likely, because they were assigned female at birth. It is bigger news and a threat to cisgender people that someone is feminine who was not assigned female at birth, than for a person who was assigned female at birth to be masculine. This is clear from the representation of tomboys in the media and a lack of feminine men and more explicit genderqueer or transgender behavior.

The Future

'I would love to see a character who is trans, and that's not their whole identity,' Darius said. Overall, participants wanted the spectacle removed from being trans, normalizing the experience. Casey said that being trans is too often a point of conflict for plotlines when a rare trans character is present. He added that he would like to see someone simply take a chest binder off without it being a big deal.

In terms of representation, participants wanted a range of identities, not just replications of the binaries. As Adam said, there are multiple ways of being trans male/masculine that doesn't involve motorcycles, leather jackets, full beards, and deep voices. Many participants said they would like to see trans people who are not on hormones as a way of being trans. Trans, as many mentioned, has been over-medicalized in its portrayal. 'I myself am on hormones, but I don't think you have to be on hormones to be taken seriously,' Gabe said. 'Because it's not a requirement. At all.'

The groups also expressed a desire to see more trans actors play trans roles. This sentiment ran throughout the sessions. Race emerged, too, in tandem with varied gender identities. After looking at images of current trans masculine/male characters, Darius' first

response was ‘Well, that was white.’ Marcos noted that white, cis-passing people are the prominent trans men on Instagram. It is a problem on most visual platforms concerning trans men, he said.

The replication of a masculine binary and over-medicalization of trans men continues to be the narrative for trans men/transmasculine people on screen, most of whom are white. These identities are limited as they present only one way to be, providing a failure in storytelling and an idea of what transgender encompasses. Given that most of the participants started their transitions trying to emulate toxic/hegemonic masculinity, messages abound about what kind of man one can be, and the limited ways masculinity is portrayed in the world. These messages and representations aid in shaping people. This focus group conversation highlights these ideas:

Casey (an 18-year-old): ‘I feel like I’m one of the rare people who didn’t realize they were trans until later in life.’

Me: ‘I think there were a lot of people who did that.’

Marcos: ‘I was 19.’

Casey: ‘I hear from so many people things like ‘I knew since I was a kid that I was a boy, not a girl.’

Me: ‘I feel like that’s just the popular narrative.’

Casey: ‘It could be. Just a narrative leaking into my brain telling me that this is the normal way to be trans.’

The concept of a ‘normal way to be trans’ is further reinforced by media representation and societal ideas surrounding what it means to embody a ‘legitimate’ gender. The idea of intelligible and legitimate genders extends past the cisgender and heterosexual because of how the media represents and reiterates it. The concept of an intelligible type of transgender emerges, as reflected in the focus groups discussions. This portrayal flattens the experience of trans people, seeming with the objective to make it easier for cisgender people to understand.

Conclusion

From these sessions, it became clear that trans male/masculine people were engaging in what Muñoz (1999) recognized as disidentification. They relate to characters because of some aspects of their identity, but very rarely because the characters explicitly reflect one’s identity. Instead, they find pieces of characters that they understand, and those characters are rarely trans. Symbolic annihilation is also at work. While trans representation fits the extended definition illustrated by Tuchman – omission, trivialization, and mockery – it is not just media that frame it this way; it is also the transmasculine audiences. They have been socialized not to expect representation or at least representation that would be relatable.

Without employing disidentification, transmasculine people would find themselves continually missing in conversations, representations, stories. For this study, however,

explicitly trans characters were presented; they just did not resonate with people of the same identity. Instead, the participants found themselves relating to powerful women, androgynous/feminine men, and transformational/shapeshifter characters. The participants are accustomed to extracting these elements, either starting as a child or seeing its importance and role in retrospect. They are well-versed in seeing themselves in elements of characters.

Overall, trans men/masculine/genderqueer people lack representation within screen cultures, and they are aware of it. They are not drawn to what is present however, primarily because it is not made for them; it is made to explain transgender to straight people and to add conflict to a storyline. It is used as a subplot or a character that they do not need or even recognize as pertaining to their experiences. The few representations that exist rarely entered their social circles because they do not belong in them.

The gratitude expressed in other studies for any representation (Cavalcante, 2017) barely registers in the groups. The participants did not seek out portrayals they perceived as tokenized and removed. Still, they tangentially knew the stereotypes of the portrayals. This is likely because the visibility did not increase as of the fall of 2018. There is a level of distrust, especially when it comes to cisgender people creating, writing, and acting as transgender characters. All participants were aware of how production labor does not reflect them. While Capuzza and Spencer (2017) saw trans characters in general evolve past the medical and two dimensional, this did not apply to transmasc/genderqueer people, and the focus groups understood that without seeing pertinent data.

Explicitly genderqueer characters are just beginning to emerge on screen, not just the kind people have to actively decode. The standard representation is the binary, even for coded transgender people. As Marcos said, they want 'trans as cis.' As these focus groups demonstrated, they responded to the call for transmasculine/trans male, but the dominant identification from the groups was genderqueer, then masculine. This continues to show how much gender representation is absent from the screen as it adheres to binary.

The degree to which this group does not relate to media portrayals goes deeper than their absence or misrecognition of identity. They do not see masculinities to which they relate because they consider the dominant type to be toxic. What they did learn from screen cultures and the surrounding world was toxic masculinity. This resulted in a rejection of presented masculinities and a reliance on piecing together their own type. Screen cultures provided them with strong women, feminine men, and shapeshifters/transformational characters to aid in understanding this identity.

While transgender representation is on the rise, portrayals are mostly of trans women. The participants attributed the rise of trans female representation – often not positive in its nature – as a spectacle grounded in sexism toward women and their objectification. On the other end of the spectrum, transmasculine, trans men, and genderqueer people are not acknowledged. They are rejected by a media landscape because their gender is not present; it is not as easily objectified as the feminine, and it is not being recognized as a legitimate masculinity. In this regard, it becomes clear how deep

and continually misguided misogyny is, and highlights the fragility inherent in dominant masculinities. It shows a continued failure to recognize ways of being outside of the binaries of male and female.

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