Performing Trans Masculinity Online

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Sixteen-year-old Kye dreams of having a masculine chest one day. "A big chest is extremely dysphoric for a lot of transguys," he says. Though he has small breasts, wearing a bra "enhanced them and made them look bigger," so he started binding them, flattening them to minimize their appearance. Like Kye, many trans men hope one day to have top surgery, but typically they must wait at least until they are 18, and gain access to sufficient funds, to do so. In the meantime, many bind, or flatten, their chests. In a four-minute You Tube video, Kye displays his flattened chest and instructs others on how to achieve a similar effect; over 75,000 viewers have seen it. "I'm a real boy!" he proclaims in the video, which was shot on his computer in his bedroom, poised in front of a dinosaur crossing poster, a series of hand-drawn animal cartoons, and the cover of a Broadway playbill.

"Wearing sports bras are better than nothing," says Kye in a video post, but "binders are what transmen need to start passing as men"—that is, to be seen by others as male. Kye, who lives in Illinois, can't afford commercially made binders, such as undershirts which have two or three layers of spandex, so he affixes Ace elastic compression bandages tightly across his chest with a safety pin, cautioning viewers of his vlog: "when wrapped too tightly, they can do damage." Compression wraps can tighten over time and restrict breathing, cause fluid build-up in the lungs, and even broken ribs. Many trans men bind their breasts for months, even years, often as a prelude to undergoing "top" surgery.

In his videos, Kye thinks out loud, figuring out ways of minimizing the social tension that occurs when gender presentation raises questions in public, and sharing what he's learned with others facing similar challenges. He's trying out a different body, helping others to do the same, and building an intimate community with other young trans men. These opportunities for public self-reflection are particularly important for those who live in the liminal space of their family homes. Being out in public can at times be difficult, if not dangerous. They can be bullied at school, or assaulted on the street if they disclose their transgender status to others. By narrating their life stories and sharing information they are creating a networked public comprised of young trans men, building emotional bonds with similar others.

Kye is among a growing number of young transgender males who are coming out of the shadows, at younger ages—and online. For increasing numbers of gender variant people, the Internet has become a community, a scattered web of gender-questioning peers, who are instantaneously connecting with one another, sharing knowledge, and foregoing the authority of experts at younger and younger ages. While looking for evidence of transgender men's lives online, I stumbled upon Kye's video, and an entire genre of YouTube video diaries that document the process of transition. I was struck by the ease with which individuals were willing to narrate the deepest recesses of their lives for an audience of unknown others.

In YouTube videos, trans men document their decision to publicly assume a male gender, disclose that decision to family and friends, and undergo surgical and nonsurgical body modifications. Over the course of three years, Kye has posted 20 videos on subjects ranging from "How Do You Know You're Trans?" to an interview with his girlfriend: "How to Date a Transman." People have viewed his YouTube channel, which has over 1,000 subscribers, over 145,000 times. His is one of thousands of video blogs, or vlogs, produced by young female-to-male individuals on the Internet. Today, those in their 20s and younger are likely to have first encountered the idea of transitioning online. Chest binding techniques are a particularly popular topic of discussion. Searching for the terms "transgender men" and "chest binding" on YouTube yielded over 4,000 videos.

In the first of over 40 videos documenting his transition, Connor introduces himself: "The name is Connor and like many other people in the world I am transgender. 1 know there are a million videos that you can watch about trans stuff but now you have another one. I am here to help and to entertain. DUUHH! A'ight so love you my friends. Enjoy the page." In a video entitled "Moment of Major Dysphoria," his room is dark, illuminated only by the glow of the computer, he discusses his estrangement from his natal body, others' inability to recognize him as the gender he truly feels himself to be, and his desire to transition. "I really need to get it done. It's hard to wait. I want to get on t (testosterone). It gets better, I think. It just takes time." He is crying.

When he went to work the other day, everyone called him by Connor, his chosen name, "that was really cool." A few people even "called me sir," he said, "but it doesn't fool me." He desperately wishes to be recognized by others for the gender he feels himself to be. "I want my parents to be ok with it, and I just want to get things done"—get access to chest surgery and hormones. "Looks like some of you are watching," Connor tells his unknown audience. "I hope everyone else who has this problem is hanging in there. Don't give up. Hopefully you guys are rooting for me, and I will root for you too. Peace and love, I'll talk to you guys soon."

He addresses his viewers, the "guys," with familiarity and affection, and describes "meeting buddies online," though they have never actually been in the physical presence of those they communicate with and probably never will be.

By producing and consuming YouTube vlogs, young trans men are creating a visual record of the transition process and creating what Internet researcher danah boyd calls "networked publics"—spaces that are structured by networked technologies for people to "gather, connect, and help construct society as we understand it."[1] They use vlogs and other social media to document the decisions to move away from their assigned gender, bind their breasts, change their pronouns, pass as male, and often, undergo chest surgery—and to work out the emotional challenges such choices pose.

Before the Internet age, it wasn't easy to find a community if you wanted to break out of your family, particularly if you were attracted to members of your own sex, or liked to cross-dress. As a teenager in the 1970s, I made my way to the local public library, where I found a medical textbook that told me all about the lurid world of homosexuality. Those scary pictures of naked people looking plaintively at the camera, arrayed like mugshots, probably set my own coming out process back at least a decade. Who would want to live such a sad, lonely life? College wasn't much better. In the late 1970s, none of my courses—I was a history major, and took lots of anthropology and sociology—mentioned queerness. And I was too scared to search for "abnormal psychology." Eventually, I ended up in San Francisco, and joined a support group, basically a coming-out group, found my way to lesbian bars, and all was well.

During those pre-Internet days, even though I knew that I was attracted to other women, it took ages to admit it to myself, and even longer to act on it—until I found a subculture of my own. The fact that there was at least a five-year gap between that first realization to the time I eventually used the L-word to describe myself would be unthinkable today. The Internet has made it possible to articulate one's desires in the privacy of one's home, or childhood bedroom, and find others who share that interest practically instantly. Googling "I am a girl but feel like a boy" turns up over eight million results.

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To the outside observer, these young people seem extraordinarily willing to share the deepest aspects of their private lives—and even over-share, at times. When he first saw these videos on YouTube, sociologist Sal Johnston, a member of an earlier cohort of transgender men, admits that he thought their publicness would invite voyeurism, disdain, and mockery. "Why would you do that?" he recalls asking himself, he tells me. But today's young people lead lives online. Millennials who openly narrate their experiences online, even experiences that are at odds with the vast majority of those around them, are downright normal.

Young people's online and offline lives blur into one another. Many of them assume, too, that the sheer volume of information available online means that only like-minded others would be interested in viewing their videos, and that those who lack a direct investment in such concerns would have little interest in them.

While few barriers to public gawking actually exist, norms of mutual respect generally seem to operate on transgender vlog sites. "In networked publics, interactions are often public by default, private through effort," writes media theorist danah boyd. "What's at stake is not whether someone can listen in but whether one should."[2] Even though transgender vlogs tend to be open for all to see, the over 50 videos that I looked at revealed only a half dozen instances of negative feedback. In each of these cases, a member of the community, or an ally, came to the defense of those who were attacked. When someone named Ethan posted a vlog of his flattened chest, discussing the virtues of a particular type of chest binder, and was taunted: "If your [sic] a dude why can't you show your chest?" another viewer responded in Ethan's defense: "If you think it is wrong and/or nasty, then why would you search for it to begin with? Ethan is not a woman, he's a man. . . you deal with it."

Responding to one of Kye's videos, a viewer writes: "Ok so, I'm not FTM or MTF but my boyfriend is FTM and watching your videos has helped me. Thank you so much, and keep up the great Vlog." She adds: "PS. You're great for starting these to help people. Not just to bitch or try to get famous. You're an amazing guy, and 1 appreciate you!" Another viewer writes: "You inspire me beyond belief. Maybe one day I can come out, too."

A year after he began posting videos on YouTube, Kye underwent top surgery; his final video documents the effects of testosterone on his changing body. Today, Kye, an art student studying illustration, lives full-time as male, and no longer posts videos online. But only a few years ago, his vlog was a lifeline, enabling him to publicly document his transition and help others to do the same.

In theory, individual vloggers can control their privacy settings, deciding which videos to share and which to keep private. But creating boundaries around online spaces is difficult. The greater the number of viewers, the less isolated vloggers feel, and the more information they are able to share. For those who participate in these networked publics, coming out online can be personally powerful.

In their everyday lives, transgender people must be acutely aware of how they appear to others, particularly when they use bathrooms and travel through public places. Transgender women are particularly vulnerable to what sociologist Laurel Westbrook and Kristen Schilt call "penis panics"—perceptions of sexual threat in gender-segregated spaces such as bathrooms. Trans women are particularly threatening, they write, because they present the "terror of penises where they 'should not' be." In contrast, transgender men are seen as a sexual threat mainly insofar as they are a "source of homosexual contamination to heterosexual cis women." According to Westbrook and Schilt, trans men's "perceived lack of a natural penis renders them biologically female" and therefore "unable to be highly sexually threatening."[3]

Once they are perceived by others as men, transgender men report that they may be subject to homophobic violence from cisgender men who see them as insufficiently masculine. Black trans men also report feeling vulnerable when in the presence of men in positions of institutional power, such as police, according to interviews with 49 transgender men in the Midwestern and Western US conducted by sociologist Miriam Adelson.[4] Much of the violence directed against transgender men, in other words, is very similar in character to that which is directed against men in general. Men police other men, often in violent ways. "Moment to moment, day to day, you have to be careful," Sal Johnston tells me. "It's an exhausting way to live."

By openly narrating their lives on YouTube, young trans men are throwing off their internalized shame and making a claim for attention in a world where attention-getting is key to self-making. They have grown up with reality television and social media, in an age of publicity. Young people understand the search for attention as normal—and inseparable from our "brand culture," according to communications scholar Sarah Banet-Weiser. Brand relationships, she argues, have become cultural contexts for everyday living, individual identity, and personal relationships.[5]

FTM transition vlogs are a mash-up of coming out stories, *Consumer Reports* product reviews, and reality television self-revelations. Short, personal, and informational, they are embedded in the commercial culture in which they have sprouted, appearing next to videos instructing viewers on "How to get a flat stomach in a week," or ads for Epson printers, exemplifying the freedoms as well as constraints of self-making with new media. Those who master the art of attention-getting have some potential to earn money by directing traffic to ads and becoming "content management partners." Brandon has posted 43 videos, has 177 subscribers, and a YouTube channel of his own. "I have about four guys who are going to be doing videos," he says, "I'm still going to be doing videos here, and also on our channel. A 13-year-old is our youngest." He meets lots of his "buddies" online, he says, and plans "to get a couple more guys so that we can have a video every day."[6]

"The Internet changes everything," says Jamison Green, who organized FTM support groups in San Francisco in the 1980s the old-fashioned way-—face to face. It breaks down barriers and allows people to communicate with others privately, but also enables them to be seen if they wish. An increasing number of younger people, so-called "digital natives," are completely at home in social media. They have never known a time before it was possible to access a deluge of information about what people are consuming, what they look like, what they're thinking. While peer groups have historically played an important role in exchanging information about the emotional, social and medical aspects of transitioning, it was not until those who were questioning their gender seized upon the Internet, and social media, in the 1990s, that the movement really took off. The Internet has enabled younger people to "break down barriers." Green (who is in his mid-60s) acknowledges. "It's had a huge impact," opening up possibilities for people to stand apart from their families and communities.

Green wonders whether social media also "creates a sense of isolation for people," and enables questionable information to enter circulation far too easily. On the Internet, "you don't know if the advice you're getting is reasonable or not," he tells me. "It's very, very difficult to suss that out with the cold frame of the screen." He remembers how special, and at times electrifying, it has felt at times to sit across from someone you hardly know and utter a statement like "I think I am a man," and then spend the next hour with that person, and ten other people one barely knows, to process that information and use it to imagine alternative ways of being in the world.

Face to face gatherings have their problems, Green acknowledges, and some transgender support groups exert pressure on individuals who are gender questioning to "go all the way" and undergo a gender transition. Others send the message to certain individuals that "they are not masculine enough" or "trans enough." Still, he believes that there's no substitute for the physical presence of others.

NOTES

1. danah boyd, *It's Complicated: The Social Lives of Networked Teens.* New Haven: Yale University Press, 2014, 9.
2. danah boyd, *It's Complicated: The Social Lives of Networked Teens,* 58.
3. Laurel Westbrook and Kristen Schilt, "Penis Panics," in *Exploring Masculinities,* edited by C. J. Pascoe and Tristan Bridges. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016, 385, 387.
4. Miriam Abelson, "Negotiating Vulnerabilty and Fear," in Pascoe and Bridges, eds., *Exploring Masculinities,* 395.
5. Banet-Weiser, Sarah. *Authentic™: The Politics of Ambivalence in a Brand Culture.* New York: New York University Press, 2012.
6. Data were collected in May 2014.

THINKING ABOUT THE READING

According to Stein, what are "networked publics"? What role do they play in the impression management process for trans men? What role do they play in building community? What is unique about the online participation of Millennials? How does it compare to past generations and time periods?