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Contents

ORIGINAL ARTICLES

ORIGINAL ARTICLE

Debating Transness: A Critical Investigation into Trans Topics in Opinion Pieces

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The position of trans people in news media has long been researched but much of this body of research does not consider op-eds pages. Considering the recent increase in anti-trans discourses in Europe, this study investigates how transgender issues are debated in the opinion pages of the Flemish press. Through a quantitative content analysis and a qualitative thematic analysis inspired by a Critical Frame Analysis, we uncover which themes are problematized by whom and which solutions are proposed on the opinion pages. The findings show that non-trans authors dominate the debates on trans issues and that trans-exclusionary arguments are widespread. The debates center the themes of sex and gender, freedom of speech, and discrimination and violence, sports, and health care. However, underlying these themes, the boundaries of transness are debated and defined. This way, a debate is induced on what it means to be transgender which is instigated by non-trans authors in trans-exclusionary texts.

KEYWORDS opinion pieces; transgender; journalism; anti-trans; media representation
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Transgender people increasingly find themselves the topic of politicized debates where their identities and rights are contested.[1] This tendency also surfaced in the fi-

1 The authors are listed alphabetically but would like it to be known that they should be regarded as joint first authors with equal contributions to the article.

nal weeks leading up to the federal and regional elections in Flanders in 2024. One of the talking points of the far-right Flemish-nationalist party Vlaams Belang included denying the existence of gender and wanting to scale back transgender rights (Droeven 2024). This flare up of attention for trans themes was short-lived and superficial. The spur of media attention seemed out of place, as research on Flemish news media did not previously identify transgender rights as up for debate (Verhoeven, Paulussen, and Dhoest 2023). However, in this article we investigate how, in the years leading up to these elections, the debate on trans topics has been shaped in the opinion pages, where the debate *was* present but remains severely understudied.

News media, and opinion pages in particular, can serve as a platform for debates surrounding transgender rights and policies (Pfannebecker and Kay 2021). Especially in current times, when anti-gender activism increasingly mobilizes on transgender rights and attempts (and sometimes succeeds) to restrict access to gender-affirming health care, unravelling these debates is relevant (Bassi and LaFleur 2022; Verloo and van der Vleuten 2020; Verlooy 2024). Many recent studies have analyzed news content about trans people and have listed ways in which journalistic coverage can be improved (e.g., Billard 2016; Capuzza 2016). However, these studies rarely discuss opinion pages (i.e., editorials, op-eds, and letters to the editor) or even exclude them (Capuzza 2016), although these pages include more trans-exclusionary discourses (Verhoeven, Paulussen, and Dhoest 2023) and include more delegitimizing language about trans people (Billard 2016) compared to editorial pages. Moreover, op-eds can have a long-lasting effect on readers' opinions (Coppock, Ekins, and Kirby 2018). In this study, we will analyze how these discussions are shaped through a combination of thematic analysis and a quantitative content analysis.

LITERATURE REVIEW

In interchangeably using the terms transgender and trans, we refer to Talia Mae Bettcher's (2013) understanding of "transgender" as a broad umbrella term that brings together different gender-variant people including, but not limited to, trans men and trans women, non-binary people, and cross-dressers. The term "transgender" has been popularized in an Anglo-American institutionalized context after which it travelled to European contexts (Gill-Peterson 2024). While the term "transgender" can resonate less in a non-Western context, we use this term because the empirical material in this study is situated in a European context.

Transgender topics in journalism

Interest in trans topics has risen significantly over the past few decades (Das et al. 2023), resulting in more extensive media coverage and fewer instances of delegitimization such as deadnaming (using names from before transitioning) or misgendering (using wrong pronouns) in news articles (Olveira-Araujo 2023b). Despite this increase in trans coverage, news media tend to deploy a rigid binary conception of gender (Åkerlund 2019; Capuzza 2014). The reason we focus on journalism is its agenda-setting function (McCombs and Shaw 1972). Without wanting to overstate the media's power on the public, it has been thoroughly demonstrated that the media serve as powerful tools to put topics on the agenda. Opinion pages provide such a platform

where the focus lies on defining issues and offering solutions. A study on the discussion on LGBT topics in Spanish online-only opinion journalism found that, although transgender topics were rarely discussed, this format put LGBT topics on the agenda in 2016 in progressive outlets (Pineda, Bellido-Pérez, and Sánchez-Gutiérrez 2022).

One study on Flemish news shows that half of the news articles on trans topics feature at least one transgender source (Verhoeven, Paulussen, and Dhoest 2023). Conversely, American research reveals that approximately half of the citations in transgender news are attributed to experts, with one-third coming from transgender sources with lived experiences (Capuzza 2014). As a result, transgender people are more often talked *about* than doing the talking. All studies on transgender news representation conclude that trans women are overrepresented (Billard 2016; Bracco, Sczesny, and Gustafsson Sendén 2024; Capuzza 2014; Verhoeven, Paulussen, and Dhoest 2023) and that they are frequently fitted into stereotypical images of womanhood (Cavalcante 2018).

Opinion journalism provides an alternative. There, people do not function as a source but can take matters into their own hands and write about what they find important in their own words. While there is still editing and gatekeeping—journalistic actors decide whether the opinion piece is published, for example (Serino 2010)—it grants authors more agency. While these opinion pages are designed to be a public forum, evidence suggests that they are dominated by professional journalists and public figures (Ciofalo and Traverso 1994; De Smaele 2024). Research taking a gender perspective into account shows that op-eds are still predominantly written by men (Harp, Bachmann, and Loke 2014; Savage 2011). Research that focused on news articles more broadly found that journalists' gender, conceptualized as male/female without reference to cis or trans identities, had almost no significant impact on how they covered transgender topics (Olveira-Araujo 2024). There is, to our knowledge, no research to date that considers the authorship of opinion pieces or journalism more broadly that takes into account transgender authors. Opinion journalism provides an interesting platform to study this for two reasons. First, people make their positions—including their trans identities—much more explicit in their bylines. Second, opinion journalism is not bound by the same objectivity paradigm as news journalism (Tuchman 1972), which means an author's identity and position are more pronounced in opinion pieces. Therefore, this article aims to investigate these mechanics, and asks: *Who writes opinion pieces on trans topics? (RQ1)*

The themes covered in opinion pieces are equally significant, as they shape how transgender issues are publicly understood and possibly contested. Opinion pieces do not merely reflect public discourse; they also actively construct it by framing certain topics as urgent or controversial (Van Dijk 1998). Therefore, we believe it is necessary to examine in relation to which themes transgender topics receive attention in opinion pages. Quantitative analyses have shown that transgender topics are most often covered in relation to sports, representation in the media and arts, and discrimination or violence in Europe (Verhoeven, Paulussen, and Dhoest 2023) and the United States (Capuzza 2016). There seems to be an underrepresentation of transgender care and legislation (Das et al. 2023). As Billard (2016) notes, scholarship on transgender representation in the news that surpasses journalistic coverage of public figures and hate-crime victims is scarce. Dutch research shows that while general news coverage

of transgender topic seems to be framed neutrally or positively, neutral attitudes are becoming less frequent as transgender themes are becoming increasingly polarized (i.e., either positive or negative; Das et al. 2023). Flemish research demonstrates that there is more room for trans-exclusionary discourse in the op-eds pages (Verhoeven, Paulussen, and Dhoest 2023). Consequently, this article asks: *Which themes are covered in opinion pieces on trans topics? (RQ2)*

Resistance to transgender equality

Alongside trans people and their rights, anti-trans activism, too, has become more visible in news media (Olveira-Araujo 2023a). Anti-trans activism understands gender as binary and essentialist and conceives trans women as dangerous men and trans men as confused girls. Different actors converge in anti-trans activism including far-right actors, gender essentialist academics, trans-exclusionary feminists, and Catholic actors (Bassi and LaFleur 2022; Platero 2023; Thurlow 2024). They deny the existence of trans people but target trans women differently than trans men, tapping into the racialized history of transmisogyny (Gill-Peterson 2024). Racialized trans women, non-binary people, and intersex people are rendered particularly suspicious or even dangerous for white cisgender women. These dynamics arise especially in discussions about gender-based segregated spaces like bathrooms or women's sports which are framed as "safe spaces" for cis women. In arguing against the inclusion of trans women in sports for example, white cisgender women are portrayed as especially vulnerable when faced with the racialized Other (Pearce, Erikainen, and Vincent 2020). Sara Ahmed (2016, 26) explains how these discourses on violence flip the victim-perpetrator roles:

> Thus minorities are often deemed as being violent, or as causing violence, or even as causing the violence directed against them. To give an account of trans people as causing violence (by virtue of being trans) is to cause violence against trans people.

These tendencies become even clearer when discourses revolve around children (Nash and Browne 2020; Van Wichelen, Verhoeven, and Hau 2023). Consequently, transgender health care for minors is especially contested (Olveira-Araujo 2023a).

In a different vein, actors who aim to scale back transgender rights may refrain from using overt transphobic language or targeting transgender people outright to avoid easily being labeled as transphobic. More often, these discourses take the form of understanding sex and gender as "natural" or "truthful," whereas so-called "gender ideology" is perceived as harmful for society (Nash and Browne 2020). Much of the recent trans-exclusionary rhetoric is situated in the register of care, making trans-exclusionary actors appear benevolent, which Elster (2022) terms "insidious concern." This benevolence is mostly granted to trans masculine persons, whose assigned female sex is emphasized to portray them as vulnerable, which perpetuates misogynistic stereotypes. On the other hand, trans feminine persons are not subjected to this register of care, and they are reimagined as predatory men. As such, this concern seems to revolve mostly around the preservation of cis and (white) womanhood.

Another way to justify transphobia is to weaponize free speech and position hate speech as a democratic right (Cammaerts 2022; Nash and Browne 2020). Trans-exclusionary actors attempt to position themselves as victims of an anti-democratic force which restricts their right to speak their mind. Contradictory to this perceived loss of

free speech is the extensive and influential platforms these actors have to spread their message. Sara Ahmed (2016) reminds us that "[w]henever people keep being given a platform to say they have no platform […] you are witnessing a mechanism of power." In this context, the ability to position oneself as a victim, and to be recognized as such, is a privilege of a position of power. As described above, mainly white cisgender women can rely on this privilege of positioning themselves as victims against the imagined danger of trans women of color. Considering these dynamics in anti-trans discourses, this article also asks: *Which diagnoses and prognoses are used when discussing trans topics? (RQ3)*

CASE STUDY

We studied opinion pieces published in Flanders, the Dutch-speaking region in Belgium, a Western European country. The country's media are divided along language, with very little interaction between French-speaking media and Dutch-speaking media. The Belgian legal framework for transgender rights is relatively extensive; trans people can change their binary sex registration based on self-determination and there are non-discrimination laws aimed to protect trans people. However, these measures do not always correspond with trans people's lived experiences as they reflect a dominant binary man/woman understanding (Meier and Motmans 2020) and transphobia remains widespread in the Belgian population (Dierckx, Meier, and Motmans 2017; European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights 2024). This discrepancy between the legal context that portrays Belgium as a "paradise for LGBT rights" (Eeckhout and Paternotte 2011) and transphobia makes it particularly interesting to study the opinion pieces in Flemish media, as they serve as a crucial space where public attitudes toward transgender issues are shaped, challenged, or reinforced. The polarization of transgender topics in news coverage (Das et al. 2023) and the established presence of trans-exclusionary discourse in Flemish opinion pages (Verhoeven, Paulussen, and Dhoest 2023) make Flanders a particularly interesting case for examining these debates in opinion pieces.

Research has shown that trans issues are gaining traction in anti-gender mobilizations in public debates in Belgium, thereby moving away from (more marginalized) actions against abortion and LGB rights (Verlooy 2024). Anti-trans mobilizations in the country are not limited to the far right and unite a myriad of actors who employ a diverse array of platforms to spread transphobia. This tendency has been unravelling since 2017 and, as we have briefly discussed in the introduction, has surfaced in the weeks before the elections in Flanders in 2024. The far-right Flemish-nationalist party Vlaams Belang denied the existence of gender and wanted to scale back transgender rights (Droeven 2024). However, Vlaams Belang's overt transphobia was quickly dismissed by politicians from other parties as well as journalists.

METHODS

Sample

The sample of opinion articles were gathered through BelgaPress, a searchable archive of Belgian news media. We searched for opinion articles published by two Flemish

newspapers (*De Morgen*, *De Standaard*) and one magazine (*Knack*). With this selection, we have every print medium that publishes opinion pages in Flanders, besides *De Tijd*—a financial newspaper that did not publish any opinion pieces about trans topics. We used a combination of search terms (see Appendix A) to gather as many opinion articles as possible, limiting the time period to the previous four years. This led to a selection of 204 articles published between 2020 and 2023, from which we manually selected the articles that covered transgender topics as the main subject ($N = 87$). Excluded articles mentioned trans topics in passing, for example in a listing of discrimination grounds. For the qualitative analysis, we selected a subsample of articles that represented a wide array of topics, which allowed us to investigate different lines of argumentation while keeping a fine-grained, in-depth analysis possible. In selecting these articles, we aimed to include five articles per medium per year. However, *Knack* did not publish enough articles every year. As such, we analyzed 15 articles from 2020 and 2021, 13 from 2022, and 12 from 2023, making for a qualitative analysis of 55 articles in total. The analyzed articles and search string are listed in Appendix A.

Quantitative Content Analysis

We applied quantitative content analysis to the full sample of 87 opinion pieces to get a descriptive overview of the authors (RQ1) and themes (RQ2). The codebook was derived inductively through collective close readings and discussions by both authors and is attached in Appendix B. Aside from metadata (medium, number of words, date, and whether it was an editorial, letter to the editor, column, or a separate opinion piece), we included a binary variable to code if the opinion piece responded to a different opinion piece.[2] Regarding author, we coded the function of the author (e.g., activist, health care professional, politician) and if they were trans (no/yes).[3] For these variables, we relied on the biographies provided with opinion pieces, our own extensive knowledge of Flemish media and trans actors, and information available online. If there was any doubt, we coded a person as non-trans, because trans identities were almost always made explicit. For themes, the variable included ten codes which are listed in the results in Table 2. To provide a quantitative indication for the discussion, we coded stance (trans-inclusionary/trans-exclusionary/neutral or unclear).[4] In coding stance, we were aware this is a reductive understanding of the full text, but it allowed us to provide a concise overview, whereas the thematic analysis investigates the debate in-

2 We refer to all these texts as "opinion pieces"; "separate opinion pieces" are op-eds written by someone without (financial) attachments to the medium that are not styled as letters to the editor.

3 For this paper, we employed a binary coding between trans and non-trans authors. However, we do not regard the distinction between trans and non-trans as a strict binary, but rather recognize that anyone can experience discomfort with gender role expectations and affirm their gender in ways that transcend traditional understandings of masculinity and femininity.

4 Neutral pieces were mostly explanatory in nature (e.g., item 16 that explains which words the newspaper used). Articles were coded as unclear if they contained both inclusionary and exclusionary standpoints to not skew the data (e.g., item 81 calls for more understanding for trans teens, but consistently misgenders a non-binary student) or the stance could not be deduced clearly (e.g., item 25 is a satirical column).

depth. We coded a text as trans-exclusionary when it excludes or denies the validity of transgender people and/or identities (Ashley 2024). Trans-inclusionary texts are those that support and/or rally for the inclusion of transgender people and/or identities.[5] Each author coded half of the sample, and intercoder reliability was checked by double coding 10 articles, exceeding the commonly recommended 10% threshold. In the first round of coding, the variable for trans identity included "unknown," which led to a discrepancy in coding between the two authors (Krippendorff's apha .35, indicating bad intercoder reliability). This code was adapted to a binary code and authors were coded as "not trans" if there were no indications for the contrary. Krippendorff's alpha for all variables ranged between .84 and one, indicating very good reliability (De Swert 2012). The quantitative data analysis was performed in SPSS and was limited to descriptive statistics. Because of the small sample size, we used crosstabs to show some trends in the data but refrained from making statements about significance.

Thematic Analysis

To address the three research questions on authors and themes in the opinion pages in depth, we applied a thematic analysis (Braun et al. 2019) to identify and analyze patterns (themes) in the data. This analysis was guided by the principles of Critical Frame Analysis (CFA), because of its potential to make exclusionary process visible and to expose prejudices against trans people in media (Verloo 2007). It provides a methodological framework to address different understandings of gender equality by investigating representations of the problems (diagnosis) and solutions (prognosis) for gender inequality. This structuring of diagnosis and prognosis makes explicit the logic underlying the opinion pieces. Moreover, by analyzing who suggests the problems and solutions, it allows to identify who is included or excluded in proposing problems and solutions. To achieve this, a set of sensitizing questions served as the basis to analyze a selection of opinion pieces (see Verloo, 2007, 47–49). The sensitizing questions helped us identify the proposed problems and solutions, as well as who has a voice in framing the issues. We manually coded the data and used Excel to structure the codes along the sensitizing questions.

RESULTS

In discussing the results, we will always first discuss the most present voices, diagnoses, and solutions, making explicit whether these are trans-inclusionary or trans-exclusionary. First, we look deeper into who has a voice in opinion pieces on trans issues and is thus granted legitimacy and the power to set the agenda about these themes. Second, we report on what is problematized in the opinion pieces, the diagnosis. Third, we look at the solutions proposed by the authors, the prognosis. We discuss each of these elements for the five most prevalent themes we found, namely sex/gender, freedom of speech, discrimination and violence, sports, and health care.

5 See Appendix B for a more detailed operationalization of the terms trans-inclusionary and exclusionary.

Table 1. Author Categories by Stance (N = 87)

Author category	Trans-inclusionary (n = 39)	Trans-exclusionary (n = 32)	Neutral or unclear (n = 16)	Total
Journalists (n = 25)	5 (20.5%)	6 (25.0%)	14 (56.3%)	100.0%
Academic (n = 24)	5 (20.8%)	16 (66.7%)	3 (12.5%)	100.0%
Activists (n = 11)	11 (100.0%)	0 (0.0%)	0 (0.0%)	100.0%
Politician (n = 9)	4 (44.4%)	5 (55.6%)	0 (0.0%)	100.0%
Speaking from own trans experience (n = 4)	2 (50.0%)	0 (0.0%)	2 (50.0%)	100.0%
Health care professional (n = 3)	2 (66.7%)	1 (33.3%)	0 (0.0%)	100.0%
Family/partner of trans person (n = 3)	3 (100.0%)	0 (0.0%)	0 (0.0%)	100.0%
Other (n = 8)	4 (50.0%)	2 (25.0%)	2 (25.0%)	100.0%

Voice

The stance towards trans issues in the separate opinion pieces was predominantly trans-inclusionary (79.5% of all opinion pieces) while the columns reflected more trans-exclusionary stances (71.9% of all columns). Columnists also have the advantage of writing what they want, within the margins of what their coordinators accept, whereas loose opinion pieces need to be *selected* by op-eds coordinators first. Columnists are often considered to be credible sources, as they have earned a recurring column in which they share their opinions and insights every few weeks.

Journalists (28.7%) and academics (27.6%) were the most present voices in the entire sample, authoring more than half of the contributions. They were followed by activists (12.6%), and politicians (10.3%). Remaining categories, including trans people writing from lived experiences, their families or partners, or health care professionals, each accounted for less than 5% of the coverage. Table 1 lists these author categories per stance towards transgender topics. This table clearly shows that while all author categories have written trans-inclusionary articles, the trans-exclusionary articles are dominated by academics and journalists, and to a lesser extent politicians.

Only a minority of the authors openly identify as transgender (20.7%). Almost all opinion pieces written by trans authors were trans-inclusionary, two were coded as unclear as they were mostly informative. Trans authors wrote articles on all themes (see Table 2), but they mainly had a voice to write about discrimination and violence (27.8% of all articles by trans people) and health care (16.7%). Authors who were not coded as trans focused more on debates on sex and gender, as well as freedom of speech (each making up 18.8% of all articles by non-trans people), sports (13.0%), and health care (10.1%). Trans people thus mainly have a voice in talking about personal experiences related to violence or health care. They discuss the meaning of transness related to gender and sex or can judge on trans-inclusion in sports or speech.

Another evolution is that the share of trans authors in the debate is diminishing, whereas non-trans authors are weighing in on these topics more (see Figure 1). While trans authors wrote 33.3% of the opinion pieces in 2020, this percentage dropped to 28.6% in 2021, 12.5% in 2022 and 10.0% in 2023. These findings are in stark contrast

Table 2. Themes by Trans and Non-Trans Authors

	Sex/gender (*n* = 15)	Freedom of speech (*n* = 14)	Discrimination & violence (*n* = 11)	Health care (*n* = 10)	Sports (*n* = 10)	Activism (*n* = 7)	Language (*n* = 6)	Media & culture (*n* = 6)	Legislation (*n* = 3)	Other (*n* = 5)
Trans authors	2 (13.3%)	1 (7.1%)	5 (45.5%)	3 (30.0%)	1 (10.0%)	2 (28.6%)	2 (33.3%)	2 (33.3%)	0 (0.0%)	0.0 (0.0%)
Non-trans authors	13 (86.7%)	13 (92.9%)	6 (54.5%)	7 (70.0%)	9 (90.0%)	5 (71.4%)	4 (66.7%)	4 (66.7%)	3 (100.0%)	5 (100.0%)

Table 3. Themes by Stance

	Sex/gender (*n* = 15)	Freedom of speech (*n* = 14)	Discrimination & violence (*n* = 11)	Health care (*n* = 10)	Sports (*n* = 10)	Activism (*n* = 7)	Language (*n* = 6)	Media & culture (*n* = 6)	Legislation (*n* = 3)	Other (*n* = 5)
Trans-inclusionary	7 (46.7%)	3 (21.4%)	9 (81.8%)	4 (40.0%)	3 (30.0%)	4 (57.1%)	2 (33.3%)	4 (66.7%)	2 (66.7%)	1 (20.0%)
Trans-exclusionary	8 (54.3%)	8 (57.1%)	0 (0.0%)	5 (50.0%)	7 (70.0%)	2 (28.6%)	0 (0.0%)	0 (0.0%)	1 (33.3%)	1 (20.0%)
Neutral or unclear	0 (0.0%)	3 (21.4%)	2 (18.2%)	1 (10.0%)	0.0 (0.0%)	1 (14.3%)	4 (66.7%)	2 (33.3%)	0.0 (0.0%)	3 (60.0%)

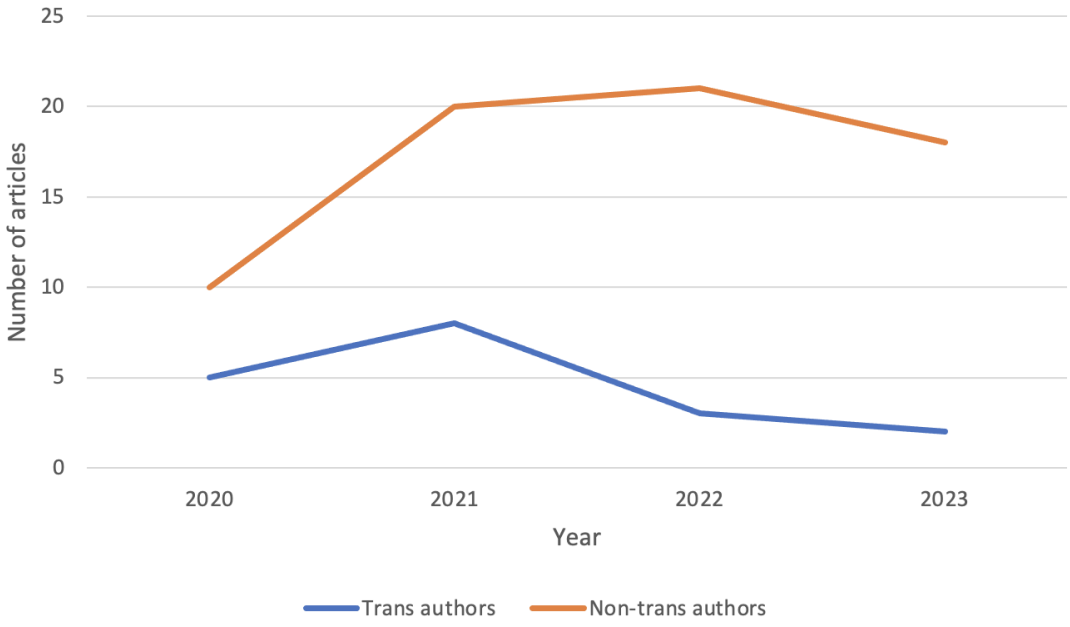

Figure 1. Number of Trans/Non-Trans Authors

with research on transgender inclusion in the news in which transgender people were heard more often (Verhoeven, Paulussen, and Dhoest 2023).

Diagnosis

The most recurring topic in the analyzed texts revolves around *sex/gender debates* that discuss the definitions and boundaries of both concepts. These discussions are primarily initiated by academics. Trans-exclusionary texts argue that debates on transgender issues are polarized and ruled by emotions, which they claim hinder rational conversations on the issues at stake:

> [Shying away from gender theory] suggests that as a right-minded person, you are not allowed to criticize some views and practices about gender. […] People with extreme emotions rule the sex-gender debate: self-proclaimed "gender critics" who deny the existence of trans people and hypersensitive trans activists who detect transphobia everywhere. Most people avoid that minefield. (4)

They problematize the lack of nuance in discussions about trans rights, sex, and gender, and claim that what they label as extreme positions on both sides—trans-exclusionary feminists and trans activists—are undesirable. A reported consequence of the lack of debate, according to the authors, is the rising influence of trans lobbies or pharmaceutical industries who are blamed for the increase of gender dysphoria. In addition to meta-discussions about transgender debates, trans-exclusionary authors question the boundaries of trans identities. For instance, an article titled "How trans are trans teenagers?" (74) questions the trans identities of minors, suggesting that they are not actually trans but rather have been falsely made to believe they are.

In contrast, trans-inclusionary texts in the theme sex/gender debates were mostly authored by health care professionals or trans people speaking from personal expe-

rience. They critique the legitimation of theories like Rapid Onset Gender Dysphoria (ROGD) or autogynephilia in trans-exclusionary texts which are "used to discredit people […] despite the scientific rebuttal" (47). ROGD frames the increase of youth coming out as trans as an epidemic as social contagion and mental illness (Ashley 2020). The theory was widely criticized by transgender health care professionals and associations but nevertheless spread amongst trans-exclusionary academics. Similarly, autogynephilia, the hypothesis that trans women's identities stem from sexual arousal at imagining themselves as feminine, is defended by trans-exclusionary actors.

Strongly connected to the sex/gender debates are the opinion pieces discussing *freedom of speech*, nearly all of which adopt a trans-exclusionary stance, save for one. Adopting similar arguments to those in the sex/gender debates, these texts argue that freedom of speech and academic freedom are under attack, as illustrated by the following excerpt:

> On campuses these days, things are going quite wrong: students and professors are walking on eggshells and no longer dare to speak freely, and anyone who has an 'uncomfortable' opinion is silenced […] after all, they try to avoid hurting anyone to the point of absurdity. (70)

Trans-exclusionary authors argue that the increased visibility of trans people and the adoption of sensitive language to describe trans issues constitute an attack on free speech and are manifestations of cancel culture. For example, one author states:

> You can hardly even talk about women anymore. It became suspicious to hold a women's day because it is insufficiently "inclusive." It is "transphobic" to talk about female menstruation, or to call pregnant women "mothers to be," because there are trans men who still menstruate, or who quickly bear a child before they let themselves be transformed [sic]. (5)

These texts oppose trans-inclusive language, labeling it as "Orwellian Newspeak" (70), a dog whistle term used in conspiracy theories to signal the supposed danger of feminist and queer activism (Borba 2022; Kuhar and Paternotte 2017). The sole trans-inclusionary text of this theme reverses the roles, allocating the problem to those stirring the free speech debate, namely privileged people who already have a voice in debates (8).

A third theme in the opinion pages is *homo- and transphobic discrimination and violence*, a topic discussed mainly in trans-inclusionary texts. Authors frame violence against LGBTQI+ people, and especially trans people, as a structural issue rooted in cisheteronormativity, as illustrated by the following quote:

> We must look at the broader, often hetero- and gender-normative context. Gender-stereotypical images and heteronormativity, in which certain masculinities and masculine behavior equal status and prestige, are an important breeding ground for homo- and transphobic violence. (9)

These texts argue that transphobia is systematically minimalized: "As trans people we are systematically pathologized […], excluded […], and victimized, but we are expected to keep laughing with [the transphobic comedy of] Ricky Gervais" (57). Furthermore, these texts challenge news coverage that frequently charges racialized communities with homophobic and transphobic violence, arguing that these issues are not "a monopoly of a certain ethnicity" (9, 36). One text states that the media are particularly

harmful towards Female, Lesbian, Intersex, Nonbinary, Trans and Agender (FLINTA*) people. According to the author, the media add another layer of violence to the already violent cisheteronormative patriarchy: "Your sensationalist articles and your so-called neutrality […] lead to extra transphobic and sexist comments" (36).

Fourthly, the *sports* theme was predominantly addressed in trans-exclusionary texts, with a particular focus on trans women's participation in women's categories. Authors frequently argue that the inclusion of trans women unsettles the integrity of women's sports and even threatens the safety of cisgender women, arguing that "people could die" (29). These articles explicitly accredit the cause of this problem to trans women and regard cis women as the victims: "Mediocre sportsmen merrily hijack sponsorships, scholarships, medals, and titles such as 'sportswoman of the year' in the 'women's sector'" (53). In this argument, trans women are reduced to their (male) sex assigned at birth: "These [trans] athletes may identify as women, their bodies think otherwise" (53). Remarkably, opinion pieces critiquing trans women's participation in women's sports were the only ones where trans women were deadnamed and misgendered. Here, transmisogyny and stereotypes regarding trans women were rampant. The authors referred to their sex assigned at birth, imposing sexist stereotypes on trans women as being violent, masculine, and threatening towards cis women.

The opinion pieces focused solely on trans women in sports, yet they never problematized trans men or non-binary people assigned female at birth. However, they did mention female intersex athletes. Despite the differences between intersex and trans experiences, opinion piece authors drew parallels between both intersex women and trans women's participation in sports. The authors, mainly sports journalists, were profoundly focused on the women's bodies, describing their genitals, hormones, bone structure, and chromosomes, emphasizing their "male mass, male bone-structure, and male-born power" (29). Through this focus on their bodies, trans and intersex women are portrayed as masculine, violent, and a threat for cis white womanhood. Scholars have drawn attention to how such processes of differentiation tap into the "colonial legacies that have long defined racialized women as the unfeminine or 'masculine' contrast to white women's presumed 'natural' femininity" (Pearce, Erikainen, and Vincent 2020, 6). Trans-inclusionary texts in the *sports* theme were not included in the qualitative analysis because of the lack of salience of transgender specific arguments in those texts and because of their numerical minority.

The final popular theme, *health care*, was mainly covered from an exclusionary stance toward trans people. These texts focus on gender-affirming health care for minors. The authors first problematize the increasing prevalence of gender dysphoria: "Since a few years, the number of people with gender dysphoria has explosively grown" (66). These texts are puzzled by the rising prevalence of gender dysphoria and problematize the lack of explanation, a wonder that aligns with international trans-exclusionary actors (Ashley 2020; Billard 2023; Thurlow 2024). This text suggests some possible causes for gender dysphoria:

> The strong feeling of discomfort with their sex characteristics has nothing do to with them being trans. It had different causes, that were insufficiently explored by the clinicians guiding their transition […] Autism stands out […] Anxiety and depression disorders also are prevalent in this group, besides eating-, compulsive-, and learning disorders. (31)

Next to pointing to autism and anxiety disorders as possible causes for gender dysphoria, the following quote also names social contagion as a cause of dysphoria:

> Lisa Littman [...] discovered that there is sometimes social contagion. The trans identification emerged in a friend group where others had outed themselves as trans. Moreover, parents reported intense use of social media before the child came out as trans. (74)

Through the frequent references to these theories, despite their rejection by several scientific communities, parallels with the discourses of transnational trans-exclusionary movements become apparent (Ashley 2020).

After suggesting possible causes of gender dysphoria, these texts problematize gender-affirming treatments in minors, especially the use of puberty blockers. One author argues that the lack of blind control-group monitored studies infringes the validity of the treatment: "Applying an insufficiently substantiated medical treatment to vulnerable children, with far-reaching and irreversible consequences, we consider irresponsible" (66). While pointing out the flaws in research to gender-affirming health care is as such not necessarily trans-exclusionary, it is a much-used argument in transnational anti-trans mobilizations (Billard 2024). Trans-exclusionary actors readily point out the lack of blinded control-group studies but omit the moral arguments against such methodologies in gender-affirming health care (Oosthoek et al. 2024). The argument evokes the "register of care" according to which trans-exclusionary actors claim to act out of benevolence while actually aiming to curb trans rights (Elster 2022).

On the other side are opinion pieces with a trans-inclusionary stance who argue that trans-exclusionary opinion pieces spread misinformation. These are often written by trans persons or their loved ones (a parent or partner) and reframe the issue: "It is a strange experience that our son's personal trajectory is the subject of social debate" (6). They problematize the attacks on gender-affirming health care in trans-exclusionary opinion pieces. Furthermore, since these articles are a reaction to earlier trans-exclusionary texts, much of their content is aimed at debunking misinformation or highlighting misleading statistics on health care or transgender people:

> [Author of 31] wrote: "A Reddit forum for detransitioners has 38.000 members." By doing so, she creates the impression that all those 38.000 people regret their transition. (32)

> Terms such as "contagion," "epidemy," and "phenomena" indicate what [Author of 74]'s explanation is [for the increase in trans teens]: social contagion. "Isn't it a bit of a trend?" (75)

Prognosis

Similar to the diagnostic polarization on *sex/gender debates*, the proposed actions to address the identified problems differ considerably between trans-exclusionary and trans-inclusionary texts. Trans-exclusionary texts argue that the primary problem is the lack of rational debate on trans issues. Their proposed solution is to continue such debates. The authors urge to keep talking about the described tensions between women's rights and trans rights which, according to the authors, are a crucial part of "the trans debate" (4, 28). One author sees more debate as a tool to find a way out of an

impasse: "We need to find a compromise between [women's] rights and trans persons' rights" (28).

On the other hand, trans-inclusionary texts problematizing "the transgender debates" urge the opposite: to stop debates on trans people's rights and lives. One text explicitly places the responsibility of solving the issue with actors that initiate these debates, and advocates: "It is time to question your thinking and your privileges" (9). These articles argue that the debates should cease because trans experiences are non-debatable and that transness is not a new phenomenon. Other texts emphasize the importance of positive and affirming messages for trans and non-conforming youth.

Regarding *freedom of speech*, where texts were all coded as trans-exclusionary except for one, the proposed solutions include continuing to debate trans topics, similar to the prognosis of sex/gender debates. The authors argue for spaces where ideas can clash and where critiquing "wokeness" or "transgender activism" is part of a healthy debate (65).

Proposed actions aimed at reducing *homo- and transphobic discrimination and violence* situated in trans-inclusionary texts include firstly reforming and expanding education on LGBTQI+ themes. The articles pose that educational tools should historically situate the current gender norms and diversify teaching materials: "In education […] the course content needs to be different and more inclusive" (9). Relatedly, they argue that there should be more diversity among teachers. Other authors distribute the responsibility for taking action: they call on (future) parents to accept their child's sexuality or gender identity but also motivate queer people to organize and come together to fight against LGBTQI+-phobia and structural oppressions like racism, sexism, and ableism. Finally, authors pose that queer people should also create safe spaces for FLINTA* people to shield them from structural oppression and "cismasculine domination" (36).

The articles on the participation of trans people in *sports*, which mainly adopt a trans-exclusionary stance, claim that trans and intersex women's participation in the women's competition should be limited. At the base, they all argue for at least the reinforcement of binary sex categories, because "biological women have the right to play sports in a space reserved for them" (23). Proposed solutions include maintaining exclusive categories for cis women, opening the men's category for everyone, installing a new "open" category, or integrating such categories within the Paralympics. Once, a text suggested to exclude all trans women from all sport categories, "to protect a very, very big majority [of cis women]" (29). These options are defended by referring to a principle of fairness, sometimes arguing that discrimination of a few to protect the majority is desirable. This author defends this solution by pointing at the numerical minority of trans women compared to cis women, stating that it entails "discrimination of some rare individuals, but it is meant to protect a large group" (12). Protecting the interests of the majority (cis women) is thus presented as a legitimation for the discrimination of the minority (trans and intersex women).

Proposed solutions for issues with gender-affirming *health care*, mainly put forward in trans-exclusionary texts, include the barring of puberty blockers to let gender dysphoric minors experience the puberty aligned with their sex assigned at birth:

> Allowing puberty to set in is important, because in 85% [of gender dysphoric youth], gender dysphoria spontaneously disappears. Their budding sexuality will mostly lead them to discover they are not trans, but gay or lesbian. (31)

These authors point out that, for those who continue to experience gender dysphoria, medical transitions should be restricted to adulthood (66). Some authors suggest to not treat the dysphoria of the adolescents but instead "focus first and foremost on mental health care" (63), implying that mental health care is not addressed in current treatments. They assert that this will prevent people from transitioning recklessly or unnecessarily, suggesting that this is the current norm. Another author does not explicitly oppose gender-affirming health care but builds his argument around the assumption that the increase in gender dysphoria is caused by "gender ideology" (59), thereby suggesting that being transgender is a hype or trend: "Permanent doubt about your sexed character is upgraded to a new sort of being" (59). This leads the author to conclude that "liberation can also lay in accepting your body as it is," proposing the acceptance of dysphoria as an alternative to gender-affirming health care. The authors calling to halt the use of puberty blockers urge trans health care professionals to exercise greater caution.

On the other side are trans-inclusionary texts that respond to the solutions put forward in trans-exclusionary texts. They propose more extensive support for trans and detransitioned people: "Trans teens are a vulnerable group, everyone agrees on that. What they all need is understanding, support, love, and acknowledgment" (75).

Almost all opinion pieces on health care—both inclusionary and exclusionary—argue that more research is necessary. What distinguishes them from each other is the object of this research. Trans-inclusionary pieces argue for more research into the needs of trans and detransitioned persons. One author phrases it as follows: "If more research is needed about trans teenagers, it is research that examines how that guidance is best shaped. Not this kind of manipulative propaganda packaged as scientific research" (75). Trans-exclusionary pieces, however, claim that research needs to clarify the causes of gender dysphoria and the long-term effects of gender-affirming treatments. In the meantime, these texts argue for a halt in gender-affirming care which further differentiates them from the inclusionary texts.

DISCUSSION

In this discussion, we first want to draw attention to a more latent theme that became apparent during the analysis, namely the *debating transness theme*. This theme is mainly present in trans-exclusionary texts, although some inclusionary texts also touch upon it. In trans-exclusionary texts, debates on the boundaries of transness were the most vigorous in themes of sports, health care, and sex/gender. These surface-leveled themes served to induce a debate on what it means to be transgender and were instigated by non-trans authors in trans-exclusionary texts. One way transness was (de)legitimized was by presenting sex assigned at birth as a determining factor in someone's gender identity. This resonates with findings from Anglo-Saxon contexts where anti-trans mobilizations construct sex as binary and immutable (Libby 2022; Pearce, Erikainen, and Vincent 2020; Thurlow 2024). Another way the legitimacy of a

trans identity was assessed in Flemish opinion pages was by determining its causes. For example, gender dysphoria was often deemed as causing transness, but transness was only deemed legitimate when the dysphoria had been present since childhood, and when the person was neurotypical. Trans-exclusionary texts also drew from legacies of exclusion like racism, sexism, ableism, and ageism to delegitimize transness, which Hsu (2022) calls *affective drift*. Understanding the cause of transness and gender dysphoria is further postulated as a prerequisite for providing health care treatment. The assumption that transness is debateable becomes especially apparent in the avoidance to name gender dysphoric people "trans" but rather referring to them as "gender dysphoric youth." This suggests that gender dysphoric youth are not considered trans nor able to determine their transness, as research from the UK has also demonstrated (Amery 2023). Moreover, their transness is pathologized and they are constructed as cis minors in need of saving (Elster 2022).

Transness is further debated in the freedom of speech theme, where questions on the validity of trans rights and identities are catalyzed by debates on freedom of speech. Here, transness serves as the object of an abstract debate which accumulates trans-exclusionary arguments. Calls for upholding debates on trans rights as part of freedom of speech then use free speech as an ideological weapon, as also noted by Ahmed (2016). They position trans identities as up for debate and represent transphobia as a defensible and responsible opinion.

While the latent debating transness theme is quite dominant in trans-exclusionary texts, it is also present in some trans-inclusionary texts which were often written in reaction to the exclusionary texts. Consequently, through the rebuttal of the arguments of trans-exclusionary texts, trans-inclusionary texts actually affirm the legitimacy of this debate. The latent theme manifested across different texts, irrespective of the coded themes. The qualitative analysis also showed that there was a lot of overlap between the different themes. Especially the theme sex/gender was present in many opinion pieces with themes such as sports, health care, and freedom of speech. These themes serve as entrance points to draw boundaries on transness in both exclusionary and inclusionary texts.

Detransitioned people and their experiences are used in inclusionary and exclusionary texts to define transness. While boundary-making in trans spaces has received some scholarly attention (Sutherland 2023), the role that detrans stories play in anti-trans mobilizations remains understudied and deserving of more (scholarly) attention, also to increase allyship between trans and detrans communities in fighting anti-trans mobilizations (Pearce, Erikainen, and Vincent 2020).

Considering the voices present in the opinion pieces, the quantitative analysis showed that only a small minority of the authors is openly transgender and that the majority of the texts takes a trans-exclusionary stance. These findings are in line with research that questions the role of opinion pages as a true public forum, as the debate is dominated by already established actors (Ciofalo and Traverso 1994; De Smaele 2024). Although research on news journalism showed that gender had little impact on how journalists cover trans topics (Olveira-Araujo 2024), these findings demonstrate the importance of including trans identities in this analysis. The imbalance of voices points to structural issues in the way debates on trans issues are currently held. The qualitative analysis showed that trans people mainly have a voice in addressing their

personal experiences with (amongst others) discrimination and health care. While trans authors also have a voice in addressing issues in sports, and debates on sex/gender, they do not refrain from referring to their gendered experiences. Non-trans authors then, position themselves more as independent professionals and claim authority in discussing the relation between sex and gender, gender-affirming health care, or sports. These findings suggest that discussions on transgender issues are predominantly shaped and set on the agenda by non-trans authors. Studies on news coverage already indicated that transgender sources are often included as sources sharing personal experiences rather than as authoritative commentators and that they are drowned out by other sources (Capuzza 2014; Verhoeven, Paulussen, and Dhoest 2023). This pattern is even more pronounced in opinion pages. This raises questions about the workings of opinion pages. Ideally, they should provide a space for diverse voices and informed debate, yet in practice, they often reinforce existing power dynamics.

With half of the trans-exclusionary texts in the sample originating from academic authors and a quarter from journalists, it becomes clear that the opposition to trans rights goes beyond the field of institutional politics. Rather, the debate in Flanders is dominated by columnists who enjoy a certain amount of discursive authority and capitalize on writing polemic texts. Columnists put debates on gender diversity on the agenda and thus set the tones for these debates with mainly trans-exclusionary columns. The themes they put forward do not necessarily reflect the issues that pertain to trans people (Pearce, Erikainen, and Vincent 2020). Further research is necessary to the causes and consequences of the imbalance in voices, how the imbalance is perpetuated, and who enjoys legitimacy and authority in debates on trans issues.

From the results, an imbalance between diagnoses and prognoses became apparent. Most of the analyzed texts problematized at least one issue while few texts proposed actual solutions. This is partly due to the format of the op-eds pages, which often serve as a platform to address societal issues and which favor clear, strong opinions. Inclusionary texts suggest fewer solutions and are more focused on problematizing trans-exclusionary opinion pieces.

The results further show that the proposed problems and solutions differ greatly depending on the stance of the text. While the diagnoses sometimes align (for example the lack of knowledge on gender-affirming health care), the disparity between exclusionary and inclusionary texts is most visible in the prognoses. In different trans-exclusionary opinion pieces, the proposed solution in fact harms trans people. This was especially clear in the texts on sports, where the proposed solutions were the exclusion and discrimination against athletes specifically because of their transness. Similarly in texts on health care, trans-exclusionary authors propose halting gender-affirming treatments which is not only considered harmful for trans people individually, but is also considered as harming their human rights (Ashley 2024; Horton et al. 2024; Suess Schwend 2020).

CONCLUSION

This article analyzed the discussions on transgender topics in opinion articles in the Flemish press through a quantitative content analysis and a qualitative thematic analysis inspired by Critical Framing Analysis. The research questions asked who wrote

opinion pieces on trans topics, which themes were covered, and which arguments were used. The findings show that the themes of sex/gender, freedom of speech, discrimination and violence, health care, and sports were most discussed. We demonstrated how non-trans authors put forth themes and discussions to contest trans rights and in doing so, also debate transness as such. The identification of the meta-theme of debating transness contributes to the research to anti-trans mobilizations outside of the UK and US contexts and provides another layer of analysis of these phenomena by going beyond the analysis of actors and discourses. While this article captured the ongoing debates in the news, there is a large share of the public debate that we did not capture, for example on social media or in right-wing alternative media, where arguments are likely to be more extreme (e.g., Verhoeven 2024).

Given the parallels Flemish trans-exclusionary opinion pieces show with international trans-exclusionary discourses, we are left to wonder what role opinion pieces play in transnational anti-trans mobilizations. From our analysis, it became clear that non-trans authors have the upper hand in framing discussions on transgender topics. It appears that opinion pieces play an important role in spreading trans-exclusionary discourses but are rarely included in research. Therefore, to further investigate how opinion pieces contribute to the increasing presence of anti-trans activism, we urge media researchers to include opinion pieces. We also recommend researchers on anti-gender activism to include anti-trans activism. Moreover, considering that trans people rarely get a voice in the opinion pages, we strongly recommend that researchers investigate from a production perspective how the distribution of legitimacy and authority to speak about transgender topics is granted through opinion pages.

We conclude this article with the words of Sara Ahmed (2016, 31) who reminds us that

> [t]ransphobia and antitrans statements should not be treated as just another viewpoint that we should be free to express at the happy table of diversity. There cannot be a dialogue when some at the table are in effect (or intent on) arguing for the elimination of others at the table. When you have "dialogue or debate" with those who wish to eliminate you from the conversation (because they do not recognize what is necessary for your survival, or because they don't even think your existence is possible), then "dialogue and debate" becomes a technique of elimination.

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ORIGINAL ARTICLE

Coping Styles and the Buffering Effects on Discrimination and Enacted Stigma in Transgender Individuals in the US

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Transgender people experience minority stressors, enacted stigma, and discrimination, with negative implications for mental health. Although research is growing in this area, few studies have explored ways of coping with marginalization. In this sample of 158 transgender individuals, who were predominantly white (n = 109, 69%) and had a mean age of 33.06 (SD = 12.88), we used cluster analysis to identify patterns of coping and examined their potential buffering effects on the negative impacts of marginalization. Three coping clusters were identified: functional (n = 67; 43.2%), unhelpful (n = 23; 14.8%), and undifferentiated

(*n* = 65; 41.9%). Approximately two-thirds of our sample experienced at least one instance of major discrimination in their lifetime, and our findings revealed that both enacted stigma and major discrimination were associated with lower satisfaction with life. The findings of this study suggest that at low to moderate levels of lifetime discrimination, participants in the functional or undifferentiated coping groups had higher levels of life satisfaction than participants in the unhelpful coping group. However, at high levels of lifetime discrimination, there was little difference in life satisfaction based on coping. In comparison, there was not a significant moderating effect for past-year enacted stigma.

KEYWORDS transgender; coping; stigma; discrimination; minority stress
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Transgender people represent a broad group whose gender identities differ from that typically associated with their sex assigned at birth. This group includes trans men, trans women, genderqueer, and nonbinary people, among others (Tompkins 2021). Transgender people experience a variety of minority stressors, one of which is discrimination. Experiences of discrimination are embedded within power structures that privilege cisgender, white, heterosexual individuals, and people with other dominant identities. These power structures intersect across various identities and simultaneously shape exposure to marginalization (Collins 1990; Taylor 2017).

As mentioned, experiencing discrimination is one aspect of minority stress. Minority stress refers to the unique stressors that marginalized groups experience, above and beyond the general stressors that anyone may encounter (Brooks 1981; Meyer 2003). Meyer's minority stress model for sexual minorities specifically identified distal stressors, meaning overt or enacted forms of minority stress like victimization and discrimination, and proximal stressors, which can be thought of as reactions to distal stressors. Proximal stressors included expectations of rejection, identity concealment, and internalized stigma. This model originated with a focus on cisgender lesbian, gay, and bisexual individuals (Brooks 1981; Meyer 2003) and was later adapted and refined to apply to transgender individuals (Hendricks and Testa 2012; Testa et al. 2015).

Research on enacted stigma, such as discrimination, rejection, and other distal or more overt acts of marginalization, has documented high rates of hardship for transgender people. In the US, up to 50% of transgender people report physical violence in their lifetime (Stotzer, 2009), 1 out of 10 report physical violence in the past year (James et al. 2016), and 1 out of 4 report discrimination in the past year (Puckett et al. 2019). In addition, the effects of enacted stigma are amplified when individuals hold multiple marginalized identities due to overlapping systems of power, including structural racism, heterosexism, and cissexism. For example, in the US, transgender people with lower socioeconomic status experience higher rates of sexual violence (Testa et al. 2012), transgender people of color (TPOC) experience higher levels of distress than white transgender people (Lefevor et al. 2019a), and Black transgender women experience deadly violence at much higher rates compared to other racial groups (Krell 2017).

Due to these experiences of minority stress, transgender people experience significant mental health disparities including higher rates of depression and anxi-

ety symptoms relative to cisgender people (Lefevor et al. 2019b). Similarly, one study examining transgender participants in a nested matched-pair study with cisgender participants found that transgender participants were significantly more likely to endorse a lifetime suicide attempt and suicidal ideation (29% of the transgender sample) than cisgender participants (8.5% of the cisgender sample; Reisner et al. 2014). These findings are further supported by the 2015 US Trans Survey, which found that 39% of participants were currently experiencing psychological distress, which is drastically higher than the rate of 5% in the general US population (James et al. 2016).

Life satisfaction is an often-overlooked component of well-being and mental health in transgender populations and little research has examined this in relation to minority stress. Research shows that transgender individuals in a sample from Norway reported significantly lower levels of satisfaction with life than their cisgender peers (Anderssen et al. 2020). Given these lower overall levels of life satisfaction, more work is needed exploring potential drivers and correlates of life satisfaction for transgender people. In one sample of 92 transgender individuals, 48.4% of the sample reported they were satisfied with their lives and higher levels of life satisfaction were associated with older age, higher education, and favorable self-rated health (Grupp et al. 2023). Another study found that life satisfaction was positively associated with psychological functioning, satisfaction with social gender congruence, satisfaction with physical gender congruence, and quality of life (Jones et al. 2018). Research also shows, in cisgender samples, a reciprocal relationship with mental health, such that mental health challenges decrease one's satisfaction with life, and lower life satisfaction is associated with an increased likelihood of psychiatric disorders (Fergusson et al. 2015). We aim to expand this research on life satisfaction by exploring associations with enacted stigma and coping profiles among transgender people in the US.

Considering the high rates of minority stress experienced by transgender people and the implications for mental health and life satisfaction, identifying useful coping strategies may help alleviate some distress in this marginalized community. Past research on coping in transgender samples has primarily explored individual coping strategies in isolation or in parallel rather than examining more holistic profiles of coping. For instance, Grossman et al. (2011) found that emotion-oriented coping predicted negative mental health outcomes in a sample of transgender youth. Similarly, Puckett et al. (2020) found that using unhelpful coping strategies of coping via detachment, substance use, and internalization were associated with higher levels of anxiety and depression. Research has also found that using social support to cope, a helpful coping strategy, was associated with lower reported depressive symptoms (Rotondi et al. 2011). While the literature detailing coping techniques of transgender people is growing, research has not, to our knowledge, examined the association between coping and life satisfaction in transgender individuals.

Although these past studies shed light on individual coping strategies, they do not provide a more holistic understanding of coping. Instead, research is needed that considers, simultaneously, the use of a variety of coping strategies, to more accurately represent how transgender people may be responding to stressors. There has been one study (Freese et al. 2018) to take such an approach with transgender people, which used cluster analyses to find distinct coping profiles. They found three coping profiles in their sample. One group had high functional and low dysfunctional coping (HFLD),

which was characterized by primarily using coping strategies aligned with the positive self-efficacy and social support factors, while rarely engaging in strategies associated with the negative self-directed or substance use factors. The authors also found a group they described as having low functional and low dysfunctional coping (LFLD), which was characterized as a group who infrequently engaged in any of the designated coping strategies. The final group the authors found included participants who used high functional and high dysfunctional coping (HFHD), suggesting participants in this group were highly engaged in all coping strategies. The LFLD group and the HFHD group had significantly higher odds of reporting more severe levels of depression compared to participants in the HFLD group. The HFHD group had significantly higher odds of reporting suicidality before transitioning and affirming their gender than participants with the HFLD coping profile and higher odds of reporting suicidality during the beginning of their transition compared to participants with HFLD and LFLD coping profiles (Freese et al. 2018).

This past research demonstrates that examining coping at broader levels that considers various types of coping simultaneously can add more complex understandings about transgender people's coping responses, with implications for understanding mental health and wellbeing. As highlighted by Freese et al. (2018), when individual coping strategies are studied in isolation, this may provide a skewed understanding of coping that is not reflective of the breadth of possible responses to stress. As there has been limited research examining coping in more holistic ways, we sought to add to the literature in this area.

CURRENT STUDY

The focus of the current study was to understand the relationships between coping, experiences of discrimination and enacted stigma, and life satisfaction for transgender people. We also were interested in understanding coping in a more complex way that can simultaneously account for the various forms of coping that transgender people may engage in, rather than examining distinct forms of coping in isolation. As such, we explored patterns in coping profiles. In addition, we examined the potential moderating effect of coping profiles on the relationship between discrimination and enacted stigma with life satisfaction.

METHOD

This data was collected as part of a larger mixed-methods longitudinal study examining health and resilience among transgender people ($N = 158$) in relation to sociopolitical contexts. Participants were recruited via advertisements distributed to community organizations, social media, snowball sampling, and in-person events (e.g., Pride festivals). Data collection was conducted in four states (Oregon, Michigan, Tennessee, and Nebraska), selected given the range of sociopolitical climates represented in terms of support and protections for transgender people. Interested participants completed an online screener that included basic demographic information. The screener data was then used to maximize recruitment efforts to include a diverse sample regarding gender identity, racial identity, rural/urban residence, and age. To guard against

fraudulent responders and bots, we utilized prevention mechanisms in Qualtrics (e.g., ballot stuffing prevention) and we reviewed screener responses for repeat participants, suspicious entries, and other information that could indicate attempts to infiltrate the study (e.g., indicating a cisgender identity although study was advertised for transgender people). At baseline, participants completed a set of questionnaires, an in-person interview, and the collection of several stress and health biomarkers (e.g., blood pressure, salivary stress hormones, and immune measures). This baseline data was collected between late September 2019 and early March 2020. Eligibility for the study was as follows: living in Oregon, Michigan, Nebraska, or Tennessee; ages 19 or over (the age of consent in Nebraska); and transgender identified. The University of Oregon Institutional Review Board approved the study. All participants provided their informed consent before participation. Participants were paid via an electronic gift card for each portion of the study they participated in, with the potential to earn up to $250.

Measures

Demographics

Participants completed demographic questions including age, gender identity (assessed with two items – one with an extensive set of response options and a second question where participants would select one of three categories; both asked participants to select the label that best represented their experiences), sex assigned at birth, state, income, and racial identity. See Table 1 for response options for these items.

Discrimination

Participants reported their experiences of discrimination by completing the Major Experiences of Discrimination Scale (Williams et al. 1997; Williams et al. 2008). This included 9 items, such as: "For unfair reasons, have you ever not been hired for a job?" If the participant indicated that they had the experience listed in each item, they were then asked, "What do you think was the main reason for this experience?" Participants were then able to select what they thought was the main reason for this discrimination, with the following options: *ancestry or national origins, gender, race, age, religion, height, weight, some other aspect of your physical appearance, sexual orientation*, and *education or income level*. Participants also indicated the last time each form of discrimination occurred, with the following response options: *within the past week, the past month, the past year, or more than a year ago*.

Enacted Stigma

The Gender Minority Stress and Resilience (GMSR) measure was used to assess experiences of enacted stigma via gender-related discrimination (e.g., "I have had difficulty finding housing or staying in housing because of my gender identity or expression"), gender-related rejection (e.g., "I have been rejected or distanced from friends because of my gender identity or expression"), and gender-related victimization (e.g., "I have been threatened with physical harm because of my gender identity or expression") subscales (Testa et al. 2015). For each item, participants indicated if they had this experience *in the past year, after the age of 18, before the age of 18*, and *never*. For parsimony, we calculated a sum score across these subscales to reflect overall levels of enacted stigma in the past year (DuBois et al. 2024).

Table 1. Demographic Information

Demographic Variable	*n*	%
Gender		
Trans man	37	23.4%
Trans woman	32	20.3%
Genderqueer	16	10.1%
Nonbinary	40	25.3%
Agender	3	1.9%
Androgyne	1	0.6%
Genderfluid	2	1.3%
Woman	9	5.7%
Man	6	3.8%
Bigender	2	1.3%
Not listed	9	5.7%
Missing	1	0.6%
Sex Assigned at Birth		
Male	52	33.1%
Female	106	66.9%
Race/Ethnicity		
Black or African American	8	5.1%
American Indian or Alaskan Native	2	1.3%
Asian	6	3.8%
Latinx	6	3.8%
White	109	69.0%
Not listed	1	0.6%
Multiracial/ Multiethnic	26	16.5%
State		
Oregon	45	28.5%
Michigan	39	24.7%
Nebraska	35	22.2%
Tennessee	39	24.7%
Location Type		
Urban	76	48.1%
Suburban	55	35.1%
Rural	27	16.9%
Income		
Less than $10,000	43	27.4%
$10,000 – $19,999	38	24.2%
$20,000 – $29,999	16	10.1%
$30,000 – $39,999	12	7.6%
$40,000 – $49,999	11	7.0%
$50,000 – $59,999	14	8.9%
$60,000 – $69,999	5	3.2%

Demographic Variable	*n*	%
$70,000 – $79,999	8	5.1%
$80,000 – $89,999	4	2.5%
$90,000 or more	6	3.8%
Education Level		
High school graduate – high school diploma or equivalent (i.e. GED)	14	8.9%
Some college credit, but less than 1 year	8	5.1%
Technical or vocational school degree	5	3.2%
One or more years of college, no degree	42	26.6%
Associate's degree	18	11.4%
Bachelor's degree	52	32.9%
Master's degree	16	10.1%
Doctorate or professional degree	2	1.3%
Graduate of a Certificate Program	1	0.6%

Coping

The Brief COPE included 28 items pertaining to how participants dealt with problems that occurred in their day-to-day lives, with 14 subscales measuring different coping styles (Carver 1997). Examples include "I've been turning to work or other activities to take my mind off things" and "I've been accepting the reality of the fact that it has happened." Participants were asked to indicate how frequently they engaged in each type of coping on a scale from 1 (*I haven't been doing this at all*) to 4 (*I've been doing this a lot*). Each subscale consisted of two items that were summed to give a score of how frequently each coping technique was used. This measure is intended to reflect a variety of helpful and unhelpful forms of coping.

Satisfaction with Life

The Satisfaction with Life Scale included five items measuring cognitive judgments of one's satisfaction (Diener et al. 1985). For example, items included the following: "I'm happy with my life." Participants rated how much they agreed or disagreed with each of the five items using a 7-point scale (1 = *strongly disagree*; 7 = *strongly agree*). Responses were summed to indicate participants' overall satisfaction with life. In the current study, Cronbach's alpha was .89.

Participants

There was a total of 158 participants across Oregon (n = 45; 28.5%), Michigan (n = 39; 24.7%), Nebraska (n = 35; 22.2%), and Tennessee (n = 39; 24.7%). Participants ranged in age from 19-70 years old (M = 33.06; SD = 12.88) and had a variety of gender identities: 27.2% identified as trans men/men, 26% identified as trans women/women, and the remaining participants identified with terms like genderqueer, nonbinary, and others described in Table 1. For racial identity, 5.1% (n = 8) of the sample identified as Black or African American, 1.3% (n = 2) identified as American Indian or Alaskan Native, 3.8% (n = 6) identified as Asian, 3.8% (n = 6) identified as Latinx, 69% (n = 109) identified as white, 16.5% (n = 26)

identified as Multiracial/Multiethnic, and 0.6% ($n = 1$) reported that their identities were not listed. See Table 1 for additional demographic information.

Statistical Analyses

SPSS was used for all analyses. We began by calculating basic descriptive information about the sample and rates of experiencing discrimination and enacted stigma. We also examined correlations between discrimination, past-year enacted stigma, and life satisfaction. We were interested in forms of coping and how these may buffer the effects of discrimination and enacted stigma on satisfaction with life. To assess different coping profiles, we conducted a k-means cluster analysis. Unique groups of participants were identified based on their responses to the BRIEF Cope scale. We examined an increasing number of clusters and determined our final number of clusters by reviewing the qualities of the clusters and interpretability, as well as sample size. Each person was assigned to a specific cluster, and this information was used in subsequent analyses. An ANOVA was conducted to assess differences in life satisfaction across the clusters. Finally, we used the PROCESS macro (Hayes 2022) to conduct two moderation analyses to assess whether the coping clusters moderated the effects of discrimination and enacted stigma on life satisfaction.

RESULTS

On average, participants endorsed approximately 2 (1.83) forms of discrimination on the Major Experiences of Discrimination Scale, with 35.9% reporting never experiencing any discrimination (see Table 2 for more details). More than 10% of the sample reported experiencing 4 or more forms of discrimination experiences in their lifetime. Over one-fourth (28.2%) of the sample reported that they had been unfairly fired, 29.5% of the sample reported that they had not been hired for a job for unfair reasons, 25.6% reported that they had been denied a promotion for unfair reasons, 27.6% reported having received worse service (such as from a plumber or mechanic), 18.6% reported being unfairly discouraged by a teacher or advisor from continuing their education, 17.9% reported ever moving into a neighborhood where neighbors made life difficult for them or their families, 9% reported being unfairly prevented from moving into a neighborhood because the landlord or a realtor refused to sell or rent them a house or apartment, and 1.3% reported they had been unfairly denied a bank loan. These experiences of discrimination were mostly related to gender identity and gender expression and presentation (see Table 3).

As expected, there was a correlation between experiencing enacted stigma in the past year with lifetime experiences of discrimination ($r = .31$, $p < .001$). Reporting more lifetime experiences of discrimination was associated with less life satisfaction ($r = -.22$, $p < .01$). In addition, reporting more experiences of enacted stigma in the past year was associated with less life satisfaction ($r = -.30$, $p < .001$).

In the cluster analysis, there were three groups. Cluster 1 (Functional Coping; $n = 67$; 43.2%) included participants who were more likely to use functional coping strategies such as active coping, use of support, venting, planning, and acceptance. Cluster 2 (Unhelpful Coping; $n = 23$; 14.8%) included participants who were more likely to use unhelpful coping strategies such as disengagement, denial, substance use to cope,

Table 2. Frequency of Discrimination Experiences over Lifetime

Number of Discrimination Experiences	*n*	Percent of Sample
0	56	35.89%
1	24	15.38%
2	29	18.58%
3	18	11.54%
4	11	7.05%
5	8	5.13%
6	6	3.85%
7	3	1.92%
8	1	0.64%

Note. Two participants were missing data on this questionnaire. Percentages were calculated based on 156 participants who completed this questionnaire.

distraction, and self-blame and a lower likelihood of using more helpful or functional strategies. Cluster 3 (Undifferentiated Coping; $n = 65$; 41.9%) included participants who had lower scores than average on the coping subscales overall but tended to use the various types of coping to similar degrees, with no singular coping characteristic defining this group.

The demographics of the clusters were largely similar including in relation to gender, sex assigned at birth, rural/urban location, state, income, and race. Cluster 2 ($M = 27.35$, $SD = 10.39$) was significantly younger than Cluster 3 ($M = 35.83$, $SD = 14.77$); $F(2, 152) = 4.23$, $p < .05$. There were no significant differences in age between Cluster 1 and 2 or between Cluster 1 and 3. Overall, there was a significant difference between the groups on life satisfaction scores; $F(2, 151) = 11.29$, $p < .001$. Clusters 1 (Functional Coping; $M = 19.44$, $SD = 7.30$) and 3 (Undifferentiated Coping, $M = 20.55$, $SD = 7.68$) had higher levels of life satisfaction than Cluster 2 (Unhelpful Coping, $M = 12.21$, $SD = 6.56$).

In the first moderation analysis, we examined whether there was an interaction between coping profiles (Cluster 2, Unhelpful Coping, as the reference group) and lifetime discrimination in relation to life satisfaction, while controlling for age (see Table 4). The coping profiles and lifetime discrimination explained 23.75% of the variance in life satisfaction. The addition of the interaction terms accounted for 4.2% of the variance in life satisfaction.

Figure 1 portrays the associations between lifetime discrimination and life satisfaction for each of the clusters. At low and average levels of lifetime discrimination, Cluster 1 (Functional Coping) and Cluster 3 (Undifferentiated Coping) had higher levels of life satisfaction compared to participants in Cluster 2 (Unhelpful Coping). However, the magnitude of these differences decreased as levels of lifetime discrimination increased. Cluster 1 (Functional Coping) and Cluster 3 (Undifferentiated Coping) saw decreasing levels of life satisfaction as levels of enacted stigma increased. As a result, at higher levels of lifetime discrimination, there were not significant differences in life satisfaction across the three groups. There was a significant negative association between lifetime discrimination and life satisfaction for Cluster 1 (Functional Coping; $b = -2.41$, $SE = 1.11$, $t = -2.16$, $p < .05$) and Cluster 3 (Undifferentiated Coping; $b = -3.20$, $SE = 1.13$, $t = -2.82$, $p < .01$).

Table 3. Discrimination Experiences and Most Endorsed Attributions

Discrimination Variable	*n* (%)
At any time in your life, have you ever been unfairly fired?	44 (28.21%)
Most common identity endorsed: gender expression or presentation	26 (59.09% of participants who endorsed this form of discrimination)
For unfair reasons, have you ever not been hired for a job?	46 (29.49%)
Most common identity endorsed: gender expression or presentation	33 (71.74% of participants who endorsed this form of discrimination)
Have you ever been unfairly denied a promotion?	40 (25.64%)
Most common identity endorsed: gender identity	25 (62.50% of participants who endorsed this form of discrimination)
Have you ever been unfairly stopped, searched, or questions, physically threatened or abused by the police?	39 (25.00%)
Most common identity endorsed: gender expression or presentation	23 (58.97% of participants who endorsed this form of discrimination)
Have you ever been unfairly discouraged by a teacher or advisor from continuing your education?	29 (18.59%)
Most common identity endorsed: gender expression or presentation	17 (58.62% of participants who endorsed this form of discrimination)
Have you ever been unfairly prevented from moving into a neighborhood because the landlord or a realtor refused to sell or rent you a house or apartment?	14 (8.97%)
Most common identity endorsed: race; sexual orientation (equal endorsement)	7 (50.00% of participants who endorsed this form of discrimination)
Have you ever moved into a neighborhood where neighbors made life difficult for you or your family?	28 (17.95%)
Most common identity endorsed: gender expression or presentation	20 (71.42% of participants who endorsed this form of discrimination)
Have you ever been unfairly denied a bank loan?	2 (1.28%)
Most common identity endorsed: gender identity; age (equal endorsement)	1 (50.00% of participants who endorsed this form of discrimination)
Have you ever received service from someone such as a plumber or car mechanic that was worse than what other people get?	43 (27.56%)
Most common identity endorsed: gender expression or presentation	35 (81.39% of participants who endorsed this form of discrimination)

Note. Two participants were missing data on this questionnaire. Percentages were calculated based on 156 participants who completed this questionnaire. We caution against use of percentages for some responses as the sample size for select questions was very small (e.g., denial of a bank loan).

In the second moderation analysis, we examined whether there was an interaction between coping profiles (Cluster 2, Unhelpful Coping, as the reference group) and past-year enacted stigma in relation to life satisfaction, while controlling for age. The coping profiles and past-year enacted stigma explained 19.82% of the variance in life

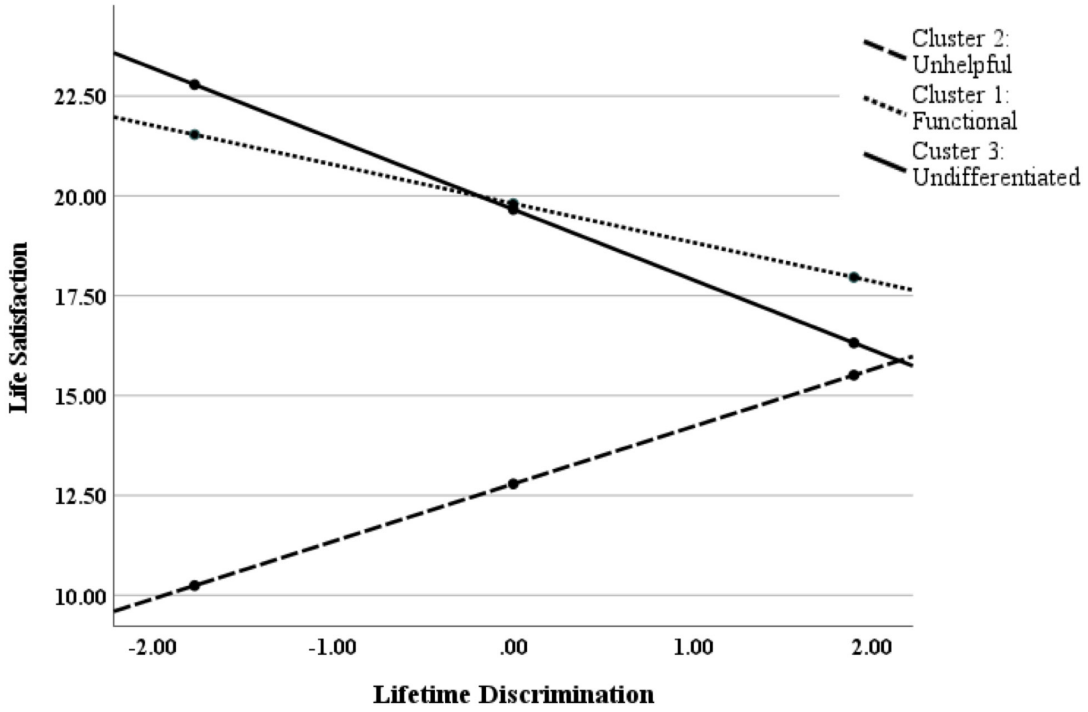

Figure 1. Interaction between coping clusters and lifetime discrimination predicting life satisfaction

Table 4. Moderation Analysis: Lifetime Discrimination, Coping, and Life Satisfaction

	Satisfaction with Life		
Variable	***b***	***SE***	***R²***
Lifetime Discrimination	1.44	1.02	0.23**
Cluster 1: Functional Coping	7.02**	1.71	
Cluster 3: Undifferentiated Coping	6.87**	1.76	
Discrimination X Cluster 1	−2.41*	1.12	$\Delta R^2 = 0.04^*$
Discrimination X Cluster 3	−3.20**	1.13	

Note. Reference group = Cluster 2: Unhelpful Coping; Analysis controlled for age; * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$

Table 5. Moderation Analysis: Past Year Enacted Stigma, Coping, and Life Satisfaction

	Satisfaction with Life		
Variable	***b***	***SE***	***R²***
Enacted Stigma	0.32	0.77	0.19**
Cluster 1: Functional Coping	7.78**	1.99	
Cluster 3: Undifferentiated Coping	7.72**	2.03	
Enacted Stigma X Cluster 1	−1.03	0.81	$\Delta R^2 = 0.01$
Enacted Stigma X Cluster 3	−0.93	0.84	

Note. Reference group = Cluster 2: Unhelpful Coping; Analysis controlled for age; * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$

satisfaction. Participants who used typically defined "healthy" coping mechanisms, Cluster 1, and participants in Cluster 3, with undifferentiated approaches to coping, had higher levels of life satisfaction than participants in Cluster 2 (Unhelpful Coping), however, the moderation findings were not significant (see Table 5).

DISCUSSION

Approximately two-thirds of our sample experienced at least one instance of major discrimination in their lifetime. These rates of discrimination are higher than what has been reported in many other studies (e.g., Handal et al. 2023; Whitaker et al. 2017; Zilioli et al. 2023), although some studies have reported a similar or higher rate of major discrimination experiences over the lifetime (Braksmajer et al. 2018; Cenat et al. 2022). Importantly, these studies were conducted with communities with different sociodemographic characteristics from the participants of our study. Much of the previous research has been focused on understanding the experiences of major discrimination in different racial and ethnic communities (Cenat et al. 2022; Handal et al. 2023; Whitaker et al. 2017; Zilioli et al. 2023), with our study contributing to assessing various types of discrimination in a transgender sample.

We originally intended to study intersectional forms of discrimination, however, due to the limited sample size and low endorsement of discrimination attributed to holding other identities, we were not able to explore this area further. Discrimination research often focuses on a single aspect of identity and relies predominantly on white samples (Vargas et al. 2020), leaving unanswered questions about the experiences of transgender individuals who hold multiple marginalized identities. The Major Experiences of Discrimination Scale (Williams et al. 1997; Williams et al. 2008) was used to determine what aspects of identity participants considered the reason for discrimination they experienced, however, this required participants to select a single identity they mainly attributed this to. With this sample, most participants indicated their experiences of discrimination were tied to their gender identity and presentation, with little endorsement of discrimination in other areas. For participants with marginalized racial identities in our sample, it may have been difficult to separate aspects of their identity when indicating why an experience of discrimination happened, such as questioning whether a person was denied a job because of their gender or their race. This highlights that scales like these often make measuring intersectionality challenging. Other research has discussed this challenge, highlighting a need for a more comprehensive understanding of intersectional experiences of discrimination (Bowleg 2013; Cuádraz and Uttal 1999). Future research might benefit from using other measures, such as the LGBTQ+ People of Color Microaggressions Scale (Huynh et al. 2024) or the Intersectional Discrimination Index (Scheim and Bauer 2019).

Aligned with other literature (Chan et al. 2021; Conlin et al. 2017; Janssen et al. 2023), we found that both enacted stigma and major discrimination were associated with lower levels of satisfaction with life. Our findings extend the findings of previous research by highlighting this relationship among a sample of transgender people. Life satisfaction is known to be lower among transgender people than among cisgender people (Anderssen et al. 2020) and our results suggest that this difference may be related to anti-transgender discrimination and enacted stigma. The importance of these

findings is underscored by past research showing that life satisfaction is associated with overall physical, psychological, and behavioral health (Hughto et al. 2015; Kim et al. 2021; Lawrence et al. 2022). Our results suggest that life satisfaction may represent an important pathway through which enacted stigma and discrimination become embodied to affect health among transgender people, although the relationship with health was not directly tested in the present analyses.

In relation to coping, it was encouraging to see that most of our sample endorsed either functional or undifferentiated coping profiles and that only a minority, 14.8%, were classified into the unhelpful coping patterns group. In the face of pervasive hardships and minority stress, finding effective ways of coping can be a challenge. Even so, most of our participants were coping in ways that appeared to be beneficial to their mental health and well-being.

The clusters that we obtained in our analysis differ somewhat from the findings by Freese et al. (2018), who found three groups based on coping profiles: high functional/low dysfunctional, high functional/high dysfunctional, and low functional/low dysfunctional. In their study, they found that transgender people in the high functional/high dysfunctional coping group had worse outcomes, particularly in relation to suicidality. It is possible that this group of transgender people are encountering high levels of minority stress and therefore coping is somewhat dysregulated and unpredictable, or that there may be other contextual factors that interfere with the effectiveness of the coping strategies used. In our work, we found a group that had lower scores than average on the coping subscales overall but tended to use the various types of coping to similar degrees, with no singular coping characteristic defining this group. This cluster was comparable to the group that endorsed more use of the functional coping strategies in relation to their life satisfaction and the moderating effects on lifetime discrimination. It is possible that our findings differ from Freese et al. due to the magnitude of use of the unhelpful coping strategies. It can sometimes be helpful to engage in coping that might be self-protective yet traditionally grouped as an unhelpful coping strategy, such as when avoiding dangerous situations. Yet, when unhelpful coping strategies are heavily relied upon, it could be detrimental to one's wellbeing. Given this possibility, we believe that the undifferentiated coping group in our findings may reflect a more flexible approach to coping that could be responsive to contextual demands.

Our findings indicate that, at low to moderate levels of lifetime discrimination, participants in the functional coping and undifferentiated coping groups had higher levels of life satisfaction compared to participants in unhelpful coping group. At high levels of lifetime discrimination, the buffering effect had lessened, and there were no meaningful differences between the groups. This seems to indicate that coping strategies, as assessed via our general measure of coping, can foster positive adaptation in the face of lifetime discrimination, but that this may be more challenging as the exposure to minority stress increases. For people who are experiencing regular occurrences of discrimination, the effectiveness of coping strategies may diminish. Furthermore, there was not a significant buffering effect in the analysis on past-year enacted stigma. As such, there did not appear to be a protective effect in relation to more recent experiences of minority stress. Our study findings highlight the importance of change at the structural level to decrease exposure to enacted stigma. Placing the burden on trans-

gender people to cope with marginalization can reinforce power hierarchies and addressing the root causes of marginalization is needed to support better mental health outcomes as well.

Limitations

There are several limitations to these analyses. First, though this sample is adequate for such an in-depth mixed-methods study centering transgender people, this is a relatively small sample of transgender people in the US as a whole and larger samples are needed in this area of study. We nearly reached our goal of 50% TPOC in the Michigan and Oregon subsamples, however, despite our efforts to reach a more diverse sample, we were unable to recruit a racially diverse subsample in Nebraska and Tennessee. Due to the limited amount of racial diversity, our ability to determine how these relationships differed between TPOC and white transgender people was restricted. Many factors could have impacted our ability to connect with TPOC, including potential participants not feeling represented or not having trust in the research team given the racial identities of the primary researchers, the lack of trust for the university systems, and the access barriers faced by many communities of color that impact the ability to participate in research. Furthermore, the cross-sectional nature of these data makes it impossible to determine the causal nature of these relationships. Longitudinal research is needed to determine how discrimination, enacted stigma, and coping affect life satisfaction over time and how coping may influence these trajectories.

In this study, we measured coping using a general measure of coping which means that other transgender specific ways of coping may be overlooked. Past research shows that transgender people may enact identity specific forms of coping (Owens et al. 2023), such as engaging in self-affirming behaviors (Sherman et al. 2021). More recent measure development research has expanded the possibilities for assessing coping in transgender communities in future research (Lindley and Budge 2024). It also is critical that future research examine more liberatory approaches as overly focusing on coping may inadvertently reinforce power hierarchies (Phillips et al. 2015). Integrating concepts like critical consciousness, empowerment, and collective action may help to push beyond the individual and their responsibility to cope with oppression.

Implications

Understanding the coping patterns of transgender individuals is critical for providing effective support in the mental health field. Coping mechanisms employed by transgender individuals in response to societal stigma and discrimination can significantly impact their mental health and well-being (Budge et al. 2013; Lindley and Budge 2024). By gaining insight into how transgender people cope effectively in the face of minority stress, we can tailor support to the unique needs of transgender individuals and ultimately better promote resilience and empowerment. Additionally, understanding coping strategies allows for the development of interventions aimed at reducing minority stressors and improving mental health outcomes and life satisfaction within transgender communities (Anderssen et al. 2020; Chan et al. 2021; Conlin et al. 2017; Hughto et al. 2015; Janssen et al. 2023).

CONCLUSION

Overall, we found relationships between lifetime experiences of discrimination, past year anti-transgender enacted stigma, and satisfaction with life. We also found there are distinct coping groups that can be meaningfully delineated and that these patterns of coping impact the effect of discrimination on satisfaction with life. We found that participants who endorsed functional and flexible or undifferentiated coping styles experienced less of an effect from lifetime discrimination on life satisfaction, particularly at low to moderate levels of discrimination. These results challenge previous views of coping which view coping strategies independently and highlight the need to view responses to stressors through a more holistic approach. Future research can help to address additional areas, such as longitudinal research on discrimination and coping, and studies that advance the measurement of intersectional forms of minority stress.

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ORIGINAL ARTICLE

When Prejudice Is Low, Religion Makes the Difference: Patterns of Exclusivity Toward Trans Men and Women in Intercollegiate Sport

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Trans athletes in the United States are experiencing systemic and social exclusion from sport, including the introduction of legislation that restricts the participation of trans people in sport. Although legislators have sought to exclude trans athletes from sport, the attitudes of cisgender athletes toward trans athlete inclusion are much more varied. Psychologists and other advocates for trans equity may benefit from better understanding specific psychosocial variables that are associated with prejudice against the participation of trans people in sport. The present study examined the roles of prejudice and religiosi-

ty on exclusionary attitudes in a sample of 248 past and current intercollegiate athletes. Participants reported demographic information, attitudes and beliefs, and responded to vignettes related to trans athlete inclusion. Two PROCESS Model 4 analyses were conducted with religiosity as a mediator of the association between prejudice and exclusionary attitudes toward trans men and trans women, respectively. Results indicated that overall attitudes towards transgender individuals predicted support of inclusion in sport for both transgender men and women, however religiosity significantly mediated attitudes towards transgender men in sport. Implications for advocacy among psychologists and other health service professionals are discussed.

KEYWORDS trans; transgender; intercollegiate; sport; exclusion
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Politicians across the United States continue to introduce and pass legislation restricting the participation of trans people in intercollegiate sport. Most recently at the time of writing, Texas passed a law prohibiting trans women from competing in collegiate sport, joining 17 other states in restricting sport participation for trans athletes (Martinez 2023). Counter to current evidence and scholarship, legislators and lobbyists argue that banning trans people from participating on teams that align with their gender identities ensures greater equality and fairness in sport (Burke 2022; Phipps 2021). However, the attitudes and beliefs of athletes themselves is rather mixed with inconsistent patterns of support (Goldbach et al. 2024). Given that athletes are the very class of people purportedly protected by laws that ban trans people from sport, it is important for psychologists and other professionals who advocate for LGBTQ+ equity to consider how athletes actually think about and respond to the inclusion of trans athletes.

Furthermore, the inclusion/exclusion debate has a direct impact on trans athletes themselves. Discriminatory legislation has been associated with poorer mental health outcomes for LGBTQ+ populations, including increased rates of depression and suicide (Paceley et al. 2021). Likewise, when athletic activities are made accessible to LGBTQ+ populations, they serve as a protective factor associated with increased self-esteem of transgender athletes (Clark and Kosciw 2022). Given the potential protective factors that accepting athletic communities provide, it is imperative to advocate for athlete inclusion.

The Role of Prejudice

Gender identity and inclusion in sport have been controversial topics in sport ethics and beyond (Gleaves and Lehrbach 2016). It is beyond the scope of this brief article to completely summarize the history of gender-based exclusion in sport, but it is important to note that historical discrimination has resulted in the proposal and/or passage of hundreds of bills targeting transgender individuals (American Civil Liberties Union 2023). Currently, at least thirty of these proposed bills (e.g., H.R.734 - Protection of Women and Girls in Sports Act of 2023, H.B.11 - Student Eligibility in Interscholastic Activities, H.B. 631 Fairness in Women's Sport Act) prohibit transgender athletes from competing in ath-

letics or require transgender athletes to compete consistent with their sex assigned at birth, rather than their gender identity (Sharrow 2021). The sport landscape is changing rapidly under the Trump administration and a recent executive order (No. 14201, 2025) will likely supersede state level efforts for the foreseeable future.

Institutions of sport in the United States, such as the National Collegiate Athletics Association (NCAA), further contribute to prejudice towards trans athletes. Despite a long-standing policy that allowed athletes to participate on teams that aligned with their affirmed gender, in 2022, the NCAA changed their transgender athlete participation policy such that participation in NCAA competition is to be determined by the governing body of each sport (Buzuvis 2022). Sport as an institution is heavily gendered and impacted by cisgenderism; when this is considered in conjunction with evidence pointing towards increased transprejudice in gender-segregated contexts (Buck and Obzud 2018), this precedent of segregation and cisgenderism in sport may partially explain the current sociopolitical climate towards trans athletes.

Even amongst scholars, there is disagreement as to the advantage held by transgender athletes, specifically transgender women. Some researchers conclude that trans women have an advantage over cisgender women due to relatively high testosterone levels and prior male physiology (Anderson et al. 2019). Others conclude that transitioning could confer an advantage or disadvantage (Torres et al. 2022). Meanwhile, a growing list of sport associations and leagues themselves (such as the International Rugby League and the International Swimming Federation) have been passing policies that restrict the participation of trans people in sport (Brassil and Longman 2021; Futterman 2022). Current laws and policies limit trans athletes' inclusion in sport based on factors such as age, hormones, geographical location, sport, and gender identity (Erikainen, et al. 2021; Phipps 2021; Morris and Van Raalte 2016). Still, the laws and policies instituted by governing bodies do not reflect the more nuanced psychosocial concerns forwarded by athletes themselves (Goldbach et al. 2024; Teetzel, 2017). More information is needed about the conditions under which cis athletes are more or less likely to support access to support for their trans teammates (Phipps 2021).

Religiosity in Focus

Many sociocultural factors have been explored regarding their influence on transprejudice, including a combination of demographics, beliefs, and values (Willoughby et al. 2010) that involve gender, political views, and religiosity (Campbell et al. 2019). Religious belief is gaining traction in sport research, especially as it relates to social attitudes and public opinions. Researchers have identified key associations between religious belief and acceptance of LGBTQ+ individuals. For example, self-identifying as religious and higher report of religious fundamentalism have been associated with higher levels of transprejudice and negative attitudes towards transgender people (Campbell et al. 2019).

Religious belief and sport regularly intersect given that many athletes credit their successes to a higher power and/or foreground beliefs on and off the field (Beyer and Hannah 2000; Czech and Bullet 2007). Research on religious belief among athletes has become an area of focus, perhaps in part due to distinct stressors that come with sport participation, and data indicate that holding a religious identity may carry some individual benefits. For example, recent research indicated potential positive impacts when

an athlete's religious beliefs are incorporated in their treatment plans when coping with adversity in sport, such as injury (Wiese-Bjornstal et al. 2022). To this end, religiosity has been positively related to psychological profiles in sport, including psychological skills, mental preparation, and motivation, (Ridnour and Hammermeister 2008) as well as enhanced performance and enjoyment of sport (Noh and Shahdan 2020). In sum, religiosity can substantially influence athletes' personal experiences of sport, but it may also shape team dynamics. The broader impacts of religiosity and sport warrants further exploration, especially in the area of athlete inclusion. Given the potential for religiosity to influence attitudes within in sport and towards trans people more broadly, the present study seeks to incorporate this variable in the context of trans athlete inclusion.

Inclusion/Exclusion

It is important to note the distinct patterns in acceptance, or non-acceptance, of transgender athlete participation in sport. According to a 2021 nationwide Gallup poll (McCarthy 2021), 34% of US adults believe that transgender athletes should be able to play on teams that match their gender identity; likewise, 63% of self-identified liberals reported being supportive of allowing athletes to play on teams according to their gender identity, while only 34% of moderates and 12% of conservatives share this view. Additional literature suggests that transgender men have received higher rates of acceptance when competing in sport than transgender women (Tanimoto and Miwa 2021), which may be in part due to the perception that they do not hold an unfair athletic advantage. Beyond these barriers, factors impacting inclusion and exclusion include sociocultural perspectives and attitudes towards transgender inclusion in sport, such as sport-specific attitudes on transgender athletes.

Generally, attitudes towards transgender athletes are less favorable among men, those who hold strong traditional gender role beliefs, those who have minimal interpersonal contact with transgender people, and those who identify strongly as a sports fan (Flores et al. 2020). However, differences between cis women and cis men and their attitudes toward trans athletes have not been found in all studies (e.g., Merrill and Anderson 2024). The culture of sport appears to be a difficult environment for transgender populations, given the observed prejudice. However, it is still unclear how athletes themselves feel about the inclusion of transgender athletes in sport. It is notable that a lack of contact with sexual and/or gender minorities has been associated with negative or less favorable attitudes towards trans athletes (Flores et al. 2020; Merrill and Anderson 2024), as this suggests that misinformation or misunderstanding of these populations may play an important role in attitude formation.

Objectives of the Present Study

Much of the research regarding transgender inclusion in sport provides insight regarding public opinion and attitudes that people hold toward the inclusion of transgender athletes and competition (Flores et al. 2020). By focusing on what factors impact current athlete attitudes toward the inclusion of transgender athletes, researchers may gain insight surrounding the likely factors that shape the attitudes and beliefs toward trans athletes and participation in sport. The aim of this study is to investigate the influence of attitudes towards transgender people and religiosity on cisgender athletes' attitudes towards transgender athlete inclusion. To this end, the present study seeks

to better understand the current athletic climate, providing insight for athletic policy, and understanding barriers to athlete inclusion. Consistent with previous literature, we hypothesized that attitudes toward trans men and trans women would be different, in a sample of intercollegiate athletes. More specifically, we anticipated that trans women would receive less support from athletes compared to trans men. We further hypothesized that religiosity would play a mediating role in the association between prejudice and exclusionary attitudes among collegiate athletes toward both trans men and trans women, such that increased religiosity would mediate a positive association between general prejudice towards trans people and sport-specific exclusionary attitudes.

METHOD

This is a cross-sectional, survey-based study of attitudes of collegiate athletes toward transgender athlete participation in sport. Data were collected from September 2020 to April 2021. Institutional Review Board approval was granted by Oklahoma State University and the University at Buffalo prior to the conduct of the study. This manuscript presents novel secondary data analyses performed on a dataset for which some basic descriptive statistics have been presented elsewhere (Goldbach et al. 2024).

Participants

The sample consisted of a total of 248 athletes located in the United States, including past ($n = 15$, 6%) and current ($n = 233$, 94%) intercollegiate athletes located in the United States who were 18 years old or older ($M = 21.15$, $SD = 4.83$). Participants predominantly played team sports ($n = 164$, 66%) and most were affiliated with NCAA Division I ($n = 129$, 52%) or Division II ($n = 53$, 21.4%) teams. Most participants identified as white ($n = 196$, 79%) and as women ($n = 170$, 68.5%). Respondents who reported identifying as gender diverse (e.g., trans, nonbinary, and so on) were not included in the present study. For additional demographics, see Table 1.

Procedure

The survey was administered using Qualtrics survey software. Survey advertisements with a link to the study were distributed on sport psychology listservs, social media platforms, through athletic directors at institutions throughout the United States, and directly to student athletes using university emails provided following Institutional Review Board approval. Participants who accessed the survey were screened for eligibility and then presented with the informed consent form and demographic questionnaire, including information about their participation in collegiate athletics. Eligible participants who consented then responded to vignettes created for the study related to various scenarios with a trans man and trans woman athlete (e.g., plays a contact sport or noncontact sport, wins or loses by a large margin, has or has not received hormone therapy). Next, participants completed the Transgender Attitudes and Beliefs Scale (TABS; Kanamori et al., 2017) to assess general attitudes and beliefs towards transgender people and a few additional items created for the present study surveying attitudes towards transgender people specifically within the context of sport. The TABS and the additional items assessing sport-specific attitudes were

Table 1. Demographic Characteristics of Participants (N = 248)

Variable	*n*	%
Gender		
Man	78	31.5
Woman	170	68.5
Sexual orientation		
Heterosexual	214	86.3
Lesbian	9	3.6
Gay	2	0.8
Bisexual	13	5.2
Queer	4	1.6
Asexual	1	0.4
Pansexual	2	0.8
Self-identify	3	0.12
Race and ethnicity		
White	196	79.0
Hispanic/Latin	7	2.8
Black/African American	12	4.8
Asian/Asian American	4	1.6
Native American/Indigenous	2	0.8
Multiracial	2	0.8
Self-identified race/ethnicity	25	10.2
Intercollegiate athlete status		
Past	15	6.0
Current	233	94.0
Athletic affiliation		
NCAA Division I	129	52.0
NCAA Division II	53	21.4
NCAA Division III	21	8.5
NAIA	5	2.0
NJCAA	10	4.0
Club	30	12.1
Sport team type		
Team-based sport	164	66.1
Individual-based sport	84	33.9
Religious tradition		
Christian denominations	160	64.5
Jewish	1	0.5
Muslim	1	0.5
Spiritual or agnostic	17	6.8
Atheist or nonreligious	42	16.9
No response	17	6.8
Other	10	4.0

counterbalanced to minimize order effects, but only data collected using the TABS are presented in the present study. After completing the survey, participants were directed to a separate survey where they were able to enter their email address in a drawing for one of ten $20 gift cards. Participant emails were not linked to their responses to the main survey.

Materials

Study participants completed a series of scales and items that are detailed in (Goldbach et al. 2022). For the present study, the researchers analyzed responses to (a) demographic items, (b) general attitudes toward transgender people, (c) a religious importance item, and (c) inclusive/exclusive reactions to transgender athlete participation vignettes.

Demographics

Participants were presented with common demographic questions that collected information such as age, gender identity, sexual orientation, race, and ethnicity. Participants were able to endorse multiple races, sexual orientations, and gender identities (see Table 1). Participants also provided information about their experience in sport such the type of collegiate sport they were affiliated with and the gender composition of their team(s).

General Attitudes toward Transgender People

The Transgender Attitudes and Beliefs Scale (TABS) was used to assess general attitudes toward transgender people (Kanamori et al. 2017). The TABS is a 29-item scale with three factors: interpersonal comfort, human value, and sex and gender beliefs. A sample item includes, "Transgender individuals should be treated with the same dignity and respect as any other person." Item responses are recorded on 7-point Likert-type scales ranging from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 7 (*strongly agree*). Higher summary scores indicate more positive attitudes toward transgender people. The scale demonstrated strong internal consistency in the present sample ($\alpha = 0.96$).

Religious Importance

A single item was used to measure the significance/degree of importance participants placed on religion (see Zwingmann et al. 2011). The item, "How important is your religion and/or spirituality in your day-to-day life?" was scored on a 5-point Likert-type scale that ranged from 1 (*not at all*) to 5 (*very important*). Higher numbers indicated higher levels of religious importance. There are a wide range of scales and approaches to measuring the nuance of individual religiosity; we elected to use self-rated impor-

Table 2. Descriptive Statistics for Primary Variables

Variables	*n*	*M*	*SD*	α
TABS	248	150.34	34.99	.96
Reaction to James	248	3.30	1.42	.96
Reaction to Emma	248	2.67	1.44	.96
Religious Importance	248	2.92	1.42	—

tance of religion because this variable has emerged as a simple, cross-nationally stable measure, invariant of related indicators (Remizova et al. 2022).

Reactions

A series of synthesized vignettes were used to gauge reactions to the involvement of a transgender man (James) and a transgender woman (Emma) in various intercollegiate sports. Half of the 14 vignettes focused on James and the other half focused on Emma. Vignettes were paired so that participants were asked to consider their level of sport-specific support for a transgender woman and a transgender man in the given scenario. After they were presented with a vignette, participants were asked to indicate their reaction on a 5-point Likert-type scale that ranged from 1 (*strongly oppose*) to 5 (*strongly support*). The seven scenarios covered: (a) non-contact sports, (b) contact sports, (c) James/Emma winning by a large margin, (d) James/Emma losing by a large margin, (e) affirming hormone therapy for 2 years prior, (f) plans to start affirming hormone therapy within six months, and (g) no plans to start affirming hormone therapy. Participants also provided information about which scenarios were most concerning for them, but those data were not used in the present study. Responses across all James and all Emma vignettes were summed to produce a reaction score for transgender men and transgender women. Higher summary scores indicated higher levels of support for James and Emma. The vignette-based scale indicated high internal consistency ($\alpha = 0.97$). For additional information about the vignettes can be found in Goldbach and colleagues (2024).

Analytic Plan

A pwr package was used in R to calculate the minimum sample size for the study with four predictors/covariates, a medium effect size ($f^2 = 0.15$), $p < 0.05$, and 0.80 power, and determined that we needed at least 90 participants for a fully powered study. The sample from the published, descriptive study included 270 participants (Goldbach et al. 2024). Cases were deleted listwise for participants who skipped survey items used to measure the primary variables. The resulting sample contained 248 participants.

IBM SPSS 28 was used for all analyses. Descriptive statistics were run for demographic variables used in this study (Table 1), descriptive statistics were generated for all primary variables (Table 2), and correlations between primary variables were computed (Table 3). Underlying assumptions for regression-based mediation (Hayes 2018) were established in SPSS. Q-Q plots indicated normal distribution of primary

Table 3. Intercorrelations Between Primary Variables with 95% Confidence Intervals

Variables	1	2	3
1. TABS	—		
2. Reaction to James	.72*** [.65, .77]	—	
3. Reaction to Emma	.66*** [58, .73]	.80*** [.75, .84]	—
4. Religious Importance	−.50*** [−.59, −.40]	−.45*** [−.54, −.34]	−.36*** [−.46, −.25]

Note. ***$p < .001$

Table 4. Gender Differences Between Primary Variables

	Men		Women		*t*(246)	*p*	Cohen's *d*	[95% CI]
	M	*SD*	*M*	*SD*				
TABS	137.77	33.03	156.11	34.43	−3.95	<.001	−.54	[−.81, −.27]
Reaction to James	3.07	1.37	3.40	1.44	−1.72	.04	−.24	[−.50, .03]
Reaction to Emma	2.15	1.19	2.91	1.50	−4.27	<.001	−.58	[−.86, −.31]
Religious Importance	2.85	1.37	2.96	1.45	−.58	.28	−.08	[−.35, .19]

Note. [95% CI] is the 95 percent confidence interval for Cohen's *d*.

variables. PROCESS Model 4 was run to test the mediation hypothesis. Age, personal relationship/contact with a trans person, and educational level have all been associated with attitudes toward trans people (see Norton & Herek, 2013; Tadlock et al., 2017) and were, therefore, included as covariates in our model. Given our significant findings related to gender differences (Table 4) and significant findings elsewhere related to the contact hypothesis (Tadlock et al. 2017), we also controlled for participation in co-ed athletics.

RESULTS

Vignette reaction scores for Emma and James were used as proxy measures for attitudes towards transgender women athletes and transgender men athletes, respectively. In a comparison of athlete vignette reactions towards James, a transgender man, and Emma, a transgender woman, results showed that athletes were significantly more supportive of James, $t(247) = 10.84$, $p < .001$, $d = .69$. This suggests that in this sample of cisgender athletes, attitudes towards transgender men in sport were significantly more favorable than attitudes towards transgender women in sport. As described in Table 3, correlations revealed a significant, positive relationship between general attitudes towards transgender people and reactions towards James and reactions towards Emma. Further, there were significant, negative correlations between religious importance and general attitudes towards transgender people, reactions to James, and reactions to Emma. Gender differences (see Table 4) for primary variables revealed that women endorsed significantly more positive general attitudes and support for trans athletes compared to men in this sample. However, no significant gender differences were found in religiosity or support for James.

Support for Transgender Women

Hayes' (2018) PROCESS Model 4 was conducted to evaluate the influence of religiosity on support for Emma as a proxy for transgender women in sport. Age, having a personal relationship with a transgender person, self-reported co-ed athletic experience, and education level were included as covariates in the model. Consistent with our hypotheses, the mediation model revealed a significant direct effect of attitudes towards transgender people on support for transgender women in sport, $c' = 0.03$, $t(241) = 10.45$, $p < 0.001$, 95% CI [0.02, 0.03]. The *f*-square value was .03 indicating a small effect size. However, religious importance did not significantly mediate the relationship between attitudes towards transgender people and support of transgender women in sport, *b*

= .0007, 95% CI [-0.002, 0.003]. These results suggest that attitudes towards transgender women in sport were best predicted by overall attitudes towards transgender people, regardless of importance of religiosity.

Support for Transgender Men

A second mediation model was used to evaluate the influence of religiosity on support for James as a proxy for transgender men in sport. The same covariates were included. Similar to the mediation model for transgender women in sport, there was a significant direct effect between attitudes towards transgender people and support for transgender men in sport, $c' = 0.03$, $t(241) = 11.68$, $p < 0.001$, 95% CI [0.02, 0.03]. The *f*-square value was .04 indicating a small effect size. Further, this model revealed significant indirect effects, suggesting that the relationship between attitudes towards transgender people and support for transgender men in sport was mediated by religious importance, $b = 0.0024$, 95% CI [0.0003, 0.0051]. These results suggest that religiosity significantly, partially mediated the relationship between overall attitudes towards transgender people and attitudes towards transgender men in sport, such that higher levels of religiosity predict lower support of transgender men in sport.

DISCUSSION

This study sought to fill the gap in knowledge surrounding intercollegiate athletes' attitudes toward the inclusion of trans people in sport. Specifically, the present study examines the potential role of religiosity in attitudes toward intercollegiate trans athletes across sport scenarios (e.g., team, individual, contact, non-contact). Results indicate that participants are overall more supportive of including trans men in sport than they are of including trans women. Findings also suggest that religiosity was a factor in intercollegiate athlete attitudes toward trans men, but not toward trans women.

General Attitudes

Consistent with past domestic and international research (Merrill and Anderson 2024; Tanimoto and Miwa 2021), participants indicated more supportive attitudes toward James (a trans man athlete) than toward Emma (a trans woman athlete). However, effect sizes related to the various gender difference calculations indicated that the magnitude of difference between men and women depended on the target of those attitudes. The largest or moderate effect sizes were observed when differences (a) in general attitudes toward trans people and (b) in attitudes toward Emma specifically were computed.

In any case, the overall trend in greater acceptance towards trans men in sport may be explained by a perceived athletic advantage of trans women (e.g., perceived advantage of increased testosterone in individuals assigned male at birth). These findings may also be influenced by factors related to medical transition. For example, Merrill and Anderson (2024) found that trans athletes' hormone status was not a significant predictor of acceptance, but Tanimoto and Miwa (2021) found that trans athletes who had undergone hormone replacement therapy were perceived as more acceptable.

This indicates a need to understand the nuanced influences of acceptance to-

wards trans men and trans women; the findings of the present study introduce religiosity as one potential influence. Given that discrimination is linked to sport performance and mental health for trans athletes (Phipps 2021), an awareness of the differential way that trans men and trans women are treated in sport may guide the allocation of resources and the creation of interventions for both populations. First, more research is needed that focuses on the unique experiences of trans men and trans women in sport. Additionally, care for trans woman athletes should consider the unique and intense forms of discrimination faced by trans women and should be designed to mitigate the associated risk, distress, and lack of community support.

The Role of Religiosity

The fact that religiosity was a mediator of attitudes toward tans man athletes, but not toward trans woman athletes is consistent with other research on the role of religiosity in attitudes toward trans people among voters (Knutson et al. 2021). Admittedly, the effect of religiosity was small, but our findings add to a growing, important line of inquiry and may inform the design and conduct of future studies. They are also bolstered by religiosity research elsewhere that, for example, indicates that religiosity may be a deciding factor about the inclusion of transgender people in sport (Arnold et al. 2024). In other words, although attitudes towards trans man athletes may broadly be more ambivalent than attitudes towards trans women in sport, religiosity may be an influential factor in the formation of attitudes relating to the inclusion of trans men in sport.

Religion can be a prominent social identity and may have a lasting impact on moral foundations, even if one no longer identifies as religious (Van Tongeren et al. 2021). Given the permeating nature of religiosity, it may be more salient in the context of sport-specific attitudes when general attitudes are more ambivalent. This phenomenon is important for advocates, clinicians, and sport medicine providers (psychologists, physicians, physical therapists) to know as they allocate resources, interventions, and format advocacy initiatives to increase inclusion of trans athletes. Understanding the individual and cultural influences on the formation of attitudes towards transgender athletes can support advocates, clinicians, and sport medicine professionals in conceptualizing sport climates. Understanding sources of opposition and barriers to inclusion may enhance effective intervention and advocacy efforts for proponents of trans athlete inclusion. Intercollegiate athletes may be more open to learning and changing their perspectives when they are more ambivalent, and that ambivalence may be an entry point to inspiring broader change and acceptance.

Strengths and Limitations

This study features several strengths such as the substantial sample size and the use of vignettes to gauge participant attitudes. The inclusion of trans men is also a strength given that trans men are generally overlooked in sport research. However, the study is also limited by dynamics that impact cross-sectional, correlational, survey-based research. The fact that most of the sample identified as white and as women should be factored into any attempts to generalize the study results and the small sub-samples of people of color, LGBTQ+ folks, and people with other intersecting identities limited opportunities to control for sub-populations and/or conduct between groups analy-

ses. Relatedly, the present study represents only collegiate athletes who predominantly identified their religious affiliation as Christian. Collegiate athletes may differ from other subpopulations, such as high school or professional athletes. Moreover, the lack of representation from diverse religious affiliations limits the generalizability of these findings. In the future, researchers may benefit from collecting samples of people with multiple marginalized identities and/or measuring additional variables such as sexism or homophobia. Likewise, while religiosity was a significant mediator of acceptance for trans men, it should be noted that religiosity is likely confounded by variables not measured in the present study, such as social dominance orientation, political orientation, and gender role beliefs (Eliason et al. 2017; Oxendine 2018).

Furthermore, there has been robust discussion about the appropriateness of running mediation analyses with cross-sectional psychological data (e.g., Fiedler et al. 2018). In an effort to account for concerns expressed by researchers, we (a) conceptualize religiosity as a state measured at one point in time, (b) indicate that we are examining the influence rather than the effect of religiosity in our model, (c) use a regression-based approach to mediation, and (d) base our model design on the growing body of research on religiosity. As indicated in our introduction, current evidence indicates that religiosity exerts a novel influence on people's attitudes toward trans people and is likely to function as an intervening variable that explains how attitudes translate into support (mediation) rather than as a factor that directly alters the association between attitudes and support (moderation). It is possible that participating in team sports could shape athletes' attitudes toward trans teammates but given the variation in team sizes and the fact that almost twice as many respondents reported participating in team sports than individual sports, we were unable to test for any influence of team sport participation that might have been present in our sample. Researchers may benefit from examining between sport differences in the future. Our results add to a growing body of research on religiosity and transphobia and mirror patterns found elsewhere and should be interpreted within that broader context.

Implications for Research and Practice

Many studies exploring transgender athlete participation have been conducted outside of the United States (Jones et al. 2017; Knox et al. 2019; Phipps 2021). There is a need for more studies like this one that explore factors that impact the attitudes of transgender inclusivity in context, such as in rural areas. Cross-cultural studies are also needed to identify the nuanced impact of laws, bans, and criteria towards eligibility for transgender athlete sport participation at a global level.

The present study may provide insight to several individuals including athletes, coaches, sport psychologists, legislators, and policymakers. As athletic organizations move toward creating accepting environments for transgender athletes, sport psychologists and coaches can better understand what factors may need to be addressed within a team or individual athletes as they relate to attitudes toward transgender athletes. Moreover, legislators and policy makers may benefit from the results of this study by gaining more insight into athlete attitudes towards transgender athletes, allowing them to create policies that are both representative and more empirically supported. These findings may also support the work of ally groups formed by sport psychologists and others that advocate for the inclusion of transgender athletes and help

create LGBTQ+ inclusive spaces in sport.

It is becoming increasingly important to understand variables that impact inclusion and/or exclusion of trans athletes as pressures on those athletes grow in public discourse and stress. This study adds to the current conversation indicating that trans women are less likely than trans men to receive support regarding inclusion in sport. Moreover, these findings point to the important role of religiosity in the development of attitudes towards trans athletes, particularly for trans men when general prejudice is low. Additionally, the findings of the present study begin to address the limited focus on trans men in sport. Just as religiosity may play a role in attitudes, other factors, such as sociocultural identities and influences from governing bodies and institutions of sport (e.g., NCAA, International Olympics Committee), may be identified in beliefs amongst collegiate athletes. The results of this study represent a call for a further depth of research on athlete attitudes on inclusion and support of trans athletes in intercollegiate spaces. Professionals, peers, and researchers may use our findings to continue implementing advocacy and movements towards equity for trans individuals in collegiate sport as insight is gained from collegiate athletes themselves.

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ORIGINAL ARTICLE

Communicating Self-Perceptions of Acceptance or Rejection at the University: A Co-Cultural Analysis of Trans University Students' Communication Strategies

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In light of a continued legislative and social push in the United States to harm already marginalized communities of transgender students, there must be examinations into how to ensure these communities still feel supported at the University. This current study analyzes interview data from trans university students using the levels of self-perceptions of trans acceptance identified by Maulding (2023) and co-cultural theory (Orbe 1996) to determine the impacts of acceptance on their communication strategies. The findings can be applied by those in positions of relative power (e.g., faculty, staff, administrators) to understand how the communication events with trans students may actually reveal their feelings of acceptance or rejection. The findings reveal that each of the four self-perceived levels of acceptance or rejection (i.e., active acceptance, passive acceptance, active rejection, and passive rejection) inspired distinct communication strategies. This study is useful for identifying the potential impacts of acceptance or rejection present in co-cultural communication involving trans university students.

KEYWORDS trans, university, co-cultural theory, self-perceptions, acceptance
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Over 500 anti-transgender bills were proposed throughout the United States in 2024 (Reed 2024). In the first three months of 2025, roughly 800 more anti-trans bills have been proposed (Reed 2025). Not all have passed into law, but every single bill has expanded the landscape of discrimination and hate through which trans folks in the United States must navigate their lives. In addition to bills specifically targeting trans

people, legislation attacking, dismantling, and defunding diversity, equity, and inclusion programs has been implemented in various places around the United States. This has led to the closure of affinity centers designed to support LGBTQ+ students, as well as students of color at several universities (Flannery 2024), often creating hardships at multiple intersections of a student's identity.

In light of this continued push to harm already marginalized communities of students, there must be examinations into how to ensure these marginalized communities still feel supported at the University. This current study analyzes interview data from trans university students using the levels of self-perceptions of trans acceptance identified by Maulding (2023) and co-cultural theory (Orbe 1996) to determine the impacts of perceived acceptance on communication strategies (e.g., educating others or avoiding) utilized by trans university students. The findings can be applied by those in positions of relative power within a university to understand how the underlying motivations for communication strategies chosen by trans students may actually reveal whether these students feel accepted or rejected. At a time when just existing as trans exposes trans students to increased risks of harm, knowing these motivations can help to create more intentional communication events to demonstrate support for members of these communities.

Trans College Students

College is a time for many young people when the shifting of influences from family life at home to college life with student peers creates new opportunities to develop greater senses of their identities. These new influences are important for students who move away to attend college (Goldberg & Kuvalanka 2018) and for students who commute to their campus from home (Booth 2007; Pokorny et al. 2017). Students are learning to adapt to new environments and evolving conceptions of who they are as adults. For cis students who experience gender identities that match their biological sex, this time can be stressful. For trans students, who must face these challenges with the addition of gender-identity-based discrimination and harassment, this time can be stressful and unnecessarily onerous (Evans et al. 2017). Prior studies throughout the past several decades have found numerous examples of harassment, aggression, or violence faced by trans students on college campuses directly related to their gender identities (Chang & Chung 2015; Pryor 2015; Pusch 2005; Singh et al. 2013). These lived experiences and acts of discrimination contribute to a colder campus climate for trans students (Yost & Gilmore 2011) and to perceptions of rejection. For trans students who are not perceiving themselves as accepted, the accessibility of identity exploration may be severely diminished (Maulding 2023) in ways that are not experienced by the cis students attending the same university. Therefore, it is important for studies to focus specifically on ways to help trans students at the University from the perspectives of trans university students.

Self-Perceptions of Acceptance for Trans College Students

Maulding (2023), through an analysis of the experiences shared by the participants, identified four levels of acceptance and rejection for trans students. The four levels identified are active acceptance, passive acceptance, active rejection, and passive rejection. Active acceptance was defined as "the activist level of acceptance," using an

"equity approach" (122). Examples of active acceptance included the campus having a queer and trans resource center focused on the specific needs of these students and professors leading by example with proper introductions of pronouns. For active acceptance, the university or members of campus actively sought ways to support trans students. Passive acceptance was identified as "an equality approach" with "no gaps or differences in treatment between people or communities" (122). Passive acceptance involves treating trans students with the same respect and care that is shown to cis students. For example, a professor can passively accept their trans students by correcting names that are listed incorrectly on the roster. The professor does not have to go out of their way for trans students any more than they would for cis students with passive acceptance.

Active rejection is "when students, faculty, or administration act with the intent to harm or bring down trans communities" (Maulding 2023, 121). Examples included fellow students loudly disparaging trans students' gender expression and professors actively excluding trans folks' contributions from classroom discussions. For rejection to be active, the actions are undertaken knowing they are problematic to the trans communities or with the intent to not accept trans students. Passive rejection, however, occurs when a "lack of understanding about an issue" results "in no perceived need to solve the problem" (Maulding 2023, 125). Although, there is no intent to cause harm, there is also no effort or desire to understand the negative impact of a particular (in)action or policy. An example of this is a university providing only a small number of gender-neutral restrooms in limited buildings around campus. It is possible that those in power believe having gender-neutral bathrooms at all solves restroom-related issues for trans students, without considering the implications or results of having so few gender-neutral bathrooms available.

Theorizing from a Co-Cultural Communication Perspective

Co-cultural communication theory (CCT), as introduced by Orbe (1996), was influenced by muted group theory's call to focus more attention on nondominant, overlooked communities (Wall & Gannon-Leary 1999) and feminist standpoint theory's (FST) recognition of the epistemological advantage of producing knowledge from marginalized perspectives (Orbe 1998a). CCT posits that dominant cultures gain and maintain power by developing communication norms that nondominant (i.e., co-cultural) group members must understand and navigate through communication strategies (Burnett et al. 2009; Fox & Warber 2015; Herakova 2012). Ramírez-Sánchez (2008) notes that these strategies are not prescribed in advance, but instead "obey cultural factors that are both internal and external to co-cultural group members" (91).

Table 1. Communication Orientations

	Assimilation	Accommodation	Separation
Nonassertive Approach	Nonassertive Assimilation	Nonassertive Accommodation	Nonassertive Separation
Assertive Approach	Assertive Assimilation	Assertive Accommodation	Assertive Separation
Aggressive Approach	Aggressive Assimilation	Aggressive Accommodation	Aggressive Separation

Table 2. Co-Cultural Practices and Orientations Summary

Examples of Practices	Brief Description
Nonassertive Assimilation	
Emphasizing commonalities	Focusing on human similarities while downplaying or ignoring co-cultural differences
Developing positive face	Assuming a gracious communicator stance where one is more considerate, polite, and attentive to dominant group members
Censoring self	Remaining silent when comments from dominant group members are inappropriate, indirectly insulting, or highly offensive
Averting controversy	Averting communication away from controversial or potentially dangerous subject areas
Assertive Assimilation	
Extensive preparation	Engaging in an extensive amount of detailed (mental= concrete) groundwork prior to interactions with dominant group members
Overcompensating	Conscious attempts—consistently enacted in response to a pervasive fear of discrimination—to become a "superstar"
Manipulating stereotypes	Conforming to commonly accepted beliefs about group members as a strategic means to exploit them for personal gain
Bargaining	Striking a covert or overt arrangement with dominant group members where both parties agree to ignore co-cultural differences
Aggressive Assimilation	
Dissociating	Making a concerted effort to elude any connection with behaviors typically associated with one's co-cultural group
Mirroring	Adopting dominant group codes in attempt to make one's co-cultural identity more (or totally) invisible
Strategic distancing	Avoiding any association with other co-cultural group members in attempts to be perceived as a distinct individual
Ridiculing self	Invoking or participating in discourse, either passively or actively, that is demeaning to co-cultural group members
Nonassertive Accommodation	
Increasing visibility	Covertly, yet strategically, maintaining a co-cultural presence within dominant structures
Dispelling stereotypes	Myths of generalized group characteristics and behaviors are countered through the process of just being one's self
Assertive Accommodation	
Communicating self	Interacting with dominant group members in an authentic, open, and genuine manner; used by those with strong self-concepts
Intragroup networking	Identifying and working with other co-cultural group members who share common philosophies, convictions, goals
Utilizing liaisons	Identifying specific dominant group members who can be trusted for support, guidance, and assistance
Educating others	Taking the role of teacher in co-cultural interactions; enlightening dominant group members of co-cultural norms, values, etc.

Examples of Practices	Brief Description
Aggressive Accommodation	
Confronting	Using the necessary aggressive methods, including ones that seemingly violate the "rights" of others, to assert one's voice
Gaining advantage	Inserting references to co-cultural oppression as a means to provoke dominant group reactions and gain advantage
Nonassertive Separation	
Avoiding	Maintaining a distance from dominant group members; refraining from activities and or locations where interaction is likely
Maintaining barriers	Imposing, through the use of verbal and nonverbal cues, a psychological distance from dominant group members
Assertive Separation	
Exemplifying strength	Promoting the recognition of co-cultural group strengths, past accomplishments, and contributions to society
Embracing stereotypes	Applying a negotiated reading to dominant group perceptions and merging them into a positive co-cultural self-concept
Aggressive Separation	
Attacking	Inflicting psychological pain through personal attacks on dominant group members' self-concept
Sabotaging others	Undermining the ability of dominant group members to take full advantage of their privilege inherent in dominant structures

Communication strategy selection is influenced by preferred approaches and outcomes. The three strategic communication approaches identified by Orbe (1996) are nonassertive, assertive, and aggressive. Nonassertive behavior includes considering the needs of others above the needs of the self (Cohen & Avanzino 2010). An assertive approach involves respectful communicative expression that represents the needs of the self and others (Orbe 1996). An aggressive approach is more dominant, can be hurtful to others, and assumes control over the choices of others (Cohen & Avanzino 2010).

The three preferred outcomes of co-cultural communication strategies are assimilation, accommodation, and separation. Assimilation is the desired outcome of fitting in with the dominant culture, despite the potential risk to personal, co-cultural characteristics (Orbe 1998b). Accommodation is being accepted into a dominant culture without giving up a nondominant identity. Separation involves only interacting with members of one's co-cultural groups or close allies unless there is no other option (Orbe 1996), rather than changing oneself or attempting to change the dominant culture.

Together, preferred approaches and outcomes create nine communication orientations, each a "specific stance that [co-cultural members] assume during their interactions in dominant organizational structures" (Orbe 1998a, 269). Table 1 illustrates these nine orientations.

Within these communication orientations are communication strategies. Table 2 from Orbe & Roberts (2012) provides examples and definitions of communication strategies sorted by communication orientation (295). This is not an exhaustive list, as specific strategies can be added or changed to match the data (Orbe & Roberts 2012), but it does provide a useful guide to commonly employed strategies.

METHODOLOGY

This current study analyzed the data collected by Maulding (2023) in order to determine whether the identified levels of acceptance and rejection impacted the communication strategies of their participants. The participants were students at Joan University (JU), who responded to emailed solicitations forwarded by university instructors and the campus queer and trans resource center (QTRC). The call for participants requested the assistance of students who did not identify as cisgender, who were willing to discuss their experiences at JU they believed to be related to their gender identities. These experiences led to the identification of the four levels of acceptance or rejection at the university. The study that resulted in the data being analyzed for this current study received approval from the instructional review board of Joan University. Each participant of the original study affirmed their informed consent to participate.

Research participants

This study analyzed in-depth interview notes and transcripts of six students. For continuity, this current study uses the pseudonyms from Maulding (2023). One student, Adan, identified as trans male/gender-neutral. Grace-Ronaldo identified as nonbinary. The remaining four participants (i.e., Drew, Max, Julian, & Zack) identified as trans male. No participant in this study identified as transfemme or trans female. The participants were majority White, with only two (i.e., Drew and Grace-Ronaldo) identifying as Mexican American. Despite being labeled as a "Hispanic serving institution," JU was also majority White. Future research of this type would benefit from a more intersectional analysis, but this study's focus is centered, solely, around gender identities.

Data analysis

This study involved a twofold thematic analysis. The first round analyzed over two-hundred pages of transcripts and notes from the study conducted by Maulding (2023), using the a priori themes of active acceptance, passive acceptance, active rejection, and passive rejection identified by that study. After dividing the emic accounts of communication events into the four levels of acceptance and rejection, the second round returned to the data, using co-cultural theory as a guide, to explore the ways in which these larger contexts impacted communication strategies. CCT provides another clear list of potential a priori themes to focus the analysis (e.g., field of experience, desired outcome, context). Initially, the data were reassembled into larger categories based upon whether they contributed to or resulted from perceptions of acceptance or rejection. After, the data were further organized by whether the acceptance or rejection fit the more specific definitions of active or passive. Following this, each communication event discussed in the interviews was analyzed to determine which CCT communication strategy the participant utilized. This allowed for a structuring of the data by desired outcome (i.e., assimilation, accommodation, and separation) and then approach (i.e., nonassertive, assertive, and aggressive). Finally, any patterns in strategy found within and between levels of acceptance which might suggest reasons for specific strategy selection were noted.

FINDINGS

The strategies are categorized by perceptions of acceptance and further categorized by preferred outcomes. Table 3 was created to assist the reader with making sense of the communication strategies explored below.

Active acceptance

The only communication orientation utilized by participants who were feeling actively accepted was assertive accommodation. These participants wanted to express and find recognition for their diverse standpoints within the dominant culture of this university (Orbe 1998a).

The first communication strategy utilized by participants perceiving active acceptance was *Communicating Self*. This strategy is defined as "interacting with dominant group members in an authentic, open, and genuine manner; used by those with strong self-concepts" (Orbe 1998a, 250). This is considered an assertive approach. One example of communicating self comes from how Drew expressed himself through his artwork. He described his art department as "very supportive" and "proud of him," stating:

> I felt very accepted in the art department cause like, no one batted an eye. Everyone was like, super understanding. And there was my work, and my work is about me as a trans male. And, like, it's like, my work is about tidbits of my life. Like, I'm exposing myself. And they're just like, they're very proud of me.

Drew communicated with people who encouraged and supported him. Because his experience in this context had been encouraging and accepting, he knew he can be vulnerable and share parts of his marginalized identity through the art he created.

The second and third communication strategies utilized by participants perceiving active acceptance were *using liaisons* and *intergroup networking*. Using liaisons is defined by Orbe (1998a) as "identifying specific dominant group members who can be trusted for support, guidance, and assistance" and intergroup networking as "identifying and working with other co-cultural group members who share common philosophies, convictions, and goals" (250). The strategies are not mutually exclusive. Multiple strategies can be utilized during the same communication events, depending on the communicator's preferred outcome and communication approach (Meyer 2019). Adan identified the faculty advisors of the campus LGBTQ club as trusted liaisons and recognized their shared queer identities, stating:

> The queer club … is good because they have faculty and staff attached, so we know there's certain people we can go to as students, that we can talk to … because they're open and … out and we can feel safe with them.

Adan recognized a shared queer identity among the faculty and staff connected to the campus LGBTQ club. It is because of these queer identities that Adan believed he can trust these members as connections to the dominant culture of this university. Through their accepted association with marginalized communities and affiliation with dominant cultures, these trusted liaisons serve as a bridge between marginalized communities and dominant power structures on campus. He knew he could seek them out for support, safety, and guidance while communicating with members of the campus at large and navigating the spaces of this university, because they were actively supporting his community beyond a "safe space sticker" (Adan).

Table 3. Examples of Co-Cultural Orientations and Practices

	Assimilation	Accommodation	Separation
Nonassertive Approach	Nonassertive Assimilation *Example:* Censoring-Self: Zack chose to censor himself, rather than respond to inappropriate comments about his gender.	Nonassertive Accommodation *Example:* Increasing Visibility: This was not seen in this study but can take the form of deliberately joining organizations to increase the level of trans presence in that space.	Nonassertive Separation *Example:* Avoiding: Drew chooses to avoid unpleasant interactions with cis faculty and students by hanging out with his close friends.
Assertive Approach	Assertive Assimilation *Example:* Bargaining: The students who identify as passing bargain with professors by asking for them to use their correct names while not bringing up their trans status.	Assertive Accommodation *Example:* Educating Others: Drew chooses to educate others about his trans identity through artwork.	Assertive Separation *Example:* Exemplifying Strength: This was not seen in this study but could take the form of highlighting group achievements to convince others to separate with you from the dominant group.
Aggressive Approach	Aggressive Assimilation *Example:* Strategic Distancing: Max does not go to the QTRC or QTRC events because he does not want to be labeled as a trans community member.	Aggressive Accommodation *Example:* Gaining Advantage: This was not seen in this study but can take the form of making a dominant member feel guilty about hardships faced by a marginalized group, in order to gain compliance.	Aggressive Separation *Example:* Attacking: This was not seen in this study but can take the form of bullying members of the dominant group because of their identity in order to create a psychological distance.

Active rejection

With active rejection, participants held two communication orientations: accommodation and separation.

Accommodation strategies

Just as with accommodation for active acceptance, participants seeking accommodation while feeling rejected are attempting to ensure their trans identities are recognized. Adan used the *educating others* strategy from an assertive accommodation orientation in an interaction with one of his professors. In a class titled "Women as Agents of Social Change," the instructor was not "talking about Marsha P Johnson, … Sylvia Rivera, or any of those queer … leaders of color," leaving Adan, a trans student of color, feeling "erased" (Maulding 2023, 123). After his attempts to insert trans women into the curriculum of this course were rebuffed, Adan decided to continue his attempts to

educate his classmates about trans issues. Refusing to assimilate by remaining silent in the face of what he perceived to be "emotionally damaging," Adan attempted to actively assert his desire to educate his classmates about the experiences of trans people. After a more assertive communication approach, influenced by his previous activist work on behalf of trans students, Adan was able to present in class about trans issues.

The second communication strategy identified, *obtaining satisfaction*, is an expansion of co-cultural theory created through this current study. CCT does allow for this type of expansion when necessary (Orbe and Roberts 2012). Obtaining satisfaction is an assertive accommodation strategy defined as using assertive, nonaggressive methods to assert one's voice, with the expectation, but not guarantee, of being accommodated. This strategy is a non-aggressive demand. *Obtaining satisfaction* was employed in Max's interaction with the campus housing department. Despite being a male student, Max was assigned a room in an all-girls dorm. Although Max began the interactions with a negative preconception of interacting with campus admins, believing the administration to be "pretty bad to trans people," his willingness to continue calling admins showed his unwillingness to assimilate. He did not use an aggressive strategy. Instead, he chose to assert his voice and demand to not be housed in an all-girls dorm. The eventual result was being "isolated" (Max) in a four-bedroom dorm, but his desire was strong enough that he still actively asserted his right to be accommodated within the dominant power structure, knowing they had the authority to ignore his assertion for accommodation.

Separation strategies

There were two examples of separation, both of which were nonassertive. The nonassertive separation orientation involves a decision to passively separate, when possible, from interactions or situations involving members of the dominant cultures. Both examples of nonassertive separation were *avoiding* or "maintaining a distance from dominant group members; refraining from activities and/or locations where interaction is likely" (Orbe 1998a, 250). This communication strategy was utilized by Max, Drew, and Adan. Adan spent time in the library to avoid people who will "mess with him." Drew separated himself from the dominant cultures, through the "safe space" he created with his friends. This is where he felt "the most comfortable." Max, when he was beginning his transition, spent his time in the theatre department or the QTRC to avoid the stares and "weird" behavior he encountered from cis students. In each case, these students felt less comfortable around members of the dominant, largely cishetero cultures and avoided interactions with them when possible, preferring instead isolation, interactions with members of queer communities, or the company of close, trusted friends.

Another example of nonassertive separation involving avoiding specific communication situations that are uncomfortable or unpleasant was provided by Max. During his first two years at this university, before he was able to live as stealth, not every instructor would accommodate Max's request to use his name and pronouns. Max stated:

> Ever since I came I was out even though I didn't look like the guy. I still like emailed all my professors and like I told everybody. For the most part [everyone accepted the name and pronouns] and then if there was any that

> wouldn't, I just dropped their classes and switched. … They … would give some excuse that like legally grading wise it has to say like a certain name or something, which doesn't make any sense because like 90% of professors would do it.

Max was not allowed to transition at home and knew what it was like to not have his trans identity recognized by others. His previous experiences influenced his decision to avoid situations, when possible, that would involve denying his trans identity. With the freedom he felt at JU to transition and strive for acceptance as a trans man, he refused to be misgendered and deadnamed by his instructors. The desired outcome was to separate himself from that situation.

Passive acceptance

As with active acceptance, no participant perceiving passive acceptance employed any separation orientations. However, both assimilation and accommodation strategies were used by participants perceiving passive acceptance.

Assimilation strategies

Passive acceptance was the only perceived level of acceptance that involved all three approaches of assimilation. Nonassertive assimilation techniques are chosen by those whose desired outcome and approach are not intended to disrupt the existing power structures (Camara and Orbe, 2010). The nonassertive assimilation strategy utilized was *censoring self* or "remaining silent when comments from dominant group members are inappropriate, indirectly insulting, or highly offensive" (Orbe 1998a, 249). Zack described using this strategy when told he is "passing enough where [they] never would have guessed" he was trans. Rather than choosing to correct this assumption that men must look a certain way to avoid suspicion they may be trans, Zack perceived the statement as evidence he is "male masculine presenting to the point where people don't question it." His stated goal was to live as stealth, with his gender unquestioned. He maintained the agency to out himself only if "it's necessary to the conversation" or required to understand his standpoint on a topic. In the context of general conversations, Zack did not see it necessary to disclose his trans status. Therefore, being able to pass without question was a result of the blending in afforded by passive acceptance and no correction was needed when he was told he passes well enough. Therefore, he used the censoring-self strategy and did not correct his co-communicators.

The assertive assimilation orientation, while maintaining the goal of assimilation, takes on less passive communication techniques and does not necessarily privilege the needs of the self or of the dominant culture (Orbe 1998a). The assertive assimilation strategy found in the interviews was *bargaining* or "striking a covert or overt arrangement with dominant group members in which both parties agree to ignore co-cultural differences" (Orbe 1998a, 249). This took the form of Max and Julian emailing their professors informing them of their names and pronouns when they did not match the names and pronouns on the class roster or email. Although other trans students emailed their professors to request they use the correct names and pronouns, the other trans students were more open about their trans status. The attempted bargain was for the teacher to use the proper names and pronouns, without having to discuss their trans status or differences any further. Max and Julian preferred to live

as stealth and attempted to assimilate as cis men. Through successful bargaining, Max and Julian did not have to out themselves as trans to any person other than the instructor. *Bargaining* allowed Max and Julian to retain more agency over their own self-disclosures of gender identity.

With the aggressive assimilation orientation, the desire of the self to "fit in" with members of the dominant society is communicated as more important than the need to maintain a connection to the communicator's marginalized cultural groups. These communicators actively attempt to distance themselves from members of their marginalized communities (Orbe 1998a). There were two aggressive assimilation strategies utilized by participants in this study. The first is *mirroring*, defined as "adopting dominant group codes in an attempt to make one's co-cultural identity more (or totally) invisible" (Orbe 1998a, 249). Drew used this strategy while on campus through his posture. "When I'm out there walking around, I kind of like, I walk normally, but sometimes I kind of like I try to sit up straighter. … I try to like mimic a guy" (Drew). Drew's field of experience told him that cis guys are taller than him, so he attempted to make himself physically larger. He changed his natural posture and stance in order to change the way he was perceived. Drew believed that being taller would connect him to cis men, rather than trans men.

The second aggressive assimilation strategy is *strategic distancing*, or "avoiding any association with other co-cultural group members in attempts to be perceived as a distinct individual" (Orbe 1998a, 249). The participants in this study who used strategic distancing (viz., Julian and Max) identified as stealth and used strategic distancing simultaneously with mirroring to distance themselves from trans communities while assimilating with the cis male communities. Julian described this as "flying under the radar." Max mentioned that, although he is a member of the LGBTQ communities, he doesn't "really identify like that." In choosing to strategically distance themselves from trans communities, in favor of aligning more closely with the more dominant cis communities, they minimized connections to their trans identities.

Before he identified as stealth, Max would communicate his trans identity through artifacts (i.e., pins) and attendance at pride events. Now, Max preferred to live his life not "associated with any label or anything." However, Max identified as stealth and had the ability to pass as cis. By choosing not to disclose his trans status, minimizing his connections to trans communities, and living without labels, Max was likely to be assumed a cis male. This is the result of his strategic communication. Max stated his goal was to "live as cis male." His aggressive assimilation helped him do so.

Accommodation strategies

The assertive accommodation strategy, which was utilized by Zack, was *educating others*. Educating others is defined as "taking the role of teacher in co-cultural interactions; enlightening dominant group members of co-cultural norms, values, and so forth" (Orbe 1998a, 250). When the information about his transness was "story relevant," Zack would disclose information about his trans identity. Zack spoke about educating his classmates in a philosophy course about his experiences as a trans male. His instructor made him feel accepted in class through opening the floor for students to discuss their personal experiences. This was open to all students, not just to trans students. During his interview, Zack spoke about how feeling accepted in class en-

abled him to use those opportunities to educate his classmates about issues he had experienced as a trans male.

Passive rejection

Just as with perceptions of passive acceptance, participants perceiving passive rejection employed nonassertive assimilation, aggressive assimilation, and assertive accommodation strategies.

Assimilation Strategies

There were three examples of the strategy censoring self, a nonassertive assimilation technique. They all involved being misgendered by campus faculty and staff. In these situations, the instructors, faculty, and staff were not intentionally misgendering the participants to harm them. Rather, the instructors, faculty, and staff did not see misgendering as an issue large enough to worry about correcting. The examples of this strategy come from Grace-Ronaldo, Drew, and Max. Grace-Ronaldo described being misgendered by their instructors even after two attempts to correct the instructor's mistake. In this situation, after their accommodation attempts were denied, Grace-Ronaldo employed censoring self with the preferred outcome of assimilating with their fellow students. Drew described "feeling tiny" and without the power to assert himself while interacting with faculty and staff and chose to censor himself, rather than correct their misgendering.

The third example came from Max's communication with campus doctors. At the time of his interview, Max could not think of a single instance of a campus doctor calling his name and could only recall instances of being called by his birth name. He described the process of seeing a campus doctor as an always expected routine, stating:

> I'll go to a doctor's appointment, and they'll like call on my birth name, like, look around, and then I'll stand up, and then they'll like say it again, because they're like, you must have misheard me. And I'm like, no, that's me. And then they'll just like, stare at me for a second and then they'll be like, okay.

This deadnaming occurred in a public waiting room, sometimes with other students around, after he had already written his name for the receptionists at the check-in desk. He had no choice but to go through this process in order to be seen by a campus doctor. To expedite the encounter in the public waiting room, Max chose to censor his corrections, until after he was in a private location with the doctor. This approach allowed him to avoid a public confrontation regarding his trans status, which was important, because every such encounter disrupted Max's desired ability to live as stealth.

Another form of assimilation with passive rejection was the aggressive assimilation strategy called mirroring. Drew employed this strategy when he felt passively accepted and when he felt passively rejected. While interacting with members of faculty he feared might not respect him and accept his gender identity, he attempted to take on more communicative cues that would be expected of cis male students. In addition to standing taller and being mindful of his posture, Drew mentioned strategically deepening his voice while introducing himself as Drew. He asserted his desire

to assimilate into the dominant culture by taking on what he perceived to be a more masculine sounding voice.

Accommodation strategies

In the same way Adan utilized the strategy of using liaisons for active acceptance, he used this strategy while perceiving passive rejection. During his first year at JU, Adan attempted to navigate the "cisheteronormative" and "cishomonormative" contexts around campus. He was able to seek advice and support from trusted cisgender friends who could lend their perspective and experience to assist with his navigation. He explained they were helpful during this period because they "would steer [him] clear from certain people and put [him] towards people that [he] should talk to … and classes [he] needed to take as a trans person at [JU]." When Adan perceived his trans identities as passively, or in some cases actively, rejected, he was able to communicate with liaisons he could trust and be vulnerable with, which made it easier for him to navigate JU.

The second assertive accommodation strategy paired with perceptions of passive rejection was obtaining satisfaction. Drew was asked by his boss to dress more professionally. His boss handed him a women's blazer. Drew relived the story, stating:

> I was wearing my cargo black pants and a dark navy-blue t-shirt. And [my boss told me] I have an assignment to go to and I had to wear like a polo. He was like the President might be there. I was like, I doubt that, but he made me put on a women's blazer and I was like, um, I had no idea. I, I was afraid, and I felt like I couldn't say no. So I put it on. I just felt so, I felt so dysphoric immediately. And I just, like it was awful, and he said how does Drew look and I was like, I know I don't look good … He's like, you look good. I was like, no, I don't and my coworker, the guy coworker, he was just like looking at like, I know, he felt so uncomfortable. And I just like I took it off. And I was like, can I go back to my dorm and just quickly go get my polo.

In this instance, the strategy obtaining satisfaction was an escalation from an uncomfortable assimilation to oblige the manager to an assertive demand to be accommodated. Drew felt powerless to say no to his boss's request and put on the women's blazer. Soon after, however, his being forced into the center of prolonged attention and his dysphoria demanded a more assertive communication strategy to change that unpleasant situation. The desired outcome was no longer to assimilate. It was now to be accommodated. His boss had the power to deny his request, but his need to be accommodated still led to his use of *obtaining satisfaction*.

CONCLUSIONS

When participants perceived acceptance at this university, there were no examples of separation strategies. This was true for both passive and active acceptance. Both passive and active acceptance involved examples of assertive accommodation. When feeling accepted in the communication contexts, the participants chose communication strategies that allowed them to seek accommodation for their marginalized co-cultures. Active acceptance included communicating self, using liaisons, and intergroup

networking as strategies to seek accommodation. With perceptions of passive acceptance came the strategy of educating others about trans issues. What is clear is that when supported and accepted most of the trans participants chose to be involved with campus as members of their marginalized communities. They felt comfortable enough to assert their right to be accommodated.

However, there is one difference between communication influenced by self-perceptions of active and passive acceptance. Namely, when participants felt only passively accepted as members of trans communities, they employed a variety of assimilation strategies. This was not the case for active acceptance. With passive acceptance, participants attempted to remain silent when faced with discrimination, to make deals with members of the dominant culture, and to strategically code themselves as members of the dominant group while distancing themselves from their marginalized identities. This could be a result of feeling accepted enough to not feel the need to separate from the dominant culture, but also not accepted enough as members of a marginalized community to assert that identity.

When participants perceived rejection in the communication context, there were examples of assimilation, accommodation, and separation strategies. The students had to choose between communication strategies that would allow them to assimilate, take activist roles, or stop attempting to change the power structures governed by the dominant culture. With active rejection came the activist strategy of educating others. Participants who felt actively rejected also chose to avoid interactions with members of the dominant culture. With passive rejection came censoring self and mirroring to assimilate and using liaisons and obtaining satisfaction to assist with navigating less-accepting spaces. The appearance of the separation strategy only occurs when participants felt actively rejected at this university. These students distanced themselves from microaggressions and discrimination, rather than attempt to change the communication environments.

When comparing acceptance versus rejection, many of the same communication orientations are present. With active acceptance, all three strategies were assertive accommodation. With active rejection, two of the three strategies were assertive accommodation strategies. The difference between these assertive accommodation strategies is the context in which they are situated. Rather than feeling comfortable enough to share information about trans identities with acceptance, the accommodation is more of an attempt to force a change in what the dominant cultures accept. The examples that come to mind are Drew creating art to communicate aspects of himself after feeling supported by the art department and, by contrast, Adan speaking up for trans folks after the problematic events in his women as agents of change course forced him to continue his activist work.

When comparing passive acceptance to passive rejection, we see the same communication orientations with nonassertive assimilation, aggressive assimilation, and assertive accommodation. This time, however, the contexts do not provide so neat a contrast as with active acceptance and rejection. It is not clear from the data whether the students who experienced passive acceptance attempted to assimilate because they did not feel their trans status was accepted. With Max, Julian, and Zack, the reason for their aggressive assimilation strategies was because they wanted to be perceived as cis men. However, Drew's assimilation technique of straightening his posture may

be because he did not perceive active acceptance of his "slouch" (Drew). He could be straightening his back for the same reason he deepens his voice when experiencing perceptions of passive rejection: he wants his identity as a man to be accepted by the other communication participants. Data from all six of the participants analyzed for this study included descriptions of being in environments in which the participants felt accepted or rejected. This study was able to explore the impact of perceptions of acceptance on the selection of communication strategies through the participants' own experiences at Joan University.

Limitations

There are three primary limitations to this current study. The first is that no participant identified as transfemme or trans female. It is useful to have the experiences of transmasc, trans male, and nonbinary participants, but a wider picture of the co-cultural communication experiences would be possible with an analysis of the experiences of more trans communities. Future research would benefit from a more focused call for participants to foster a more nuanced understanding of the impacts on various groups who do not identify as cisgender than this exploratory study was able to achieve.
The second limitation is that this study did not explore the potential impacts of the participants' intersecting identities. The intent was to determine whether trends existed between perceptions of acceptance and communication strategies. The study did identify potential trends, but a deeper analysis of participant identities would be useful for understanding additional factors at play during these communication events and strategy selections.

The third primary limitation is that this study includes only the experiences of trans students at Joan University. It is true that most studies employing the lens of co-cultural theory do rely on smaller and more limited sample populations. However, it would be beneficial to the goal of ending trans-based discrimination and hardship to see this work continue on different campuses. It is possible that a larger sample of the populations would provide more ways to identify perceptions of rejections and even more suggestions for improvement than those listed below as practical applications.

Theoretical applications

The first theoretical contribution was a comparison of co-cultural communication strategies with different levels of perceived acceptance. It was useful to use the categories of perceptions of acceptance identified by Maulding (2023) as lenses while exploring the participants' communication strategies. This allowed me to isolate the role of context in communication strategy selection. Although context is a fundamental aspect of CCT (Orbe 1998a), no previous studies have examined the communication strategy selections between the same participants as the perceptions of acceptance changed in different contexts.

The second theoretical contribution is the addition of the assertive accommodation strategy obtaining satisfaction. This strategy serves as a final step in assertive accommodation, just before aggressive accommodation. Aggressive accommodation is characterized by taking away the choice to accommodate or not from members of the dominant group (Orbe 1998b). Obtaining satisfaction does still allow for the dominant group member to deny the accommodation (e.g., Drew's boss could have denied

his request to change clothes), but it does assert an intent to be accommodated more forcefully than other assertive accommodation strategies. This new category was created, rather than stretching the definition of an existing category to fit this type of communication. This additional strategy may prove beneficial to future studies using co-cultural theory.

Practical applications

The first major practical application of this current study is an examination of how self-perceptions of acceptance or rejection impact communication strategies of trans students. Feelings of acceptance led to an overall better relationship between trans students and their programs, instructors, and campus. This led to more open discussions about their needs and experiences as trans students or to spaces where they were able to focus on their education rather than their gender. On the contrary, perceptions of rejection led to separation strategies and isolation. This led to participants avoiding campus organizations, dropping courses, and feeling erased. Understanding the motivation for communication strategies can help staff, faculty, and administrators create better campus environments for their trans students.

The second major practical application is a list of directives for improving the University compiled from suggestions given by the participants. What follows are the goals and visions of trans university students who have lived the various levels of acceptance through rejection as trans students. They come from looking out with the epistemological advantage those in positions of relative power cannot claim and with the desire to improve conditions for the trans communities to follow.

There are three university-level suggestions. The first is a call for the university to be more vocal with their advocacy for trans students. When trans students feel more actively accepted through this vocal advocacy, they are in better positions to thrive. Examples of this vocal advocacy includes creating space at every table to discuss issues impacting students and requiring campus-wide training that includes trans issues as more than a hurried afterthought.

The second university-wide suggestion is for the university to be more mindful with official documents and the ways they perpetuate cisnormativity and trans erasure. This includes allowing students to change their names on emails, campus documents, and student IDs to reflect their true names, as opposed to their deadnames. Being deadnamed can be a source of intense emotional distress. This is not something any student needs to experience whenever checking (often-required) student email accounts or showing a requested student ID.

The final university-wide suggestion is for universities to conduct a purposeful audit of when resources use only male or female options. This includes providing more gender-neutral restrooms around campus. This also includes providing menstrual products in spaces beyond women's restrooms. Campuses may also look into including trans-friendly products, such as menstrual pads designed for more culturally masculine underwear, for sale in the student stores or for free in all restrooms.

There are also three suggestions for faculty and staff. The first is that there should be more accountability for faculty and staff taking gender-sensitivity training seriously. Unfortunately, the lessons in these trainings (e.g., helping students survive and heal from sexual assault and preventing sexual harassment) may prove vital for the

safety and success of all students. The faculty and staff need to truly be able to help all students.

The second suggestion is that faculty and staff need to learn how to respectfully use the names and pronouns of all students. Not every trans student has the financial or institutional means to legally change their names. For some students this is not a possible task. That should not mean that those students do not have their identities respected at their university.

Finally, every classroom should be a safe space for trans students. Faculty need to know how to stand up for trans students and how to provide this safety for them. This should be declared on the syllabi. This should also be manifested in an openness to consider the ways the curriculum might be harmful. For example, a social justice course curriculum that does not include the contributions of trans folks should be open to discussion and expansion.

Through these six suggestions, trans students would be less likely to experience feelings of institutional or personal rejection at their university. They would be less likely to have to adjust their communication strategies in order to participate in communication events.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

Although, this study does not purport to solve all of the issues faced by trans students at universities, it can be used to help those in positions of relative power understand how their own communication of acceptance or rejection impacts the communication strategies and university experiences of trans students. Every communication event involves a communication strategy. For members of co-cultures interacting with more dominant cultures, those strategies can be identified using co-cultural communication theory. It is clear that perceptions of acceptance or rejection influence the choice of communication strategies. Improving those perceptions of acceptance at any university, will potentially lead to contexts in which trans students feel comfortable enough to employ the strategies that make them feel empowered, rather than invisible or erased.

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ORIGINAL ARTICLE

Navigating Parental Rejection and Forging a Path to Acceptance: The Experiences of the Transgender Community in China

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Parental rejection poses a major challenge for transgender individuals; however, the reasons behind this rejection remain critically understudied, especially within the Chinese sociocultural context. Using a mixed-methods approach, this study investigates parental rejection as experienced by the transgender population in China by analyzing quantitative survey data ($N = 199$) and qualitative interviews ($N = 32$) to document rates of parental support, identify key reasons for rejection, and explore factors that facilitate acceptance. Over 75% of participants reported that both their mothers and fathers were unsupportive when they first came out as transgender, with the belief that being transgender is "unnatural" (71%) and the fear of losing face (67%) cited as the two most prevalent reasons for this rejection. However, a significant proportion of parents eventually moved towards acceptance, with 43% of mothers and 34% of fathers showing an increase in support after the initial disclosure. According to participants, this increase in acceptance was motivated by parental love, concern over the participant's mental health, and the participant's transition. They reported that parents then utilized three pathways to understanding their transgender identity: consumption of informational resources, engagement with the queer community, and guidance from medical professionals. Understanding why parents reject their transgender children is the first step towards promoting acceptance both within the family and in society as a whole.

KEYWORDS transgender; China; parental rejection; reasons for rejection; parental acceptance
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> Around the age of four or five, when I began to develop a sense of gender, I realized that I "should" be a boy, even though I was born with a female body. I felt like I was carrying a secret that I couldn't tell anyone, including my parents. I felt so confused and unsettled, I did not understand what was happening. The only clear thing was—I was a boy. –Hongrui, a trans man born in 1989

Hongrui was born in 1989 in a rural village in southern China, where he quickly realized he was a transgender man, but, being in rural China, he did not have access to any information about this topic. It was not until he moved to an urban area for college that he finally found the words to describe his identity. In 2010, at age 21, Hongrui shared these feelings with his parents, but they completely rejected his gender identity. His mother was so angry she refused to speak, and his father cried in secret. Hongrui's parents argued that being transgender was "unnatural" (有违自然, *yǒu wéi zìrán*), and claimed he was just going through a phase. They feared their child would face a life of discrimination for defying societal norms. Hongrui's parents had lived their whole lives in rural China; being transgender was unheard of for them. It took a full decade for Hongrui's parents to come to terms with his identity. During this time, they were motivated by their love for their son to seek out informational resources and connect with the queer community to understand what it means to be transgender. Now, Hongrui's parents are very supportive of his gender identity, and they have a close, loving relationship.

Research has shown that Chinese parents are overwhelmingly unsupportive of their transgender children, especially when they first come out (K. Chan et al. 2024; Wu et al. 2017), but why? At present, few studies have attempted to document what reasons parents, Chinese or not, have for rejecting their child's gender identity. Furthermore, while some studies of the western transgender population have begun to document how and why parental views change after their child initially comes out, researchers have yet to examine this question in China. Thus, this study works with transgender individuals to document the rates at which their parents support or reject their gender identity while also identifying what reasoning their parents base this rejection on. Participants also detail which methods they have used to influence their parents into becoming supportive of their transgender identity. This study used a mixed methods approach and gathered quantitative data through a survey of 199 transgender individuals in China and qualitative data from 32 interviewees of this survey. The sample for this study is largely young (72% aged 18–25), well-educated (59% have a bachelor's degree), and urban (83% grew up in urban areas). A mixed-methods approach was used to provide a platform for the Chinese transgender community to share their voices with the world. Only by understanding why parents reject their children's transgender identity can we address this lack of support and guide them towards acceptance.

BACKGROUND

Gendered expectations in China

Defying the expectations placed on you in accordance with your sex assigned at birth is more than a matter of personal expression in China where the state itself has stepped in to regulate gender presentations. In 2021, a proposal was put forth at the National People's Congress entitled "Preventing the Feminization of Male Adolescents," which accused male adolescents in China of being too soft and weak, while calling for a national effort to cultivate masculinity by increasing physical education in schools (Ministry of Education of the People's Republic of China 2021). Later that year, a directive from the National Radio and Television Administration effectively banned the broadcast of effeminate men, whom they referred to as "sissies" (娘炮, *niáng pào*), claiming that such "abnormal" individuals are a threat to the nation's culture (Central People's Government of the People's Republic of China 2021). 娘炮 is a derogatory term used to target any man not in compliance with traditional notions of masculinity but has been especially used to attack queer individuals (Wang and Bao 2023). Research confirms that avoiding femininity is a defining feature of masculine expectations in China (Song and Liang 2018). Failure to comply with these standards results in severe bullying and is potentially fatal, as was the case for 26-year-old Zhou Peng, who committed suicide only months after effeminate men were banned from TV (Yip 2021).

Gender expectations for women in China have experienced whiplash from the masculinized ideal woman of Mao Zedong's Cultural Revolution to the hyper-femininity of present-day China. During the Cultural Revolution (1966 to 1976), Mao sought to expand China's working population as well as his army of supporters by raising up women to be equal to men, as long as they chopped off their hair, donned men's clothes, and took up hard labor jobs (M. Yang 1999). After Mao's death, China opened its doors to the world again and women were promptly shoved back into the box of traditional femininity, where women in China are now held to extreme beauty standards and are hypersexualized in media (W. Yang and Yan 2017). Currently, the beauty standard for women in China is pale, young, and thin (Liu and Li 2023), and marriage is considered the pinnacle of a woman's life as unmarried women in their late 20s are labeled as "left-over women" (剩女, *sheng nǚ*) (Gui 2020). Women in Chinese movies are significantly more likely than the male characters to be young, sexualized, and in conformity with stereotypical beauty standards (Liebler et al. 2015). In the real world, women who comply with these beauty standards receive a greater income than those who defy these norms (Hamermesh et al. 2002). These standards of hypermasculinity and hyperfemininity reveal that there is little room for gender nonconformity in modern day China, placing transgender individuals at great risk of societal exclusion and discrimination.

The reality of being transgender in China

Despite being ignored in mainstream history and media, Chinese records reveal that transgender men and women existed openly throughout both the Ming Dynasty (1368–1644) and the Qing Dynasty (1644–1911) (Xie 2017). Today, an estimated 4.2 million trans people live in China, but, aside from one notable celebrity, there is no representation or discussion of trans Chinese people in mainstream media (Feng 2022). China's singular trans celebrity is renowned ballerina and talk-show host Jin Xing (金星), who underwent gender affirming surgery in 1995. However, despite Jin Xing's fame and

influence, her trans identity is rarely discussed, and she has refused to use her position to advocate for LGBTQI+ rights in China, stating that queer people should not expect "special treatment" and must instead work hard to "earn" their basic human rights (J. Dong 2021). This lack of media representation is a critical barrier to achieving societal acceptance as positive portrayals of transgender people increases acceptance amongst non-LGBTQI+ people (Gay & Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation 2025; Gillig et al. 2017). In China's current media environment, this vital representation is essentially nonexistent.

Gaining parental acceptance as a trans person in China is particularly important due to the government's requirements for transitioning, the legal obligations regarding elder care, and the positive influence of parental support on mental health. In China, the government requires individuals to obtain parental consent before undergoing bottom surgery (gender-affirming genital surgery) regardless of age. Although parental consent is technically only a requirement for bottom surgery, many practitioners also enforce this rule on patients seeking hormone replace therapy (HRT) and other gender-affirming operations (X. Zhou 2024). Due to this often-insurmountable obstacle, a large portion of the trans community in China must resign to buying HRT medications off the black market or even using unrelated medications in hopes of achieving the effects of HRT (Amnesty International 2019). For example, many trans women will take birth control or fertility treatments as substitutes for estrogen. The effects of taking unprescribed medications is dangerous and can result in severe, life-long health problems.

Trans people in China with unaccepting parents face further battles due to the expectations of filial piety, which mandate that children must care for their parents in old age (Y. Yang 2021). The essence of filial piety is to be respectful and obedient to your parents in repayment for bestowing life upon you, and this 3,000-year-old Confucian belief continues to inform familial relationships to this day (Guo 2008). The key aspect of modern filial piety is caring for your parents in old age by financially supporting them, moving in with them, or allowing them to move into your own home (Y. Yang 2021). This societal expectation became mandated by the government in 2013 when a law passed by the National People's Congress allowed parents 60 and older to sue their children if they neglected to provide the culturally expected support. Similarly, in 2016, the Shanghai Ministry of Civil Affairs instated a policy to punish neglectful children by publicly posting their names and docking their credit score (X. Dong 2016). These policies permanently tie individuals to their parents, placing transgender individuals in a precarious situation by forcing them to maintain relationships with unaccepting parents to avoid legal consequences.

The effects of parental acceptance go beyond merely facilitating medical transitions and easing elder care; parental support is lifesaving. Several studies have found that parental acceptance improves adolescent transgender mental health and leads to decreased rates of suicidal ideation (Jin et al. 2020; Hingston 2019; Simons et al. 2014). Addressing suicide rates within the Chinese trans community is imperative as researchers have found it to be exponentially higher than that of the cisgender population; only 12% of the cisgender population in China experiences suicidal ideation, compared with 56% of the trans community. Suicide attempts occur in only 3% of cisgender individuals versus 16% of transgender people (Chen et al. 2019). Since parental

acceptance decreases the risk of suicide among transgender people, there is a clear need to understand *why* parents reject their transgender children.

Current Research on Parental Support of Transgender Identities

The lack of knowledge in China on transgender people contributes to the widespread rejection of transgender identities. Research has found that Chinese parents are largely uninformed on this topic, leading them to fall for common misconceptions regarding trans people (Lin 2018; Song and Chen 2022). A study of the transgender population in China found that nearly 90% of participants reported that their natal families did not fully accept their gender identity (Wu et al. 2017). Sixty-five percent of the respondents interested in gender-affirming surgery disclosed that their parents barred them from pursuing it. A continuation of this study, published in 2023, found that only 19% of participants' mothers were very or somewhat supportive of their gender identity compared with just 11% of fathers (Beijing LGBT+ 2023). Higher rates of maternal acceptance in comparison with paternal acceptance has been found in several other studies (Hill and Menvielle 2009; Ishii 2017; Riggs and Due 2014; Y. Zhou et al. 2021).

At present, no research quantitatively measures parental reasoning for rejecting transgender identities, but some studies have indirectly documented various reasons for rejection. Five reasons have been noted both within and outside of China: the fear of losing face (Song and Chen 2022), the fear that their child will face discrimination (Hill and Menvielle 2009; Song and Chen 2022), the belief that being trans is unnatural (Lin 2018), the belief that it is just a phase (Gray et al. 2015; Gregor et al. 2014; Hill and Menvielle 2009; Ishii 2017; Johnson et al. 2020; Katz-Wise et al. 2017; Lin 2018), and the claim that this is a symptom of westernization (Johnson et al. 2020). Additionally, trans women in China have been documented as being rejected on the basis that they were expected to carry on the family name (Song and Chen 2022; Yan et al. 2019).

Researchers have examined three specific routes parents take to reaching acceptance: consuming informational resources (Hill and Menvielle 2009; Ishii 2017; Johnson et al. 2020), connecting with the queer community (Ishii 2017), and receiving guidance from medical professionals (Gray et al. 2015; Riggs and Due 2015). Three motivations behind this change have also been documented: unconditional love (Hill and Menvielle 2009), the child's persistent transition (Sansfaçon et al. 2015), and the mental health of the child (Amnesty International 2019).

Although the studies covered in this section do provide a helpful foundation for this study, they suffer from some major limitations as only a few focus on China specifically and, those that do, have small sample sizes. There are additional studies and essays that provide ethnographic and autobiographical insight into this population, but these also lack a robust sample size (Jun 2010).

With this research and background in mind, this study puts forth the following research questions:

- *RQ1*: What difference do transgender individuals in China perceive in the acceptance of their gender identity between their mothers and fathers?
- *RQ2*: What are the specific reasons Chinese parents use to reject their children's gender identity?
- *RQ3*: What motivations and processes facilitate a parent's shift from rejecting to accepting their child's gender identity?

METHODS

Definitions

Transgender is an umbrella term that applies to any individual who does not identify with their sex assigned at birth, including binary trans people and nonbinary trans people. Binary trans people are those who identify with a binary gender identity, e.g. man or woman. Nonbinary trans people includes a range of different terms, the most prominent being agender and genderfluid. Agender is defined as someone who has no gender, and genderfluid is someone who moves between two or more gender identities. Transfeminine nonbinary people, both agender and genderfluid, are those who were assigned male at birth, and transmasculine refers to those who were assigned female at birth. A cisgender person is someone who identifies with their sex assigned at birth.

Mixed Methods Structure

This study consisted of two integrated phases in accordance with an explanatory sequential mixed methods design (Creswell and Creswell 2018), where the quantitative survey ($N = 199$) was conducted first to identify patterns, and then followed by interviews ($N = 32$) to extend the analysis by incorporating qualitative data. The results from the survey informed the purposeful selection of interviewees as well as the interview questions (Creswell and Creswell 2018). Interviewees were chosen based on age, gender, and parental level of support to build a representative sample of the survey population. Through the utilization of the explanatory sequential mixed methods design, this study uses its qualitative findings to enrich the quantitative survey data by revealing the lived experiences behind the statistics.

Population Selection Justification

This study exclusively examines transgender participants' perspectives on parental acceptance/rejection and emphasizes that all interpretations of parental motivations are necessarily mediated through the participant's experience. The decision to collect data from transgender individuals rather than their parents was methodological and based on previous research: (1) unsupportive parents were unlikely to participate in research about gender identity, creating potential for non-response bias; (2) parents may retrospectively minimize past conflicts with their children due to social desirability effects such as shame or memory reconstruction (R. Chan 2011); and (3) it is difficult to gain access to parents of transgender individuals as a population in China. As a result, the following parental motivations should be viewed as participant-reported attributions rather than definitive parental perspectives. Recommendations for future research incorporating parents can be found at the end of the article.

Quantitative Data Collection

Participants were recruited via several LGBTQI+ organizations throughout China as the author shared their research invitation in the WeChat group chats for these organizations. Since the topic of this study is particularly sensitive in China, the research invitation was only posted in group chats, not on any website. As a result, the survey's sample population is limited to people who are active in the queer community. Furthermore, snowball sampling was used for the survey instead of random sampling due to the difficulty in accessing this community.

The research invitation included information about the research study, the researcher, and a QR code that linked to the research survey. This survey was created with the Chinese survey website *Wenjuanxing* (问卷星) and was written in Chinese. To partake in this study, participants had to be: (1) transgender, (2) of Chinese ethnicity, and (3) born and raised in China. Those under the age of 18 were permitted to participate in the survey but were not allowed to be interviewed, in accordance with IRB requirements. The survey was published on 11 April 2023 and closed on 15 June 2023. A total of 200 responses were received during this period, however, one response was excluded from analysis as the respondent stated that they did not grow up in China. The resulting sample size for the survey totaled at 199 respondents. Table 1 shows the detailed demographics for the survey sample.

Although the sample population does include diversity in terms of age and education, the majority were young, well-educated, and grew up in urban areas, with 72% falling between 18-25 years of age and 59% of the sample already having obtained an undergraduate degree. In terms of upbringing, 83% of respondents grew up in urban areas, while 17% were raised in rural villages. Currently, 94% of participants reside in

Table 1. Demographics of Survey Participants (*N* = 199)

Variable	*n*	%
Gender		
Trans women	87	43.72%
Trans men	73	36.68%
Agender	32	16.08%
Genderfluid	7	3.52%
Sex Assigned At Birth		
Female	96	48.24%
Male	103	51.76%
Intersex	0	0%
Level of Education		
Middle school	13	6.53%
High school	26	13.07%
Associate degree	20	10.05%
Undergraduate degree	117	58.79%
Master's degree	19	9.55%
Doctoral degree	4	2.01%
Age		
Under 18	20	10.05%
18–25	143	71.86%
26–30	26	13.07%
31–40	9	4.52%
41–50	0	0%
51–60	1	0.50%
61+	0	0%

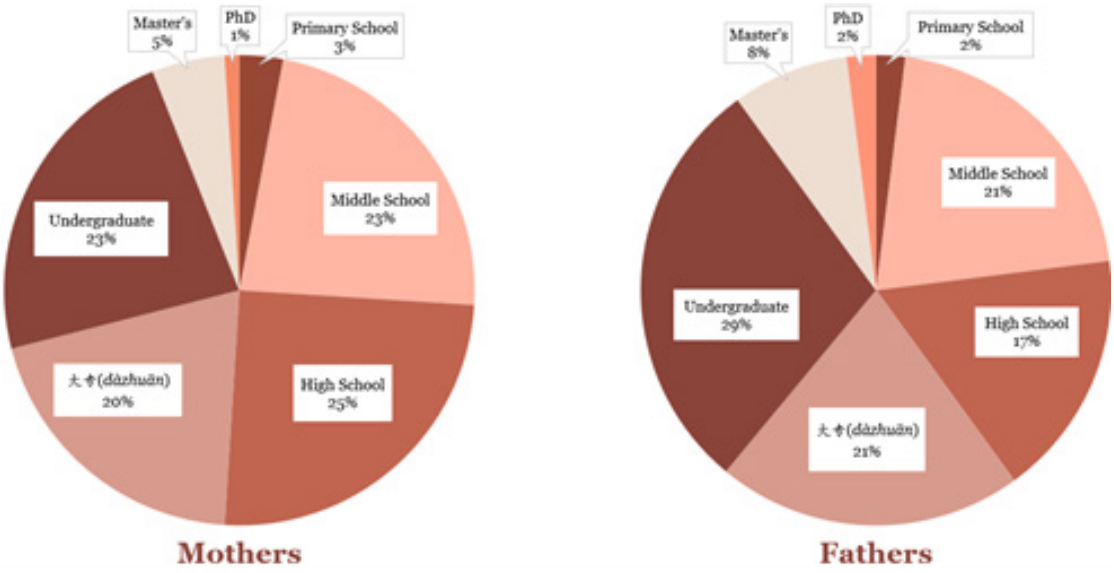

Figure 1. Highest educational level of survey participants' parents

urban areas of China, with the remaining 6% living in rural regions. Since this study focuses on parental reception of transgender identities, participants were also surveyed on their parents' upbringing and education and reported that 62% of both mothers and fathers were raised in urban areas while 38% grew up in rural areas. As for education, 51% of respondents reported that their mother's highest level of education was high school or less. Fathers received more education, with only 40% of fathers in this group. The chart below shows a detailed breakdown of parental education by gender. Note that 大专 (*dàzhuān*) does not have an exact equivalent in the US; it is a post high school diploma program that usually lasts two to three years.

To measure parental support and rejection, participants were asked "When you first came out to your parents, did they support your transgender identity?" This question included a row for their mother and a separate row for their father. Participants' options for selection were "very unsupportive," "unsupportive," "neutral," "supportive," and "very supportive." Following this question, participants were asked "After coming out, did your parents opinion or attitude change?" If the respondent selected "yes," they were then asked, "At present, do your parents support your transgender identity?" The same options were provided as the previous question on parental support. If participants indicated that either their mother or father were unsupportive, a question was triggered for the relevant parent to measure their reasoning for rejection. This question was multiple selection, and the options were "unnatural," "afraid of losing face," "believes it is just a phase," "received negative influence online," "afraid child will face discrimination," "westernized," and "religion." An open response option labeled as "other" was also available for respondents to add any additional reasons for rejection.

In line with sex-based gendered expectations, transgender women and transfeminine nonbinary participants were given an additional question about carrying on the family name since both groups were assigned male at birth. This question surveyed whether their parents rejected them because they had expected them to "carry on the family name" (传宗接代, *chuán zōng jiē dài*). This question differed slightly from

the above as it surveyed current parental views, instead of their initial reaction. Thus, participants were given three response options: "yes," "no," and "already supportive." Mothers and fathers were surveyed separately.

Qualitative Data Collection

At the end of the survey, participants were given the option to express interest in being interviewed. Purposeful sampling was used for selecting interviewees to ensure the resulting sample properly represented the survey sample regarding three factors: age, gender, and level of parental support (Creswell and Creswell 2018). The sample size for interviews totaled at 32; 11 transgender women were interviewed as were 11 transgender men. 10 agender and genderfluid people were interviewed, with an equal balance of sex assigned at birth. Interviews were semi-structured and covered the same topics as the survey. The interviews were conducted with two main goals: obtain a clear life picture from the interviewee and answer any questions that arose based on their survey responses. The author is bilingual and conducted 30 of the interviews in Chinese, while the remaining two were done in English due to participant preference. Quotes used in this article from interviews conducted in Chinese were translated into English by the author. Interviews ranged from 30 minutes to two hours, with most lasting around one hour. Interviews were conducted between June 18th, 2023 and July 31st, 2023. 11 interviewees were contacted via WeChat messaging with follow-up questions. Tables 2 and 3 show the pseudonym, levels of initial and current parental support by parent (M = mother, F = father), and year of birth for each interviewee. Initial parental support precedes current support. Table 3 contains information for nonbinary individuals and thus also includes an additional section for their specific gender identity under the nonbinary umbrella category. While each interviewee was included in the overall qualitative analysis, not every interviewee was directly mentioned as an example in this study and thus not all have pseudonyms.

This research study was funded by Peking University's Dean's Research Grant. These funds were used to provide each interviewee with 50 RMB as compensation for their time. Survey respondents did not receive compensation. This study was approved by the Institutional Review Board of Peking University's Sociology Department, and each interviewee signed an informed consent form.

Quantitative Analysis

The website used for the survey, Wenjuanxing, was used to generate the percentages discussed throughout this study. Wenjuanxing has extensive tools for quantitative analysis and allows the user to filter based on different responses. Using this tool, the author grouped survey respondents on different attributes, namely gender, to compare their answers. One-tailed hypothesis testing was conducted using a z-score calculator for two population proportions to analyze parental support and reasons for rejection. One-tailed hypothesis testing was chosen as the study's hypotheses were directional, based on prior research and preliminary observations. This method was first used to examine the differences in rates of support for mothers and fathers, including both initial support as well as current support. In this case, the null hypothesis was "mothers and fathers have equal likelihood of being X," with X being switched out for the different levels of support. Participants were then grouped by gender to measure

Table 2. Demographics of Interviewees: Trans Women and Men

Pseudonym	Gender	Level of Parental Support	Year of Birth
N/A	Trans woman	M: Initially unsupportive; Now very supportive F: Initially unsupportive; Now supportive	2005
N/A	Trans woman	Both: Very unsupportive	1997
Yuting	Trans woman	Both: Initially unsupportive; Now supportive	1997
Ruoyu	Trans woman	Both: Initially supportive; Now very supportive	1998
Xinlei	Trans woman	Both: Very unsupportive	2002
Mengjie	Trans woman	Both: Very unsupportive	1969
N/A	Trans woman	M: Initially unsupportive; Now supportive F: Initially very unsupportive; Now neutral	1998
Shinan	Trans woman	M: Very unsupportive F: Initially very unsupportive; Now neutral	2003
Yaqi	Trans woman	M: Initially very unsupportive; Now very supportive F: Initially very unsupportive; Now supportive	1990
N/A	Trans woman	Both: Very unsupportive	1995
Yuhua	Trans woman	Both: Very unsupportive	1992
Yize	Trans man	Both: Very unsupportive	1998
N/A	Trans man	M: Very unsupportive F: Initially unsupportive; Now neutral	2001
Junxi	Trans man	M: Initially neutral; Now supportive F: Supportive	1993
N/A	Trans man	M: Initially neutral; Now supportive F: Very unsupportive	1996
N/A	Trans man	Both: Very unsupportive	2002
Zihua	Trans man	M: Initially very unsupportive; Now neutral F: Very unsupportive	2002
Hongrui	Trans man	Both: Initially very unsupportive; Now very supportive	1989
Taizhe	Trans man	M: Very unsupportive F: Initially very unsupportive; Now supportive	2001
Zeqing	Trans man	Both: Initially unsupportive; Now supportive	2001
Baicheng	Trans man	M: Initially unsupportive; Now supportive F: Initially very unsupportive; Now supportive	1998
N/A	Trans man	M: Initially unsupportive; Now very supportive F: Initially unsupportive; Now supportive	1994

Table 3. Demographics of Interviewees: Nonbinary Participants

Pseudonym	Gender	Level of Parental Support	Year of Birth
N/A	Transmasculine genderfluid	M: Initially unsupportive; Now supportive F: Very unsupportive	2001
N/A	Transmasculine agender	Both: Unsupportive	1998
N/A	Transmasculine agender	M: Unsupportive F: Very unsupportive	2000
Tingsheng	Transmasculine agender	Both: Unsupportive	2003
Youran	Transmasculine agender	M: Initially unsupportive; Now neutral F: Initially neutral; Now supportive	1992
Chenyang	Transfeminine genderfluid	M: Initially neutral; Now very supportive F: Very unsupportive	2004
N/A	Transfeminine agender	M: Very unsupportive F: Unsupportive	2004
Ruijuan	Transfeminine genderfluid	Both: Initially neutral; Now very supportive	1999
N/A	Transfeminine agender	M: Initially unsupportive; Now neutral F: Very unsupportive	2003
N/A	Transfeminine genderqueer	M: Unsupportive F: Very unsupportive	2001

any gender differences between the different reasons behind parental rejection. Trans women and trans men were compared to one another and then grouped together under the category "binary trans" to compare against the nonbinary trans participants. Hypothesis testing was also used to examine changes in support, with the hypothesis being "mothers and fathers have an equal likelihood of experiencing a change in their support level."

Qualitative Analysis

Interview transcripts were analyzed using reflexive thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke 2022), with matrix coding (Miles and Huberman 1994) conducted manually by the author in Excel to systematically compare themes across demographic subgroups. Participants were first organized into a matrix by gender identity (female, male, transfeminine, transmasculine) parental support level (very unsupportive, unsupportive, neutral, supportive, very supportive), and year of birth. Following an iterative review of each transcript, the author then coded responses for deductive themes as aligned with the survey (e.g., reasons for rejection), and inductive themes that emerged from the analysis (e.g., relational influences). This adapted matrix approach not only allowed visual tracking of theme prevalence and negative cases but also provided a swift method for situating interview quotes within relevant themes.

Reflexivity Statement

In conducting this sociological research study, it is important to acknowledge the researcher's positionality. As the principal investigator, my background, experiences, and perspectives inevitably shape both the design and interpretation of this study. As a white, nonbinary American, I bring a particular lens through which I perceive and understand social phenomena. As a foreigner in China, I initially feared my potential research participants would be wary of me. However, I was able to bridge this difference in race and nationality by connecting with my participants on our shared experiences as transgender individuals. Our identities as gender-nonconforming people allowed us to come together and share our experiences with one another. Furthermore, as someone that has experienced these topics firsthand, I am well-equipped to discuss these painful matters in a respectful way.

RESULTS

Coming Out: Quantitative Analysis of Initial Parental Reactions

Initial rates of parental support

Participants reported that, when they first came out, 76% of their mothers and 78% of their fathers were either unsupportive or very unsupportive. Figure 4 shows initial rates of parental support, current levels of support will be discussed in the following section. For quantitative analysis of differences between mothers and fathers, the two supportive categories were grouped together due to the small sample size of the "very supportive" group and the two unsupportive categories were grouped together for consistency. No statistically significant differences were found between the support of mothers and fathers when the participant first came out, answering *RQ1*.

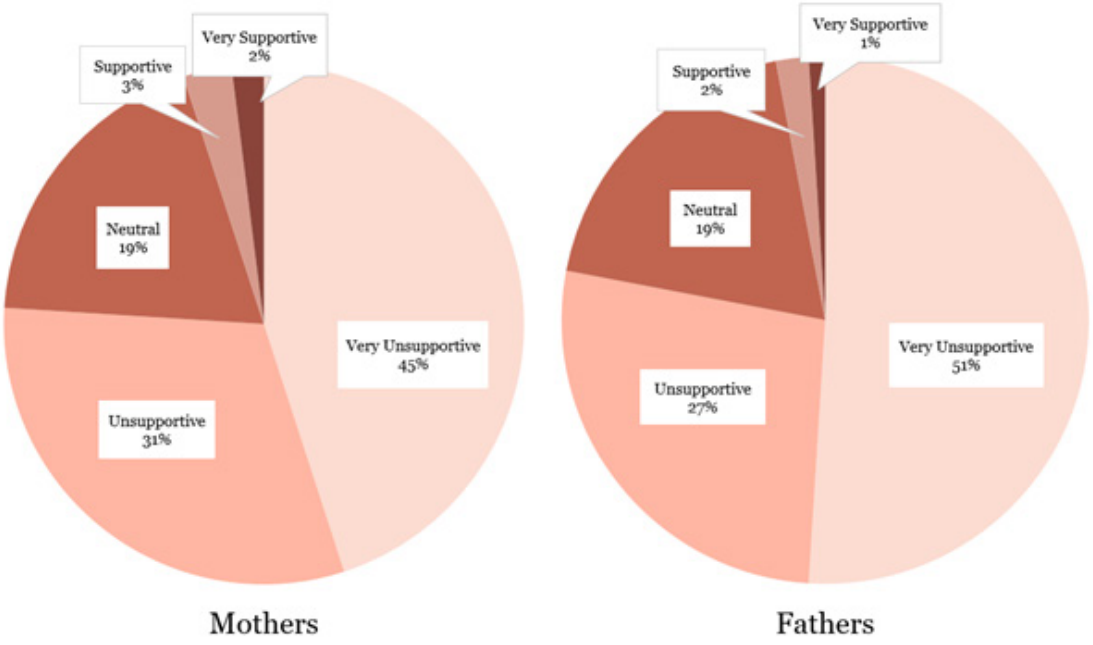

Figure 2. Initial rates of parental support of transgender identity

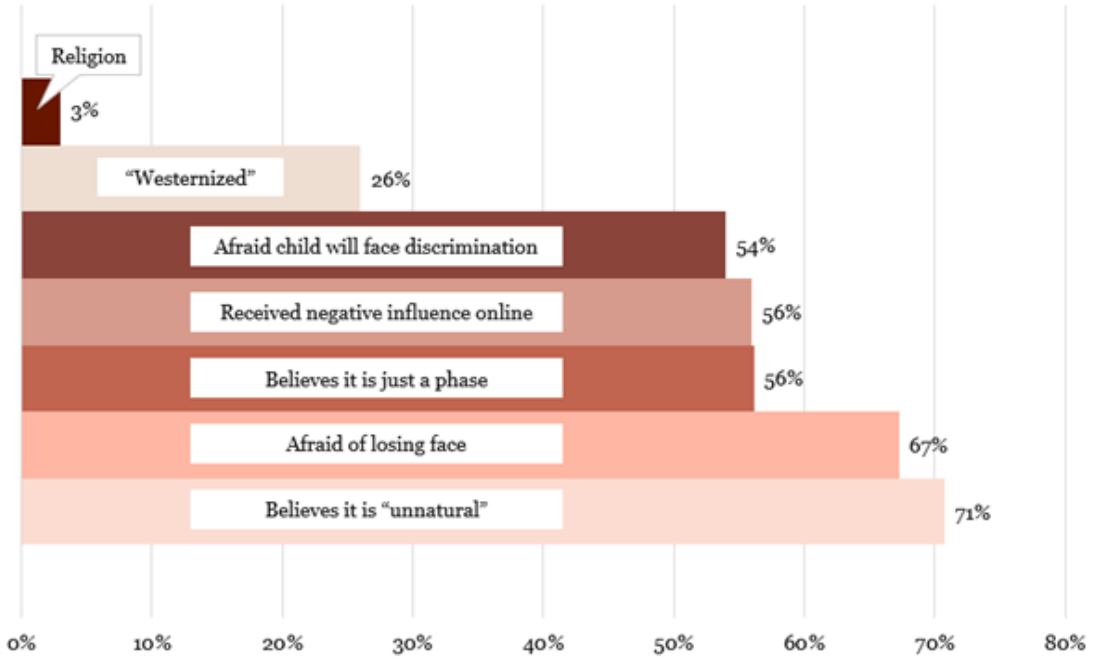

Figure 3. Parental reasons for rejecting participant's gender identity

Parental Reasons for Rejection

Parental rejection based on the claim that it is "unnatural" to be transgender was the highest rated response with 71% of participants selecting this option. Parental fear of losing face was the second highest response at 67%. The next highest responses, coming in at nearly the same rates, were the belief that this is "just a phase" at 56%, the claim that this is the result of a negative online influence at 56%, and the fear that their child will face discrimination at 54%. This was followed by the claim that the participant has been "westernized" at 26%. Only 3% of parents rejected their child's transgender identity on the basis of religion. These findings replicate previous studies on the trans community in China and answer *RQ2* by revealing that the two main reasons for parental rejection are the claim that being transgender is "unnatural" (Lin 2018) and the fear of losing face (Song and Chen 2022).

The joint display table below integrates quantitative prevalence data with qualitative lived experiences to reveal four dominant patterns in the parental rejection of transgender identities. First is sociocultural conformity as parental resistance was frequently rooted in adherence to the allegedly natural order (71%) as well as fear of social judgment (67%). Interview data exposed how these concerns reflected deeper anxieties about deviating from gendered expectations and familial norms as parents feared backlash from their social circles. The second pattern was developmental dismissiveness where 56% of parents believed the participant would grow out of their transgender identity. The third dominant theme was centered on moral corruption as 56% of parents reportedly believed their child received a negative influence online and an additional 26% attributed their transness to westernization. Individuals with parents in these categories shared that their parents blamed these external influences and even attempted to cut them off from communicating with others. The fourth and final

theme was weaponized protection, where 54% parents rejected the participant's identity on the basis that they would face a difficult life full of discrimination. Although this concern may be sincere, it could also be interpreted as a fear tactic to enforce conformity to societal norms, as, ultimately, this fear stems from violating gendered expectations. These four themes intersect across the sample size, illustrating the complexity of this issue. Qualitative findings are discussed in greater depth below.

Trans women and transfeminine people were also surveyed on rejection due to the expectation that they would carry on the family name. Results reveal that 42% of mothers rejected them due to this expectation, while 41% did not and 17% were already supportive. As for fathers, 57% rejected them for this reason, while 34% did not and 9% were already supportive. Hypothesis testing found that fathers were more likely than mothers to reject their transgender daughters for this reason ($p = 0.01$). Rejection on the basis of carrying on the family name has also been documented by other researchers in China (Song and Chen 2022; Yan et al. 2019).

In addition to these predefined options, open-ended responses uncovered an additional recurring theme as 9% of respondents stated that their parents' rejection stemmed from concern over their child's physical health, due either to gender-affirming surgery or hormone replacement therapy. This fear over the harms of such treatments on one's physical body is also discussed in Pi Jun's autobiographical essay on being a trans man in China (Jun 2010).

Reasons for parental rejection show little statistical significance between genders except for the following four groups. First, transwomen are more likely than transmen to be rejected because their parents do not want to lose face ($p = 0.01$). Second, transmen are more likely than trans women to be rejected because their parents claim it is "just a phase" ($p = 0.02$). Third and fourth, binary trans participants were more likely than nonbinary participants to be rejected because their parents do not want to lose face ($p = 0.01$) and because their parents were afraid that their child will face discrimination ($p = 0.03$).

Table 4. Joint Display of Quantitative & Qualitative Findings

Quantitative Finding	Qualitative Theme	Quote
71% Unnatural	Biological essentialism	"My dad called me a pervert."
67% Afraid of losing face	Societal perceptions and gender expectations	"They said not to tell anyone else…"
56% Just a phase	Dismissal of the participant	"My mom said these were 'childish ideas.'"
56% Negative influence online	Peer corruption	"My mom took away my phone, hoping I'd go back to normal."
54% Feared child will face discrimination	Protective justification	"They said, 'Among all those trans people, there's only one Jin Xing, why take the risk?'"
26% Westernized	Foreign corruption	"My dad said, 'I should have never let you leave our hometown.'"

The Coming Out Experience: Qualitative Analysis of Parental Impact

Braving parental rejection

With over 75% of both mothers and fathers initially being unsupportive of the participant's gender identity, interviewees shared a plethora of stories that detailed this rejection. As 71% of participants reported being rejected based on the belief that being transgender is unnatural, many parents responded to their child coming out with intense insults tied to their beliefs in biological essentialism. For example, when Mingxuan, a trans woman born in 1999, came out to her mother at 14, her mother responded by calling her a pervert and claiming her brain is defective. Similarly, when Shihan, born in 2003, came out to her mother at age 12, her mother called her the Chinese slur for trans women (人妖, *rén yāo*). This slur is particularly derogatory as the first character (人, *rén*) means human while the second character (妖, *yāo*) means devil or demon. Other interviewees' parents had similar sentiments and berated them for being "sick." Yize, a trans man born in 1998, reported that after coming out to his parents, they would send him anti-trans articles that claimed to provide proof that it is unnatural to be transgender.

In accordance with societal gender expectations, 67% of participants reported that their parents rejected them because they feared they themselves would lose face due to their child's gender identity. In these cases, they pressured the participant to adhere to their sex assigned at birth in front of any extended family and forbade them from coming out to others. Baicheng, born in 1998, explained that his parents were afraid his gender identity would spark heated discussions within their community and cause a great stir that they would not know how to handle. Other participants put forth similar explanations where their parents feared they would suffer from social isolation due to their child's gender identity. For example, Taizhe, a trans man born in 2001, explained that both his parents and their peers were very traditional; his parents believed they would lose respect in their community if their child was seen partaking in such "deviant" behavior.

Furthermore, 56% parents initially dismissed their child's gender identity as being "just a phase," and thus did not truly recognize and respond to their coming out until much later. Many of these parents dismissed the participant as being immature or as simply joking with them. For example, Baicheng recalled that his mother was not angry when he came out to her at 16, and instead simply dismissed his "childish ideas." It took several gender anxiety breakdowns for his mother to realize he was serious about this matter. Once she recognized the authenticity of his proclamation, she began to become very angry at any mention of his gender identity. Other participants echoed this narrative; their parents did not take their gender identity seriously until they had told them multiple times or began socially transitioning. On the other hand, some parents believed that this was simply a normal step in puberty and wrote their gender identity off as merely the beginning stages of gender consciousness.

Another 56% of participants reported that their parents believed they received a negative influence online from people with malicious intent. As a result, when these participants came out, their parents would restrict them from accessing the internet and communicating with others. Shihan shared that her parents isolated her from her online community after she was caught trying to take HRT from the black market at age 14. Yuhua, born in 1992, recalls the conversation she had with her parents when she

came out at 28,

> Yuhua: "I always felt I was born in the wrong body, ever since I was very little… I'm not comfortable with most things related to being male."
>
> Her mother replied: "Why do you have to think that way? There is nothing you can do now; you were born a boy."
>
> Her father declared: "You must have heard too much strange information; I should have never let you go so far away from our hometown."

Yuhua was especially shocked by her father's response as he had previously never shown any concern over her decision to leave their hometown or use the internet. Similarly, 26% of participants shared that their parents attributed their transgender identity to being "westernized." In these cases, parents regretted sending their children to study abroad as the believed that being transgender was a purely American phenomenon.

The final reason for rejection was based on the fear that the participant would face discrimination at 54%. Participants with parents in this category reported that their parents believed their child would be discriminated against within cisgender society due to the public's lack of familiarity with the concept of being transgender. Yuhua attempted to show her parents that trans people can be successful in life by using celebrity Jin Xing as an example, but her parents simply countered "Among all those trans people, there's only one Jin Xing, why take the risk?" Other participants reported that their parents believed the trans community was infinitesimal and they feared their child would be forced to live in isolation with no friends or no romantic partners.

Trans women were additionally rejected due to their parents' expectation that they would carry on the family name. Parents within this category consisted of those who were more conservative and adhered to traditional societal expectations. For example, when Shihan came out to her mother at age 12, her mother vehemently opposed her gender identity, and Shihan speculates that this is due to her adherence to tradition, saying,

> My mother has a lower level of education compared to my father, and she finds it difficult to accept changes. Her thoughts are more aligned with those of oppressed women from the older generation. This is a systemic sorrow. In the past in China, women were required to bear too many domestic responsibilities without receiving the recognition they deserved. They could only place their hopes and pride in their families and children. She said to me, "You are my everything and my only hope."

Shihan's story illustrates the expectations many Chinese parents have for their children when they are assigned male at birth. Shihan's mother had clearly believed her "son" would carry on the family name and thus bring her pride by having children. At present, Shihan's mother still expects her to have children, but Shihan has yet to decide if she wants children. Shihan's transgender identity further complicates this decision as trans women who undergo hormone replacement therapy typically become infer-

tile.

Some parents knew their children deviated from gender norms prior to them coming out but this did not necessarily prime them for acceptance as they were vehemently opposed to this behavior. For example, Mengjie, a trans woman born in 1970, used to secretly wear her sister's clothes whenever her family was out of the house. However, she was caught by her mother several times and, as a result, was ridiculed and beaten. Thus, it is no surprise that when Mengjie, at age 40, finally came out to her mother, she was rejected and ridiculed as being "sick."

A few parents resorted to extreme methods to "fix" their child. Yuting, born in 1997, came out as trans to her parents at age 13. They were unsupportive, claiming that she was just temporarily confused and had received a malicious influence online. They also feared she would face discrimination and did not want to lose face. This led them to send Yuting to conversion therapy where she received an unknown "medicine" via an IV drip. After a few months of this treatment resulted in no change in her gender identity, her parents brought her back home, and, several years later, they were able to finally accept her. Once Xinlei, a trans woman born in 2002, started taking HRT, her parents contacted her doctor and attempted to bully her into revoking Xinlei's prescription. However, the doctor did not relent and Xinlei was able to continue with her HRT treatment plan. Similarly, Taizhe was expelled from his college because his mother convinced the dean to expel him if he did not start presenting as a woman again.

The initial parental rejection experienced by the majority of participants illustrates these parents' deep-seated fears of breaking social norms and facing societal judgment. The extreme measures some parents resorted to highlight the lengths to which parental rejection can manifest in attempts to "fix" any deviations from gender conformity. In reality, such treatment serves only to harm the individual and push them further away from their family.

Negotiating with neutral parents

Although most parents were unsupportive when their child first came out, 19% were neutral. Youran's story serves as a prime example of a truly neutral parent. Youran, a transmasculine agender person born in 1992, came out to their father at 28 over WeChat while living in the US. Initially, Youran did not say much on that matter, and simply stated, "I want to be a boy, being a girl is too hard." Their father did not object, he simply stated, "Being a man is also very difficult." Following this, Youran began posting pictures of themselves dressing in masculine clothes on their social media. Eventually, Youran's father shared that he had done some research on what it means to be transgender, but when Youran invited him to join a WeChat group chat for the parents of trans people, he declined. He also did not want to read any of the informative articles Youran sent him. Later, when Youran had to acquire his consent to begin HRT, he consented without making any negative or positive remarks. When Youran told their father they wanted to be called his son and not his daughter, their father objected, saying people would be confused on how he suddenly had a son. Youran acquiesced by asking him to use the term "child" instead, and their father agreed.

Several interviewees shared that although their parents were ultimately neutral, they occasionally would display some unsupportive behavior. For example, Junxi, a trans man born in 1993, classifies his parents as being neutral when he initially came

out but also shared some of his mother's negative reactions. First, she was shocked and sad, and tried to avoid discussing this topic with Junxi for several months. Junxi's father was more supportive and thus helped to persuade Junxi's mother to accept his gender identity. When Junxi came home for Spring Festival, he had a face-to-face conversation with his mother that further alleviated her fears and helped her to begin moving towards acceptance. However, Junxi shared that he still feels afraid to discuss this topic further with her and thus tries to avoid it. Similarly, Chenyang, a transfeminine genderfluid person born in 2004, also shared how their mother avoided the topic of their gender identity for several years after they came out. These examples illustrate the complexity of the situation for participants with neutral parents, as their status as neutral is not necessarily fixed and can lean in the direction of either supportive or unsupportive.

Coming out to supportive parents

Only 5% of mothers and 3% of fathers were some degree of supportive when their child first came out. In the case of Ruoyu, a trans woman born in 1998, her decision to wear skirts every day throughout kindergarten aided in preparing her parents for her eventual coming out. Despite her parents' acceptance of this gender-nonconforming behavior, after kindergarten, Ruoyu felt pressured by society to conform to gender presentation expectations for boys and kept this appearance up until she graduated college. After graduating, she began to grow her hair out and wear make-up. At first, her mother believed this was just a new way that Ruoyu was expressing her personality, and she did not protest. Once Ruoyu began to get her nails done regularly, she decided to come out to both her parents. At this point, her parents were not entirely sure what it meant to be transgender, but they understood that Ruoyu understood herself best and thus they offered their support. The more they learned about what being transgender truly is, the more supportive her parents became. Ruoyu even came out to her extended family, and almost all of them, including her 75-year-old grandmother, fully supported her.

Journeys to Acceptance: The Evolution of Parental Support

Despite such low rates of support when initially coming out, many parents became accepting of their child's gender identity later. Reasons for parental change in support were discussed in interviews and three prominent motivations emerged along with three key routes. The motivations include parental love, the poor mental health of the participant, and the participant's social transition. The routes to acceptance discussed by participants were consumption of informational resources, connection with the queer community, and guidance from medical professionals.

Current parental support of transgender identity was higher than expected based on previous studies of the trans population in China (K. Chan et al. 2024; Wu et al. 2017), but still remained low; as Figure 4 shows, over half of parents remain either unsupportive or very unsupportive. Forty-three percent of mothers and 34% of fathers increased their level of support after the participant came out. This was found to be statistically significant ($p = 0.03$) and shows that mothers are more likely to have a positive change in their support. Quantitative analysis of current rates of support also found that mothers were more likely than fathers to be supportive at this stage ($p =$

0.03). This provides evidence for *RQ1* that mothers eventually become more accepting than fathers and replicates previous research which has found that fathers tend to be less accepting of their trans child's gender identity than mothers (Hill and Menvielle 2009; Ishii 2017; Riggs and Due 2014; Y. Zhou et al. 2021).

Motivations Behind Parents' Change in Support

The driving force of parental love

The first and most significant factor in gaining parental support was parental love; most interviewees in this category noted that their parents' love for them was the main factor behind this change. Yaqi, a trans woman born in 1990, stated that while it took her parents a few years to accept her identity, she knew they would eventually support her. She stated: "My parents are, first and foremost, tolerant. They are willing to understand and accept my heart. But the key is, from the beginning, they held onto the idea of never giving up on me." Similarly, Ruoyu recalled how, at the beginning of her transition, her parents did not fully understand her gender identity, but she states, "they respected me enough to support me." Hongrui also reported that his parents love for him was the most important factor in gaining their support. Other interviewees reflected on the importance of parental love and mutual respect in motivating their parents to become accepting of their gender identity.

However, parents whose views changed solely out of love for their child did not necessarily understand their identity and were subsequently unable to accept the queer identity of others. Ruijuan, a transfeminine genderfluid person born in 1999, explained that their parents fall into this category because "they simply support me in being myself, relying on our good relationship." This leads their parents to still be wary of other queer people even while being accepting of Ruijuan. Junxi also stated that his

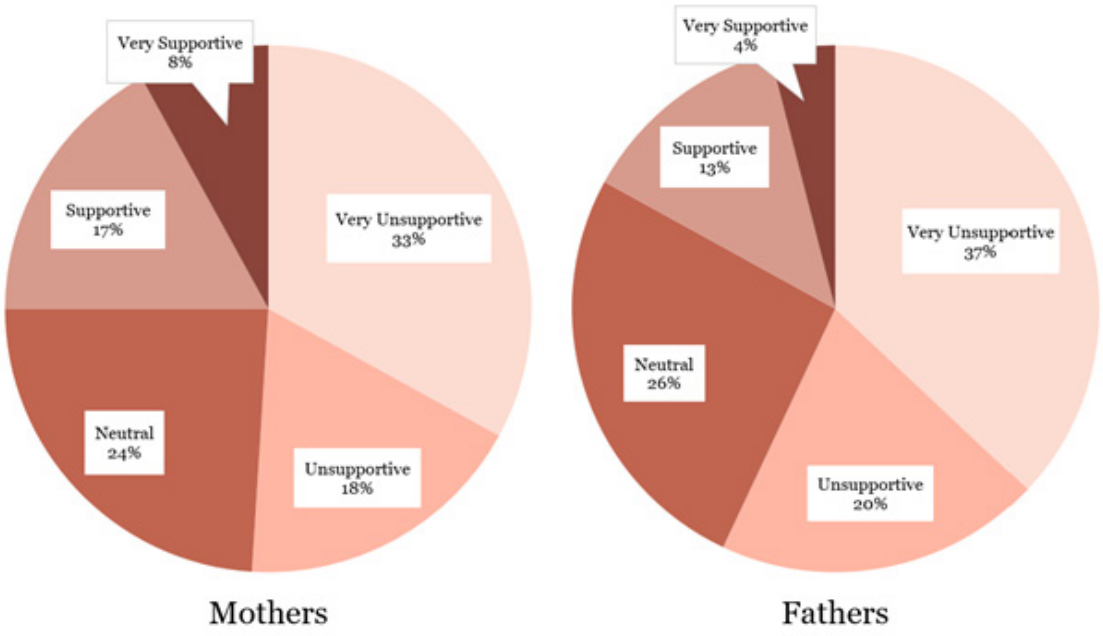

Figure 4. Current parental support of transgender identity

parents could not accept others being queer: "I think they may just reluctantly accept all this out of respect for my choice and love for me, but they don't really *accept* these feelings." In these cases, the parents do not truly support the trans community, rather they simply respect their child enough to have faith that they are making the right choice. The impact of love has also been documented in the American trans population where parents believe their unconditional acceptance will improve their child's quality of life (Hill and Menvielle 2009).

Motivated by the fear of poor mental health

Many parents who saw their children experiencing intense depression and suicidal thoughts were driven to accept their child's gender identity in the hopes of alleviating their grief. These parents also realized that forcing their child to live as their sex assigned at birth meant their child would never be happy. In many cases, these parents also acted out of fear that their children would estrange themselves: Hongrui states that eventually his parents realized that "No matter how hard they pushed me, I wouldn't turn into the normal cisgender person they wanted me to be, and they would lose their only child." A large portion of these parents see HRT and gender affirming surgeries as the cure to their child's internal struggle as well as the solution to potential discrimination if they can pass as their gender identity.

Ruijuan's parents are a prime example of this change in support due to poor mental health. When Ruijuan came out to their parents at 19, they were initially neutral in support. However, by this point, Ruijuan had been depressed for quite some time, and, prior to coming out, their parents did not understand what was causing this. Once Ruijuan's parents realized that being forced to present as their sex assigned at birth was the major cause of this depression, they quickly became supportive of their gender identity. Ruijuan recalls,

> They felt sorry for my pain and tried to find ways to make me happy. I think they were surprised by the depth of emotion I expressed about this. They were trying to understand why I feel this way. They attempted to address my gender dysphoria, and then, years later, unanimously concluded that only completing gender reassignment surgery could alleviate this severe anxiety and depressive state.

Currently, Ruijuan's parents are very supportive of their gender identity and even helped Ruijuan undergo a vaginoplasty in the fall of 2022. With parental support and access to gender-affirming care, Ruijuan's mental health is now better than ever.

While Ruijuan's parents were motivated by their child's severe depression, other parents were not spurred towards acceptance until more drastic measures were taken, such as attempted suicide. Shihan was not able to obtain any semblance of acceptance from her father until after she had attempted suicide several times and injected chemicals into her testicles to perform a self-castration. Now her father holds a neutral attitude towards her gender identity in hopes that she will not harm herself again, but her mother remains unmoved by these events. Similarly, due to their severe depression and suicidal ideation, Tingsheng, a transmasculine agender person born in 2003, stated "my parents would pretend to accept everything in order to prevent my suicide." Research has documented other parents who were driven towards acceptance

out of the fear that their child might end their life or hurt themselves, as they view it as their responsibility to prevent this (Sansfaçon et al. 2015). Previous research on the transgender community in China has also found that it takes these extreme situations of attempted suicide to convince parents to stop intervening with their children's HRT (Amnesty International 2019).

The positive influence of transitioning

Several participants with unsupportive parents chose to begin socially and/or medically transitioning even in the face of parental rejection. As their parents observed the improvement of their mental health, they gradually began to support this change. Yaqi noted: "As they see my life getting better and happier, they have come to accept that being transgender is not a bad thing. The more I become like a girl, the more positive I become, and as my life improves, they become more relieved." The positive change in Yaqi's mental health led her parents to realize that being transgender was actually the answer to the problem, not the problem itself.

Transitioning in front of unsupportive parents also normalizes the concept of being trans and helps the parents to understand what life will look like for both them and their child. This, in turn, can help them move towards acceptance. Zihua, a trans man born in 2002, shared how he was able to normalize being trans by dressing in a more masculine fashion. Although his mother was initially very unsupportive, once he started presenting in line with his gender identity, she began to better understand him and would even take him shopping to buy men's clothes. This bonding helped his mother to overcome her initial concerns, and she is now more supportive of his gender identity. Other studies have also found that the child's transition can normalize transness to their parents and encourage acceptance (Hill and Menvielle 2009).

The Three Pathways to Acceptance

Accessing informational resources on the transgender experience

The first route to acceptance was exposure to educational and informational resources, typically via popular science articles about the transgender community. Several interviewees noted that they would share articles from researchers or medical professionals with their parents to help them better understand their trans identity. Participants also utilized blogposts and videos from other trans people to show their parents that it is possible to live a happy life as a transgender person. While previous research has documented parents who seek out this information on their own (Hill and Menvielle 2009; Johnson et al. 2020), very few participants in this study had parents with this level of initiative and the consumption of such resources was mostly driven by the participants themselves.

Connecting with the queer community

To further normalize the concept of transness, many participants connected their parents with their local queer community. The most prominent method for this involved adding their parents to a WeChat group chat that serves as a support group for the parents of transgender children. These participants noted that after joining the group chat, their parents were more understanding and began to use their new name and pronouns. Some participants noted that their parents took the initiative to connect

with queer people in their daily lives. For example, Taizhe shared that his father became more accepting after meeting other queer people through his job. Similarly, Hongrui's father used the internet to connect with the queer community and even reached out to some of his queer co-workers. The success of this method in gaining parental support further answers *RQ3* and is supported by existing research on the trans community in Japan (Ishii 2017).

Sage guidance from medical professionals

Medical professionals also played a key role in influencing parents to accept their child's gender identity. Ruoyu noted that even though her parents were relatively accepting when she came out, speaking with a psychologist helped her mother to fully support her. Her mother asked the psychologist, "Can he [*sic*] turn back [into a cisgender]?" The doctor replied, "A straight tree, if forced to grow at an angle, may wither and die." After this conversation, her parents fully supported her gender identity and her medical transition. Similarly, Junxi connected his mother with his HRT doctor's assistant, and, after the two of them talked, his mother was much more understanding and accepting of his decision to pursue HRT. The positive influence of guidance from medical professionals provides additional evidence for *RQ3*. Seeking reassurance and guidance from medical professionals has been documented by other researchers as a common method parents use to understand their transgender children (Gray et al. 2015; Riggs and Due 2015).

Taking multiple pathways to acceptance

Naturally, in many cases a combination of these factors was used to achieve parental acceptance. For example, Zeqing, a trans man born in 2001, had moved to the US for high school and came out to his parents at 14 when they came to visit him. At first, his parents rejected his gender identity, claiming he had been westernized, that it was just a phase, and that he was negatively influenced online. They fought non-stop for several days, with Zeqing crying himself to sleep every night. Eventually, his parents began reading articles online and talking to people at Beijing LGBT+ (北同文化, *běi tóng wén huà*), a queer organization in China. However, their research made them worried that Zeqing would face social rejection since the trans population seemed relatively small. Thus, they declared that Zeqing must get a diagnosis from three different doctors verifying his trans identity before he could undergo surgery. They returned to the US to attend these doctors' meetings with Zeqing and were greatly encouraged by the plethora of information and reassurance these medical professionals provided. Once Zeqing's parents realized that passing as his gender identity would likely protect Zeqing from certain forms of rejection and discrimination, they fully supported his transition. Zeqing notes that his ability to medically transition comes down to privilege: his parents are very wealthy and have important connections that eased the process of changing his legal gender in China.

Having multiple factors influence parental acceptance likely leads to increased success in achieving support. Baicheng recalled,

> It's possible that because my state of mind was so poor at that time, and because they love me enough and didn't want to see me fall apart, they made some concessions. Once my condition

> improved, I discussed it with them properly and educated them with popular science articles about being transgender. After repeating this process dozens of times, they finally believed what I said. They also saw that I was still studying hard and realized that I wasn't joking or being immature. They understood that the suffering I endured for so long was real and that I also had plans for the future, so they decided to comply with it.

As Baicheng's story shows, many parents needed time and information to fully understand and accept their transgender child. This is likely due to the fact that there is little representation of transness in media and thus many Chinese parents are unfamiliar with the concept of being trans. However, this negative reaction still has a major impact on the participant; even in the face of mixed responses, negative responses have a larger impact on participants than positive ones (Johnson et al. 2020). This shows the need for increased representation of trans people in Chinese media and more easily accessible information for the parents of transgender people.

Ultimately, these findings answer *RQ3* by revealing that parental love, fear over poor mental health, and the child's transition motivate parents to shift towards accepting their gender identity. The main methods for unlocking this understanding were the consumption of informational resources, connecting with the queer community, and consulting medical professionals.

CONCLUSION

Through participant reported responses, this study has provided a clear understanding of how the parents of transgender people in China respond to their gender identity and what impact this has on the individual in question. While over 75% of both mothers and fathers were initially unsupportive of their child's gender identity, a sizable portion of these parents were able to transition towards accepting and supporting their child. Unfortunately, over 50% of parents remain to be unsupportive due to their belief that being transgender is "unnatural" and their fear of losing face. Parents that did become accepting were spurred by their love for their child, concern for their child's mental health, and their child's efforts to normalize transness by transitioning in the face of parental rejection. Once they were motivated to move towards supporting their child, parents utilized informational resources, their local queer community, and medical professionals to educate and familiarize themselves with the reality of being transgender. Ultimately, this research illustrates the desperate need to increase transgender representation and provide readily accessible resources to the public. Doing so will aid in the normalization of transness and help prepare parents to accept gender nonconformity from anyone in their life.

Research Implications

With such high rates of parental rejection, there is a clear need to promote increased acceptance and representation for transgender people in China. Parental support can be life saving for trans people as it has been found to serve as a mitigating factor in the face of suicidal ideation (Hingston 2019; Jin et al. 2020; Simons et al. 2014). This is especially important as the rate of suicide attempts within the Chinese transgender pop-

ulation is exponentially higher than that of the cisgender population (Chen et al. 2019). Having the support of one's parents can help foster the courage needed to brave society in a world where transness is not yet widely accepted. Conversely, if one's parents act as yet another source of abuse, this exacerbates the already intense feelings of isolation and rejection. This results in the individual feeling completely alone while also leading them to believe that achieving happiness while being transgender is impossible. Thus, to improve quality of life for the transgender community, we must work to increase parental acceptance.

Increasing transgender representation in the media and spreading education on the diversity of gender identities will help to resolve these high rates of parental rejection as representation promotes acceptance (Gay & Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation 2025; Gillig et al. 2017). The most common reason for rejection found in this study, the belief that being trans is "unnatural," stems from a lack of information on this topic. Many of the other reasons for rejection were also driven by a lack of information. The second highest reason for rejection was the parents' fear of losing face; with increased representation and education, parents would no longer have to fear losing face in their community as the concept of being trans would become normalized. Similarly, by openly supporting their transgender child, the parents themselves are acting as an agent of social change as they show their community that being trans is socially acceptable. As those in their community are exposed to this supportive attitude for transgender people, they will also move towards accepting the queer identities of others.

Limitations

This research study is subject to various limitations due to the population and the structure of the survey questions. For the population, this survey collected data from the transgender individuals themselves, not their parents, and thus all findings are participant-reported attributions. Furthermore, upon the completion of data collection and analysis, it became evident that some additional questions and answer options should have been included in the survey. One key limitation emerged in the measurement of parental reasons for rejection; the survey did not provide a predefined option for "fear of health problems," which 9% of participants independently reported in the open response option. Thus, the quantitative data likely underrepresents this concern as other participants may have selected this option if it were presented to them. Furthermore, the survey lacked a question to assess which factors contributed to one's parents increasing their support of the participant's gender identity. Although insights into this aspect were obtained through the interviews, the smaller sample size of the interview cohort restricts the reliability and generalizability of this data. Ultimately, while efforts were made to mitigate these limitations through supplementary data collection, the inherent constraints associated with sample size discrepancies and the qualitative nature of this supplementary data remain to be significant in the generalization of this study's results.

Future Research

With these findings as a foundation, researchers should conduct similar studies using a longitudinal structure that incorporate parents as participants. Such studies

will provide further evidence not only for parental reception and reasons for rejection, but also for the best routes to gain parental support. These results can then be used to inform educational programs and to equip media with positive transgender representation. Similarly, an intervention study could use an experimental structure to test different methods of obtaining acceptance and measure their impact on parental attitude by including the parents themselves as participants. This approach could potentially identify the most effective strategy for influencing one's parent to accept their gender identity.

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