


Challenging “Getting Better” Social Media Narratives With Intersectional Transgender Lived Experiences

Oliver L. Haimson 

Social Media + Society
January-March 2020: 1–12
© The Author(s) 2020
Article reuse guidelines:
sagepub.com/journals-permissions
DOI: 10.1177/2056305120905365
journals.sagepub.com/home/sms


Abstract

A dominant media narrative of “getting better” over time is often projected onto LGBTQ people’s personal life experiences. In this research study, I examine this narrative’s role in transgender people’s emotional well-being throughout transition. A “getting better” narrative was pervasive in my qualitative analysis of 240 Tumblr transition blogs and 20 interviews with bloggers, signaling that it impacted people’s self-concept both as presented on social media and when talking about their experiences. This narrative causes undue emotional harm given contrast between one’s post-transition reality, which may involve distress (despite greater congruence between one’s body and identity), and a dominant cultural expectation of happiness. I argue that an intersectional approach to understanding trans people’s emotional well-being—by considering multiple salient identity facets and life transitions—makes trans lives more livable by complicating the cultural imperative to feel better, and to present a unilaterally positive self-image online, post-transition. Even though trans people on average feel better after gender transition, everyday realities are often in contrast to the dominant narrative’s positioning of gender transition as a process with a single, simple goal of feeling better. Challenging the “getting better” narrative gives trans people the freedom to live and exist in their post-transition identities, whether or not they feel “better.”

Keywords

social media, transgender, life transitions, emotional well-being, intersectionality, Tumblr

Introduction

In late 2018, essayist and transgender¹ woman Andrea Long Chu published an opinion piece in *The New York Times* Sunday Review in which she argued that gender transition, while important and necessary for trans people, was not necessarily a path to greater well-being (Chu, 2018). Chu received substantial backlash online from trans people, many of whom described how their own experiences contrasted with Chu’s argument, and others who thoughtfully critiqued Chu’s generalizations of the trans experience and characterization of trans bodies (Ashley, 2018; Thom, 2018). Even though many would agree with Chu that trans people who want to transition need to and deserve to transition whether or not it makes them happier, admitting that happiness is not the goal opens trans identity up to a host of criticisms that trans people may not be prepared to defend. Other narratives that posit transition instead as a means to improved well-being—the narratives that trans people have grown up with and have been telling to doctors and surgeons for decades (Bolin, 1988; Prosser, 1998; Stone, 1987)—are easier to internalize and easier to communicate to cisgender audiences.

A dominant narrative of “getting better” over time is often projected onto trans people’s personal life experiences, frequently propagated by social media. I examine this narrative’s role in transgender people’s emotional well-being throughout gender transition² via an analysis of Tumblr transition blogs and interview with bloggers. The “getting better” narrative was pervasive in my data and analysis, signaling that it impacted people’s self-concept both as presented on social media and when talking about their experiences.

Many people assume that, after transitioning, trans people will feel better over time—a narrative propagated in part by the “It Gets Better” movement (hereafter IGB; IGB Project, n.d.). IGB is a dominant cultural narrative popularized via a series of YouTube videos in which adult LGBTQ people told their stories as a way to give hope to young LGBTQ people (Gal et al., 2016; IGB Project, n.d.). The IGB Project’s (n.d.)

University of Michigan, USA

Corresponding Author:

Oliver L. Haimson, School of Information, University of Michigan, 105 S. State Street, Ann Arbor, MI 48109-1285, USA.
Email: haimson@umich.edu



“mission is to communicate to lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender youth around the world that it gets better, and to create and inspire the changes needed to make it better for them.” Prominent gay author Dan Savage and his partner Terry Miller pioneered IGB with a 2010 YouTube video in which they used their personal stories to signal to LGBTQ youth that life improves over time. In turn, many other LGBTQ people, famous and not, shared their positive life trajectories via YouTube, and these narratives were then spread across other social media sites, including Tumblr, Twitter, and Facebook. Although IGB has undoubtedly had positive impacts on LGBTQ people by framing LGBTQ lives in a positive light, it has also been critiqued by many, who argued that Savage’s vision of “better” is narrow, and unrelatable to many, given his (and many other IGB video creators’) subject position as white, male, cisgender, and financially secure (Gal et al., 2016; Nyong’o, 2010; Puar, 2010). For others, such as those facing minority stress (Hendricks & Testa, 2012) related to their race, ethnicity, gender, or class in addition to LGBTQ-related stressors, it does not always get better (Halberstam, 2010; James et al., 2016; Nyong’o, 2010). In fact, the cognitive strategy of imagining a better future, as an approach for coping with minority stress, may actually be associated with poorer emotional well-being (Toomey et al., 2018). Yet for trans people, the common narrative remains that a person should be happy and content post-transition, after a period of challenging experiences due to stigma during transition (Mullen & Moane, 2013). In the 10 years since its conception, IGB has become a dominant cultural narrative blanketing LGBTQ people’s experiences and how they present their identities and experiences on social media.

In this article, I ask

RQ1. How does a “getting better” narrative circulate among Tumblr transition bloggers? How is it also challenged?

Through answering this research question, I also discuss several open-ended questions: How does the IGB narrative hold up for transgender people? Is it helpful to posit gender transition as a means to “get better”? How do other intersecting identity facets further complicate this narrative?

I show how IGB’s dominance may cause dissonance for trans people for whom *It (does not) Get (unequivocally) Better*. I discuss a diverse range of transition experiences, including people for whom it “got better,” others for whom it did not, and those for whom emotions were volatile throughout and beyond gender transition. I contribute an understanding of how trans people’s intersecting identity facets and life circumstances interact with transition well-being trajectories to complicate “getting better” narratives. I argue that an intersectional approach to understanding trans people’s emotional well-being—by considering multiple salient identity facets and life transitions—makes trans lives more livable by complicating the cultural imperative to feel better, and to

present a unilaterally positive self-image online, post-transition.

Literature Review

Imagining one’s future as being better than one’s past, and striving optimistically toward happiness, is in some ways a fundamental feature and expectation of being a human (Gilbert, 2009). Yet I show in this work how LGBTQ people, and trans people in particular, face unique expectations in part because of the IGB Project’s pervasiveness. To situate the present analysis, I first review existing research on the IGB movement and its cultural impact, then discuss academic work on intersectional trans experiences as portrayed on social media.

Academic Responses to the It Gets Better Social Media Movement

A body of research has examined the ways IGB’s message and video corpus may or may not represent the disparate LGBTQ population’s experiences. Empirical evidence suggests that LGBTQ people’s experiences do improve on average over time as they grow older and experience less victimization and psychological distress (Birkett et al., 2015), or grow resilient after facing challenges (Asakura & Craig, 2014); yet, only a small fraction of LGBTQ people record and post their experiences in the form of IGB videos. Gal et al. (2016) documented how those who posted IGB videos formed a collective identity, in which they maintained common norms around describing personal narratives in which one’s life improves over time. Troublingly, when an IGB video deviated from this narrative (e.g., arguing instead that it does *not* get better), it was punished by “dislikes” on YouTube (Gal et al., 2016).

Many important critiques of IGB have surfaced throughout the years. Some noted that the campaign places the burden of improving one’s emotional state on vulnerable LGBTQ youth rather than addressing the systemic oppression that impacts LGBTQ people’s lived experiences, and that IGB emphasizes and encourages waiting for time to pass rather than engaging in political action (Craig et al., 2014; Gray, 2011; Grzanka & Mann, 2014). Others highlighted IGB’s lack of practical tools or means of helping with suicidality in LGBTQ youth populations (Craig et al., 2014). Critiques have also discussed how IGB centers neoliberal ideals and homonormative³ lifestyles which can serve to exclude or further marginalize LGBTQ youth who do not seek these futures (Grzanka & Mann, 2014; Hawkins et al., 2018; Johnson, 2014).

Identity-based critiques assert that IGB centers particular demographics in ways that are neither intersectional nor representative of the LGBTQ population broadly. While some trans people contributed IGB videos (Nuru, 2014) and the “getting better” narrative is expected of the LGBTQ

population overall (Grzanka & Mann, 2014), the videos tend to be more male, white, cisgender, able-bodied, and American than the LGBTQ population (Gal et al., 2016; Johnson, 2014). In Craig et al.'s (2014) study, LGBTQ youth noted IGB's focus on cisgender narratives as a limitation. Meyer (2017) argued that IGB encourages narratives of class privilege, meaning that high-socioeconomic status LGBTQ people are likely to participate, describe their upward mobility, and sometimes assert classism when describing those who have bullied them in the past.

In response to these critiques, scholars have argued that IGB did in fact achieve a radical expansion of what "better" futures meant for LGBTQ people (Goltz, 2013), and that IGB narratives are much more diverse across many identity dimensions and conceptions of "better" than its critics suggest (West et al., 2013). In this study, rather than analyzing IGB content directly, I examine how IGB may have influenced trans people's personal narratives, and the ways that the dominant LGBTQ narrative of "getting better" sometimes falls short when considering how multiple identity facets and life transitions intersect in people's lives over time.

Intersectional Trans Experiences and Social Media

Dominant societal notions of trans experiences and narratives center white and middle-class experiences (de Vries, 2012). Yet trans people's transition experiences and narratives vary substantially depending on other identity facets that intersect with their trans identity, including but not limited to race, ethnicity, sexuality, socioeconomic status, age, ability status, nationality, and immigrant status (de Vries, 2012; Singh, 2013). Some identities are associated with being particularly vulnerable to surveillance and profiling from law enforcement (Daum, 2015; Spade, 2011).

Intersectionality, first theorized by Crenshaw (1991) in the context of women of colors' experiences with violence, describes the additional and overlapping structural oppressions faced by people with multiple marginalized identities and the inability to separate intersecting identity facets in lived experience. Given intersectionality's importance in trans lives and experiences, it is important to understand the ways that simplistic narratives like IGB fall short, despite often being internalized and expected both by trans people and by others in their lives. Race and ethnicity were important identity facets for participants in this study, yet intersectionality related to race is not the primary focus in this article. Haimson et al. (2019) engages more deeply with Tumblr bloggers' intersectional experiences related to race and trans identity.

Social media enable trans people to find community, support, and resources related to intersecting identities, such as being a trans young person of color (Singh, 2013). Social media movements like #BlackLivesMatter and #SayHerName have taken an intersectional approach from the outset,

emphasizing that racial justice must also include trans and LGBTQ justice (Brown et al., 2017; Jackson, 2016). Similarly, trans women use #GirlsLikeUs on Twitter to discuss politics, activism, and personal issues, and how each is intertwined with their experiences facing multiple intersecting oppressions (e.g., race, gender, class, and sexuality; Jackson et al., 2018). I extend this work by examining intersectional trans experiences in social media narratives on Tumblr transition blogs. In doing so I intentionally did not limit my intersectional analysis to identity-based characteristics like race, ethnicity, gender, and socioeconomic status, but also included multiple life transitions that bloggers experienced simultaneously along with gender transition and that thus contributed to their intersectional sense of self.

How Tumblr's Features Support Trans Individuals and Communities

Tumblr is a major site for trans identity presentation, experimentation, community-building, and support exchange online (Cho, 2015; Fink & Miller, 2014). The site's features meet trans and LGBTQ needs in many ways. Tumblr's "publicly private" (Lange, 2007) nature and boundary management affordances enable intimate expressions (Cho, 2017; Vivienne, 2017) and a space to transition away from existing networks (Haimson, 2018b; Haimson et al., 2019). Tagging promotes identity construction and community-building (Dame, 2016). Freeform profiles and pseudonymous accounts enable complex and multiple identities (Oakley, 2016; Vivienne, 2017). Given this feature combination, Tumblr has frequently been characterized as a queer (Cavalcante, 2019; Cho, 2017) and a trans space (Haimson et al., 2019), and thus an ideal site to investigate trans people's "getting better" narratives online.

Method

I conducted qualitative content analysis on 3,200 posts from 240 Tumblr transition blogs and interviewed 20 English-speaking Tumblr transition bloggers. I selected blogs to include in the sample by first searching on Tumblr using tags common on transition blogs, such as "transition," "ftm transition," "mtf transition," and "transition blog." Through the initial set of blogs, I determined other tags commonly used in transition blogs, including "transition timeline," "girls-likeus," "nonbinary transition," and "tpoc" (trans person of color). After "following" each of the blogs in the sample, Tumblr's recommendation algorithm recommended other relevant transition blogs to follow, which I then included in the sample if they met the study's inclusion criteria: (1) included substantial text content, (2) focused on gender transition, and (3) bloggers stated that they were, or appeared to be, 18 or older. I collected each blog's text data (but no image or video data, as a way to preserve privacy) using Tumblr's Application Programming Interface (API) (Tumblr, 2018)

and the PyTumblr (n.d.) API client. Using theoretical sampling (Strauss & Corbin, 1998), I selected a diverse subset of bloggers to interview (10 trans women, 7 trans men, 3 non-binary people; 13 white, 3 Black, 3 Asian, 2 Hispanic/Latinx) who had had varying experiences with emotional well-being throughout gender transition, according to their blogs. Interviews lasted on average 60 min ($SD=13.8$ min) and were conducted via video chat ($n=19$) or phone call ($n=1$). Interview participants were compensated with US\$25 Visa gift cards.

I analyzed interview data using an inductive open-coding approach (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Concurrently, I analyzed Tumblr data using both inductive and deductive coding (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005). I then used axial coding (Strauss & Corbin, 1998) to organize my analysis into a set of codes and themes that applied to both data sets. I discussed emerging themes, and connections between codes and themes, with two other researchers throughout the analysis process. This piece is part of a larger project using this data set (Haimson, 2018a, 2018b, 2019; Haimson et al., 2019), and the themes discussed in this piece are a subset of the project's full codebook.

In this work, I intentionally took an ethical approach to collecting participants' social media data by using an opt-out approach to data collection and protecting participants' confidentiality. Although all the Tumblr blog data I collected were technically public, I had an ethical responsibility to alert participants to the fact that their data were being used in a research study, and to give them the opportunity to opt out of data collection (16 bloggers opted out). By taking an ethical approach to privacy, combining social media data analysis with analysis of interviews with a subset of the people whose data I collected, considering participants' intersectional identities, and centering participants' lived experiences, I follow Linabary and Corple's (2019) call for feminist online research practice. This study was approved by University of California Irvine's Institutional Review Board.

Results

This section is organized as follows: I begin by describing the experiences of some trans people who indicated that their lives did improve post-transition, followed by some who indicated that their lives did not improve, highlighting ways the social media movement IGB may have impacted peoples' feelings toward their emotional well-being over time, and how they express their own narratives on social media. Next, I complicate notions of how gender transition impacts one's emotional well-being, given that gender transitions intersect with many other life transitions and identity facets.

For Some, It Gets Better

The narrative of "getting better" was pervasive in both interview data and blog posts, signaling that this narrative impacted

people's self-concept both as presented on social media and when talking about their lives and experiences. When I asked interview participants if their emotional well-being had changed over time during and after transition, 16 out of 20 stated that they felt better. While I did not specifically ask about IGB or whether participants "felt better," remnants of this narrative came up often. It is not possible to know for sure to what extent participants' mentions of getting or feeling "better" over time are related to or influenced by the IGB campaign; getting better is certainly a dominant cultural imperative on its own (Gilbert, 2009). Either way, the obligation that transition bloggers felt to get "better" over time, both for themselves and as a positive example for trans youth, is important to investigate. IGB's massive influence on the LGBTQ community likely impacted people's conception of what it means to be trans, and what it means to present trans identities in digital spaces.

Many participants described how mental health issues like anxiety and depression reduced as they transitioned. Blair⁴ described it this way:

I had this background noise in my head, of anxiety, and depression, and dialogue, that I'd had so long I wasn't even really aware of it, it just became part of my existence . . . and [after beginning transition] that had gotten so much quieter . . . **even things that I didn't even know were wrong got better.**⁵

People's default mental state changed, often in ways that were unexpected because, as Blair described, they were not even aware of the ways that living in a discordant gender identity was negatively contributing to their mental health. Miles wrote on his blog that transitioning made him feel more confident, happy, and able to enjoy life more, to the extent that he was barely recognizable to himself:

My self-confidence has improved so much I hardly recognize myself. I'm loving all the things I used to enjoy at a much deeper level. I laugh so much more and many of my friends have commented on **how much happier and lighter I seem.**

In our interview, he described feeling more relaxed post-transition, particularly as fewer people in his life were linked to his prior identity:

Around six, seven months afterwards, I started feeling like, oh, yeah, **I'm a lot more relaxed now**, especially as I had new friends that only knew me as [new name]. The more people I had in my life like that, I would relax even more than before.

Importantly, for Miles, the people who surrounded him had a substantial impact on his emotional well-being, whether it was old friends telling him he seemed happy, or building a new network of people who knew him only post-transition. Miles' experience highlights ways that one's audience is often an important factor in both gender presentation and emotional well-being.

Some bloggers reported feeling better post-transition even among family, which can be an especially difficult context for gender transition (Haimson, 2019; Hendricks & Testa, 2012; James et al., 2016). Amelia wrote on her Tumblr about feeling included as a woman in her family, which helped immensely with her mental health:

With my father and family. **Things feel so good, I mean I feel like I am part of a family.** My depression has more or less disappeared. Even my gender dysphoria has tapered off quite a bit. I am treated authentically as a grown woman, which has been **great for my mental health.** I have not once felt suicidal.

Her post implies a sense of belonging and acceptance from family, which, as previous literature has found, positively impacts mental well-being (Bockting et al., 2013).

Tumblr was a place where people felt comfortable posting negative content, and did so frequently (Haimson et al., 2019). Thus, when people did post positive content and described their experiences with improved emotional well-being after transitioning, these posts came across as genuine. The same may not be true on a site like Facebook, where “positivity bias” (Reinecke & Trepte, 2014) means that people post mostly positive content, whether or not they are truly feeling positive. On the contrary, because negativity was common and accepted on Tumblr, Tumblr posts that emoted positivity did come across as genuine descriptions of people who felt better over time throughout transition.

In 2014, social media movement #RealLiveTransAdult emerged on Twitter in response to trans teenager Leelah Alcorn’s suicide, as a way for trans adults to signal to younger trans people that surviving to adulthood was possible (Clifton, 2014). Trans adults posted tweets often including their occupation, relationship status, and emotional well-being, giving faces to possible futures for trans youth by depicting trans people who had survived both adolescence and transition. Alcorn was a Tumblr blogger and posted her suicide note on Tumblr. Thus, #RealLiveTransAdult caught on beyond Twitter among many trans Tumblr bloggers as a way to communicate with the most vulnerable members of their community and epitomized some bloggers’ purpose for maintaining their transition blogs. In addition to posting a tweet stating “I’m a 43yo educ tech consultant, mother of 4, will be married soon to an amazing lady who is perfect for me. #RealLifeTransAdult,” Zoe posted about #RealLiveTransAdult on her Tumblr:

I like that this tag has caught on. **It’s really the purpose for what I write here**—my experience living authentically has been **overwhelmingly positive**, and that’s a story that needs telling . . . I firmly think **we need as many positive stories out there as we can get** and if I can help someone by doing a little typing, all the better :)

Positivity is a commonality between RealLiveTransAdult and IGB; yet, the two movements differ in important ways, which I return to in this article’s “Discussion” section.

Getting better, or surviving to adulthood, does not involve straightforward and steady emotional well-being increases; instead, the path is volatile, though many describe it as “net positive.” As Jessica stated, “**transition is a volatile time**, but I would say it was a **net positive** experience.” Dilon described volatility in emotional well-being after a family disclosure, writing on their Tumblr: “It has been a year to the day that I came out to my parents. **Not every day from then on was better but damn has it been in the long run.**” These experiences demonstrate emotional well-being over time’s complexities during gender transition.

It is difficult to say to what extent the people I interviewed who described emotional well-being increases filtered their own experiences into a dominant cultural narrative. That is, to some extent they may have said what they thought I, and the eventual audience for this research, wanted or expected to hear. In this sense, the Tumblr blogs may be a more accurate data source; yet, these too involved an audience, and that audience was made up largely of young, impressionable trans people who may be struggling with mental health challenges. I stated above that positive content on Tumblr comes across as genuine because posting negative content is also common and accepted on the site. Yet questions remain around the extent to which people post their emotions when those emotions run counter to the IGB narrative and may negatively impact the young trans people who read one’s blog.

For Others, It Does Not Get Better

Although emotional well-being improved post-transition for many people, others struggled immensely, and had experiences that were primarily negative rather than positive. The quotes in this section are difficult to read, but are necessary to include to demonstrate the difficult feelings and experiences many trans people encounter, even after transitioning. Importantly, those who expressed negative emotions and experiences on Tumblr challenged the expectation, as posited by IGB and is the norm on Facebook (Reinecke & Trepte, 2014), that social media is a place to share positive content, and that negative social media content is only acceptable if it is in the context of a positive trajectory narrative. Yet even on a site like Tumblr, where posting negative content was common and acceptable, people’s posts were tempered by the IGB narrative and the pervasive expectation to produce content that would provide a positive example for trans youth. This caused dissonance for those whose own experiences did not follow this narrative.

As an example, Amelia, who in the previous section had described how her depression and dysphoria decreased substantially, unfortunately faced more difficult emotions at many other times throughout her transition. “**They say life gets better,**” she wrote,

but I can’t see how it can or if it will. Am I wrong for wanting to go back a year ago and not have come out? I can’t help but

feel my life was far better not knowing what transgender was. Continuing to just wish to be a girl, retaining my friends and relationships. I can't help but wish I never came out. At the end of the day, I don't think coming out has caused any good in my life. I am dealing with so much stress and regret. My family is over 2,500 miles away, I have no friends, crazy people keep harassing me.

Eight months later, her emotional well-being had not improved:

I've missed a few doses of HRT [hormone replacement therapy] recently. I just feel like it's not doing any good. **My life has gotten much worse since coming out.** Even though I can live as a woman, it comes at the expense of my family and my friends—it's just not worth it. I am actually considering detransitioning. I wonder if my life would get easier if I went back to being a man?

The positive post I excerpted in the previous section occurred 2 months after this one, but unfortunately represented one happy moment, rather than an upward trajectory in emotional well-being. For Amelia, transition involved social exclusion, rejection from family and friends, and harassment, which amalgamated into feelings of regret (which were importantly linked to others' reactions rather than her own feelings about her gender or body). When she wrote "they say life gets better," it implied she understood that her experience was an outlier to a dominant narrative. She questioned her negative emotions ("am I wrong?") in light of a cultural imperative to feel "better."

As another example that complicates the IGB narrative, Sofia wrote about a suicide attempt on her transition blog:

In the interest of creating an honest blog, **here's an honest post that I'm hoping will help people understand the pain and desperation girls like me feel.** . . . The fact that I can't afford [facial feminization surgery], the fact that I feel it's the only way to gain some confidence and on top of so many other torments recently such as my breakup, family problems and falling out with my best friend led me to do something drastic. I tried to end my own life. This was last week. It wasn't the first time I've attempted it. It wasn't a cry for help nor was it a way to seek attention . . . I was sad. Sad that I wasn't strong enough. That I don't have it in me to fight any more. So this was my last option. I intended to see it through.

For some, even though they are able to transition, they cannot escape some of the difficult emotions that come with life, trans or not: in Sofia's case, loneliness and sadness. She described a lack of financial means for transition-related medical expenses, a recent breakup, family problems, and difficulties in a friendship. Only one of these is directly related to her gender transition. This example demonstrates that no matter how much one's emotional well-being may increase when their appearance and social identity shifts into alignment with their internal gender identity, each person faces many difficult things in their life that gender transition

cannot "solve." This includes systemic inequities (e.g., financial disparities) commonly experienced by trans people, particularly trans people of color (James et al., 2016). When placed in contrast to a media narrative that posits that transition should be accompanied by increases in emotional well-being, the realities of transition, and life more broadly, can feel discordant. Thus, Sofia used Tumblr, a social media outlet known for being open to negative self-presentation along with the positive, to describe her difficult experiences with pain and attempted suicide.

Despite how one feels inside, during and after gender transition, many people's emotional well-being improvements are hindered by feeling uncomfortable with their physical appearance, and facing harassment and safety threats in public spaces in the physical world. Thus, people find comfort in online spaces like Tumblr, where identity can be tied to a flexible online embodiment rather than an uncomfortable physical embodiment (DeVito et al., 2017; Turkle, 1995). On her blog, Leah recounted a conversation with her dad, who had confronted her for appearing unhappy, in comparison with family photos of her smiling pre-transition:

I am the only trans woman you know, Dad. **Many of us become happier, more positive people when we begin to transition** . . . Before transitioning, I did not have to deal with mean stares every time I walk through the mall. **Someday I will not care what other people think, but right now, it's important to me to feel safe.** Right now, being safe means not going out to restaurants, bars, movies, etc. until I feel more comfortable in my own skin.

By hailing "many of us," Leah placed herself in direct comparison to a trans community full of people whose emotional well-being increases over time, or so the narrative goes. At the same time, she compared her current self, mid-transition and uncomfortable in her appearance, to a future self who will feel safer and more comfortable—in line with the pervasive IGB media narrative. Importantly, Leah described the safety concerns that many trans women face in public spaces, and how "mean stares," and an unwritten threat of violence, impact how she feels. These are new concerns and limitations, minority stressors (Hendricks & Testa, 2012) that her previous self, smiling in photos, would not have faced and may not have even considered. This complex interplay between past, present, and future selves places transition in precarious relation to emotional well-being, and sometimes requires a person to choose between safety and happiness. Leah chose Tumblr as an online space to express herself as vulnerable and not "better," thus explicating Tumblr as a place where people were still *aware of* and *impacted by* the dominant narrative, yet chose to *complicate it* with honest expression of their own difficult experiences. In this way, transition blog communities on Tumblr exist as counterpublics (Fraser, 1990), with discourses separate from mainstream trans narratives, as also found by Jenzen (2017).

Complicating “Better” or “Worse”: Intersecting Life Transitions and Identity Facets

The previous two sections included examples of people whose emotional well-being increased, decreased, and/or was volatile as they changed gender. However, it is unrealistic to expect that any trend could accurately describe how people feel over time, given that gender transition occurs alongside many other life events and circumstances. This comes into perspective when gender transition is compared with other life transitions. Paige described the expectation that others place on trans people to be happy post-transition by comparing it to marriage:

Everyone expects you to be just like—it’s like, “You got to come out, and be alive out” and it’s not like this is spoken, but it’s almost like cis people think like, “You’re out and proud, that’s enough.” . . . **You almost don’t get to be unhappy and trans** because, you’re trans, and you’re telling people about it, so shouldn’t you just be so happy to just be living your life all the time, that like **regular people problems aren’t allowed to get you down as much as other people** just because you should be so happy, and overwhelmed. It’s like this unspoken, no one expects you to become more unstable afterwards just because **they think you’re supposed to be happy just all the time because you’re out**. Because, **everyone has this narrative in their head of like, “The suffering is over when you come out.”** And it’s pretty annoying because, it’s kind of contradictory to how life is. It’s like if you get married, you aren’t just happy for the rest of your life. Like, “Oh yeah, that guy’s married, he doesn’t get to be sad.” **That’s not how it works. And it’s not like any other life event should dictate your existence in such a way.**

Paige’s point complicates the IGB narrative. Gender transition is one of the only life transitions that is widely considered to be linked to increased emotional well-being. Other life transitions, such as marriage, moving, and job changes, are often considered steps forward, but are not given the same weight in terms of facilitating a steady, long-term emotional well-being improvement. Perhaps because they are more common, people acknowledge that after marriage, one’s life returns to a “new normal” (Massimi et al., 2012) in which suffering and unhappiness are still possible. Yet with gender transition, many assume that a person will be happy and well-adjusted afterwards; otherwise, why would they disrupt their lives so much in pursuit of this change? As Paige rightly pointed out, “that’s not how it works.” No life event can fully dictate one’s emotional well-being over the long term. Thus, while many researchers have found empirical evidence for increased emotional well-being over time as people transition (Budge et al., 2013; Haimson, 2019; Kozee et al., 2012; What We Know: The Public Policy Research Portal & Center for the Study of Inequality at Cornell University, 2019), there are also great amount of variance that statistical models cannot account for. This variance likely relates to the other life events and things that happen

day to day in people’s lives, that may be related or unrelated to their trans identity. Even if transition positively impacts people’s emotional well-being, there is more affecting one’s life than their trans identity; transitioning does not solve all problems in one’s life. Furthermore, as Ahmed (2010) has posited, it is unclear whether happiness is in fact something that people should strive toward.

The expectation that gender transition will inevitably lead to improved emotional well-being can cause disappointment when other life events and identity facets take precedence in impacting how one feels. Lucas described disappointment that transition did not resolve his problems with social anxiety and mental illness, and that he was not necessarily happier as he progressed in his transition:

Honestly, **I thought coming out at work/school would solve all my problems**. I thought I’d be happier, more outgoing, less awkward but the fact is: I’m still bipolar and an introvert, I still have Aspergers and a stutter. It’s disappointing . . . would [hormones] really make me happier? Yes, my dysphoria probably wouldn’t be crippling, but it would still probably be hard for me to make friends and I’d still stutter and whatever.

Intersections between Lucas’ trans identity and his health and personality facets add complexity to the transition process and complicate the assumed linear, positive relationship between transition and well-being. Yet, transitioning could still alleviate his gender dysphoria, and in that sense, make life more livable.

Most of the people I interviewed were either post-transition or in the later stages of their transition, and interviewees made clear the ways their emotional well-being was influenced not only by their trans identity, but also by the rest of their lives. For example, Paige was impacted by receiving an autism diagnosis at the same time as she was transitioning: “I’m on the autism spectrum, and I didn’t get diagnosed until like seven months ago, but **it’s really affected my life in a kind of adverse way.**” Others faced everyday difficulties with finances, work situations, and friends, as Isabella described:

Roommate didn’t pay the Internet bill and stole my money—then I broke the screen on my phone—then a friend said I was disrespectful because I didn’t pay her back for bailing me out of jail, though I thought it was a favor—worked a nonstop 14 hour shift between two food service jobs—. . . feeling really self conscious about my body, not happy with who I am—. . . **feeling like the world is against me and I keep getting sucked up by the undertow, and I’m just treading water.**

These types of everyday life stressors can have major impacts on one’s emotional well-being, and in Isabella’s case made her feel helpless, as she expressed using the undertow metaphor.

Mental health issues like anxiety and depression may remain during and after transition, and may even be heightened for some. Brady stated that “even though T [testosterone] has

really helped a lot of the mental health stuff, **it's not a cure all** for everything that ends up happening to your brain." For others, increased anxiety is a result of transitioning in particular social environments, such as school, church communities, or friend groups.

Life transitions do not occur in a vacuum; for almost every participant in my study, several intersecting life changes happened at once. Amber, for example, simultaneously experienced gender transition, divorce, moving, and consciously forming new friend groups. Breakups were the most common intersecting life change, as many people's relationships changed fundamentally as their gender changed. Describing her transition, Jessica stated that she "**became a lot more anxious** . . . I was having panic attacks several times a day every day at work. **It was just about my life falling apart**, because it had started falling apart." When I asked whether this was related to her transition, she said, "The transition. Slowly but surely my relationship with my boyfriend deteriorated." For Jessica, it was not possible to separate her recounting of emotions around her transition and her relationship breakup, because these two life changes were intertwined, happened simultaneously, and both impacted her emotional well-being immensely.

Being trans is only one aspect of trans people's identities (Mullen & Moane, 2013). Interview participants discussed many other life transitions and identity facets that were salient during their gender transitions, all of which impacted their transition experiences and their emotional well-being. Participants experienced breakup and divorce, job loss, moving, death in the family, parent's divorce, and shifting friend groups. Some were activists or educators, some were graduate or undergraduate students, and some strongly identified with their particular occupation (e.g., nurse). Participants' trans identities intersected with their identities as people of color; people on the autism spectrum; gay, lesbian, or bisexual; religious people; veterans; people of low socioeconomic status; and residents of particular kinds of geographical areas, such as small towns. Some participants were non-binary in the past or the present, and some had partners who were also trans or transitioning. Many participants, particularly trans women, experienced minority stressors related to being trans and being women, such as discrimination, harassment, and stigma (Hendricks & Testa, 2012). This list indicates the complex intersections of identities and life experiences that refute transition as a simple process that can be unequivocally associated with increases in emotional well-being, even though bringing one's body and social identity in congruence with one's felt gender is important and often necessary for survival.

"**Things are getting better**," Ellis said in our interview, "but **other things are getting worse**." They described this sentiment in more detail in their blog:

The bottom line is: **my life is not okay right now** because I'm working too much, my partner is working too much, and we're not making enough money to stay afloat. Me getting a full-time job would greatly improve the situation. Getting a job teaching at the college level is very hard. . . Add being a big ole queerbot

to the mix, add being trans to the list, add not passing as cis anything to the list, add having seemingly incongruent pronouns, gender marker, name, and way of dress, and we've got some problems . . . I have to trust that people won't discriminate.

As a non-binary person, these difficulties will likely persist for Ellis. While their gender made sense to them, it may never match societal ideas of gender in a way normative enough to allow them to achieve basic needs, such as employment and financial stability. Thus, while their transition may have been going well and their gender may have been in line with their felt identity ("things are getting better"), minority stressors and fear of discrimination meant that "other things are getting worse."

In addition to trans identity disclosures, many of people's intersecting identity facets also required disclosures, which can be difficult. Owen wrote on his blog about how disclosing about his social anxiety was more difficult even than coming out as trans:

I've told people about my divorce. I've told people I'm gay. I've told people I'm trans, but **the most difficult thing for me to tell people about is social anxiety**. It's been something I've struggled with for my whole life. I've made a lot of progress, but at the same time I have lots more work to do . . . It's something about me that I hate most, and has been a constant battle for me.

Managing and disclosing his social anxiety was important and difficult for Owen and continued to impact his emotional well-being post-transition. For other people, other identity facets may have been most difficult to manage and disclose.

Discussion

I presented results detailing different types of emotional well-being trajectories throughout and beyond people's gender transitions. I showed that while some people described feeling better over time, others described opposite or volatile experiences. This is because one's trans identity, and gender transition, cannot be separated from the other life events and identity facets that intersect with them. Thus, especially in trans people's post-transition lives, emotional well-being is impacted not by their trans identity or transition status, but by the ups and downs of life as experienced by all people, trans or not.

How people feel over time, and how well their personal narrative matches up with the dominant IGB media narrative, impacts how people present themselves on social media. IGB posits social media as a place to share positive life experiences and to share negative content only if it is in the context of a positive trajectory. Many trans people latch on to this narrative, which makes a strong link between adults posting positive content on social media and the younger generation of trans people's well-being and survival. Yet complicated feelings and inadequacies may arise when people feel that they are not living up to the narrative, and thus not providing a "good example" for trans youth. In my study's Tumblr and interview data, there were many subtle references to the IGB narrative and the ways that it caused

difficult feelings, especially for those whose emotional well-being did not improve over time. This leads people to feel a sense of responsibility and an expectation to post positive content—which does not fit well with people’s perception of Tumblr as a safe, comfortable online space (Haimson et al., 2019; Renninger, 2015). Tumblr transition blog communities are online spaces, and counterpublics (Fraser, 1990; Jenzen, 2017), where people can share negative content and can complicate the IGB narrative through genuine self-presentation. Social media are powerful in their ability for both virality of certain ideas and critique of those same ideas; as Puar (2010) noted,

ultimately, the best part of the viral explosion of Savage’s project [IGB] is that so many have chimed in to explain how and why it doesn’t just get better. The very technological platform of the phenomenon allows the project to be critiqued from within.

While by “platform” Puar likely means YouTube, IGB spread far beyond YouTube, and so do its critiques. On Tumblr, transition bloggers simultaneously internalize and critique IGB with posts saying things like, “they say it gets better, but . . .”

The RealLiveTransAdult movement, another means of spreading positivity to young trans people, appears similar to IGB—both are driven by positivity, a goal to improve young LGBTQ people’s lives, and hope to dissuade teens from suicide by sharing LGBTQ adults’ stories. Yet there is important distinction between these two movements that became visible in my analysis of transition blogs. The distinction lies in the difference between “Better” (in IGB) and “Live” or “Adult” (in RealLiveTransAdult). While IGB simplifies LGBTQ experiences and ignores intersections with race, ethnicity, gender, class, and other identity facets that make an unambiguously “better” life trajectory unguaranteed, RealLiveTransAdult instead signals that youth *can and do survive to adulthood*, whether or not things get better. IGB assumes that LGBTQ people’s lives improve as they grow up, which is not always true depending on life circumstances. RealLiveTransAdult instead provides concrete evidence to trans youth that trans people survive, and become adults, even when taking into account the challenges they may face not only as a trans person, but also as a person with myriad intersecting identities, many of which may be stigmatized. In this way, subtly and cleverly in its succinctness, RealLiveTransAdult radically presents an intersectional version of IGB; a way to spread positivity without the assumption that if a person does not necessarily feel better over time, then they must be doing something wrong. Other social media movements, such as #GirlsLikeUs on Twitter, have somewhat different focus, yet similarly promote an intersectional vision of trans survival and support trans identities via collective advocacy (Jackson et al., 2018).

The “getting better” narrative is also perpetuated by narratives that have been dominant in trans medical settings for many years. To access trans medical care, trans people were

required to tell doctors and therapists a particular version of their life story—what Stone (1987) called “constructing a plausible history”—in which their gender assigned at birth caused them distress and dysphoria that could only be relieved by medical transition (Bolin, 1988; Prosser, 1998). The medical establishment considered what was then called transsexualism to be a mental illness that could be corrected with medical procedures (Denny, 2004). Although the newer transgender model acknowledges that medical transition is only one of many choices for trans people (Denny, 2004), remnants of this history remain salient in current medical gatekeeping procedures (Garrison, 2018). As such, trans people are often compelled to invoke “getting better” narratives when telling their stories to doctors and therapists. The combination of trans narratives expected/required in medical settings, and trans narratives propagated by media movements like IGB, gives rise to the obligation that some trans people feel to present positive emotional well-being trajectories over time.

This study’s results indicate it is not possible to isolate the effects of gender transition on people’s emotional well-being. Instead, it is critical to study people’s gender transitions as one part of a person’s life that exists alongside many other parts, all of which impact their life experiences in the physical world and as expressed on social media. Tumblr is an important online space with affordances and community enabling trans people to document transition narratives on their own terms, yet still constrained in some ways by expected, dominant narratives. An intersectional approach to understanding trans people’s emotional well-being makes trans lives more livable by complicating the cultural imperative to feel better. Considering multiple salient identity facets and life transitions reduces trans people’s obligation to present a unilaterally positive self-image online.

Conclusion

In this article, I analyzed Tumblr transition blogs and interviewed bloggers to understand the complicated relationship between gender transition and emotional well-being over time. I showed that how a person feels over time depends on many factors and many different intersecting identity facets and life circumstances. Thus, despite society’s expectations and trans people’s internalizations of the IGB social media movement’s narrative of uncomplicated increased well-being over time, ultimately the IGB narrative fails to capture the complexity of intersectional trans lived experiences. I argue that understanding and allowing space for trans people’s myriad and complex lived experiences requires rejecting dominant narratives and instead applying an intersectional, individualized approach to well-being over time.

Acknowledgements

I acknowledge the participants in this study’s generosity in allowing me, and the readers of this work, to learn from their experiences. Special thanks to research assistants Katrina Vergara for help with

data collection and Gustavo Figueroa for help with interview transcription and analysis. I appreciated helpful feedback throughout this research process and on various iterations of this work from my dissertation committee: Gillian Hayes, Andrea Forte, Gloria Mark, and Bonnie Ruberg. Thanks to TJ Billard for organizing the ICA panel where I first shared this work, and to the other panelists and Gillian Branstetter for critique and feedback. I thank the anonymous reviewers for their thoughtful comments that improved this work.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Funding

The author(s) disclosed receipt of the following financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article: This work was supported by National Science Foundation Graduate Research Fellowships Program Grant No. DGE-1321846 and an internal grant from the University of California, Irvine (James Harvey Scholar Award).

ORCID iD

Oliver L. Haimson  <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-6552-4540>

Notes

1. Transgender, shortened as “trans,” describes people whose gender differs from the gender they were assigned at birth, including non-binary people.
2. Participants commonly used the word “transition” to describe their blogs and experiences, informing our word choice in this article.
3. Homonormativity refers to LGBTQ people upholding and adhering to dominant heterosexual institutions and assumptions such as marriage, monogamy, and reproduction, along with de-politicized lifestyles rooted in consumption and domesticity (Duggan, 2002).
4. All participant and blogger names are pseudonyms.
5. I paraphrased some blog posts to reduce traceability and to maintain bloggers’ privacy. Those blog post quotes that were not traceable via Google Search are left as is. I revised blog post quotes for spelling, grammar, and readability as necessary. All bolded text indicates emphasis added by the author, not the interviewee.

References

- Ahmed, S. (2010). *The promise of happiness*. Duke University Press.
- Asakura, K., & Craig, S. L. (2014). “It Gets Better” . . . but how? Exploring resilience development in the accounts of LGBTQ adults. *Journal of Human Behavior in the Social Environment*, 24(3), 253–266. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10911359.2013.808971>
- Ashley, F. (2018, November 26). My happy vulva: Comments on Andrea Long Chu’s controversial essay. *Medium*. <https://medium.com/@florence.ashley/my-happy-vulva-comments-on-andrea-long-chus-controversial-essay-70e2dfbecd79>
- Birkett, M., Newcomb, M. E., & Mustanski, B. (2015). Does it get better? A longitudinal analysis of psychological distress and victimization in lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and questioning youth. *Journal of Adolescent Health*, 56(3), 280–285. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jadohealth.2014.10.275>
- Bockting, W. O., Miner, M. H., Swinburne Romine, R. E., Hamilton, A., & Coleman, E. (2013). Stigma, mental health, and resilience in an online sample of the U.S. transgender population. *American Journal of Public Health*, 103(5), 943–951.
- Bolin, A. (1988). *In search of eve: Transsexual rites of passage*. Bergin & Garvey.
- Brown, M., Ray, R., Summers, E., & Fraistat, N. (2017). #SayHerName: A case study of intersectional social media activism. *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, 40(11), 1831–1846. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01419870.2017.1334934>
- Budge, S. L., Adelson, J. L., & Howard, K. A. S. (2013). Anxiety and depression in transgender individuals: The roles of transition status, loss, social support, and coping. *Journal of Consulting and Clinical Psychology*, 81(3), 545–557. <https://doi.org/10.1037/a0031774>
- Cavalcante, A. (2019). Tumbling into queer utopias and vortexes: Experiences of LGBTQ social media users on Tumblr. *Journal of Homosexuality*, 66, 1715–1735. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00918369.2018.1511131>
- Cho, A. (2015). Queer reverb: Tumblr, affect, time. In K. Hillis, S. Paasonen, & M. Petit (Eds.), *Networked affect* (pp. 43–57). MIT Press.
- Cho, A. (2017). Default publicness: Queer youth of color, social media, and being outed by the machine. *New Media & Society*, 20(9), 3183–3200. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1461444817744784>
- Chu, A. L. (2018, November 24). Opinion—My new vagina won’t make me happy. *The New York Times*. <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/11/24/opinion/sunday/vaginoplasty-transgender-medicine.html>
- Clifton, D. (2014, December 31). These powerful #RealLiveTransAdult tweets are showing trans youth they’re not alone. *Mic*. <https://mic.com/articles/107474/these-powerful-real-live-trans-adult-tweets-are-showing-trans-youth-they-re-not-alone>
- Craig, S. L., McInroy, L. B., Alaggia, R., & McCready, L. T. (2014). “Like picking up a seed, but you haven’t planted it”: Queer youth analyze the It Gets Better Project. *International Journal of Child, Youth and Family Studies*, 5(1), 204–219. <https://doi.org/10.18357/ijcyfs.craigsl.512014>
- Crenshaw, K. (1991). Mapping the margins: Intersectionality, identity politics, and violence against women of color. *Stanford Law Review*, 43(6), 1241–1299. <https://doi.org/10.2307/1229039>
- Dame, A. (2016). Making a name for yourself: Tagging as transgender ontological practice on Tumblr. *Critical Studies in Media Communication*, 33(1), 23–37. <https://doi.org/10.1080/15295036.2015.1130846>
- Daum, C. W. (2015). The war on solicitation and intersectional subjection: Quality-of-life policing as a tool to control transgender populations. *New Political Science*, 37(4), 562–581. <https://doi.org/10.1080/07393148.2015.1089030>
- de Vries, K. M. (2012). Intersectional identities and conceptions of the self: The experience of transgender people. *Symbolic Interaction*, 35(1), 49–67. <https://doi.org/10.1002/symb.2>

- Denny, D. (2004). Changing models of transsexualism. *Journal of Gay & Lesbian Psychotherapy*, 8(1–2), 25–40. https://doi.org/10.1300/J236v08n01_04
- DeVito, M. A., Birnholtz, J., & Hancock, J. T. (2017). Platforms, people, and perception: Using affordances to understand self-presentation on social media. In *Proceedings of the 2017 ACM conference on computer supported cooperative work and social computing* (pp. 740–754). Association for Computing Machinery. <https://doi.org/10.1145/2998181.2998192>
- Duggan, L. (2002). The new homonormativity: The sexual politics of neoliberalism. In R. Castronovo, D. D. Nelson, & D. E. Pease (Eds.), *Materializing democracy* (pp. 175–194). Duke University Press.
- Fink, M., & Miller, Q. (2014). Trans media moments: Tumblr, 2011–2013. *Television & New Media*, 15(7), 611–626. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1527476413505002>
- Fraser, N. (1990). Rethinking the public sphere: A contribution to the critique of actually existing democracy. *Social Text*, 25–26, 56–80. <https://doi.org/10.2307/466240>
- Gal, N., Shifman, L., & Kampf, Z. (2016). “It Gets Better”: Internet memes and the construction of collective identity. *New Media & Society*, 18(8), 1698–1714. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1461444814568784>
- Garrison, S. (2018). On the limits of “trans enough”: Authenticating trans identity narratives. *Gender & Society*, 32(5), 613–637. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0891243218780299>
- Gilbert, D. (2009). *Stumbling on happiness*. Alfred A. Knopf.
- Goltz, D. B. (2013). It Gets Better: Queer futures, critical frustrations, and radical potentials. *Critical Studies in Media Communication*, 30(2), 135–151. <https://doi.org/10.1080/15295036.2012.701012>
- Gray, M. (2011, March 4). It doesn’t get better for anyone if we don’t make it better for everyone. *Queer Country*.
- Grzanka, P. R., & Mann, E. S. (2014). Queer youth suicide and the psychopolitics of “It Gets Better.” *Sexualities*, 17(4), 369–393. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1363460713516785>
- Haimson, O. L. (2018a). *The social complexities of transgender identity disclosure on social media* [Doctoral dissertation, University of California, Irvine]. <https://escholarship.org/uc/item/19c235q0>
- Haimson, O. L. (2018b). Social media as social transition machinery. *Proceedings of the ACM on Human-Computer Interaction*, 2(CSCW), 63. <https://doi.org/10.1145/3274332>
- Haimson, O. L. (2019). Mapping gender transition sentiment patterns via social media data: Toward decreasing transgender mental health disparities. *Journal of the American Medical Informatics Association*, 26(8–9), 749–758. <https://doi.org/10.1093/jamia/ocz056>
- Haimson, O. L., Dame-Griff, A., Capello, E., & Richter, Z. (2019). Tumblr was a trans technology: The meaning, importance, history, and future of trans technologies. *Feminist Media Studies*. Advance online publication. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14680777.2019.1678505>
- Halberstam, J. J. (2010, November 20). It gets worse. . . . *Social Text*. https://socialtextjournal.org/periscope_article/it_gets_worse/
- Hawkins, B., Andalibi, N., & Haimson, O. (2018). Helpful information to whom? An intersectional critique of the ‘it gets better project. *Proceedings of the Association for Information Science and Technology*, 55(1), 825–827. <https://doi.org/10.1002/prat.2018.14505501133>
- Hendricks, M. L., & Testa, R. J. (2012). A conceptual framework for clinical work with transgender and gender nonconforming clients: An adaptation of the Minority Stress Model. *Professional Psychology: Research and Practice*, 43(5), 460–467. <https://doi.org/10.1037/a0029597>
- Hsieh, H.-F., & Shannon, S. E. (2005). Three approaches to qualitative content analysis. *Qualitative Health Research*, 15(9), 1277–1288. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1049732305276687>
- It Gets Better Project. (n.d.). *What is the It Gets Better Project?* <http://www.itgetsbetter.org/pages/about-it-gets-better-project/>
- Jackson, S. J. (2016). (Re)imagining intersectional democracy from Black feminism to hashtag activism. *Women’s Studies in Communication*, 39(4), 375–379. <https://doi.org/10.1080/07491409.2016.1226654>
- Jackson, S. J., Bailey, M., & Foucault Welles, B. (2018). #GirlsLikeUs: Trans advocacy and community building online. *New Media & Society*, 20, 1868–1888. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1461444817709276>
- James, S. E., Herman, J. L., Rankin, S., Keisling, M., Mottet, L., & Anafi, M. (2016). *The report of the 2015 U.S. Transgender Survey*. <http://www.transequality.org/sites/default/files/docs/USTS-Full-Report-FINAL.PDF>
- Jenzen, O. (2017). Trans youth and social media: Moving between counterpublics and the wider web. *Gender, Place & Culture*, 24, 1626–1641. <https://doi.org/10.1080/0966369X.2017.1396204>
- Johnson, M. (2014). The It Gets Better Project: A study in (and of) Whiteness—In LGBT youth and media cultures. In C. Pullen (Ed.), *Queer youth and media cultures* (pp. 278–291). https://doi.org/10.1057/9781137383556_20
- Kozee, H. B., Tylka, T. L., & Bauerband, L. A. (2012). Measuring transgender individuals’ comfort with gender identity and appearance: Development and validation of the Transgender Congruence Scale. *Psychology of Women Quarterly*, 36(2), 179–196. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0361684312442161>
- Lange, P. G. (2007). Publicly private and privately public: Social networking on YouTube. *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication*, 13(1), 361–380. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1083-6101.2007.00400.x>
- Linabary, J. R., & Corple, D. J. (2019). Privacy for whom? A feminist intervention in online research practice. *Information, Communication & Society*, 22, 1447–1463. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1369118X.2018.1438492>
- Massimi, M., Dimond, J. P., & Le Dantec, C. A. (2012). Finding a new normal: The role of technology in life disruptions. In *Proceedings of the ACM 2012 conference on computer supported cooperative work* (pp. 719–728). <https://doi.org/10.1145/2145204.2145314>
- Meyer, D. (2017). “One day I’m going to be really successful”: The social class politics of videos made for the “It Gets Better” anti-gay bullying project. *Critical Sociology*, 43(1), 113–127. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0896920515571761>
- Mullen, G., & Moane, G. (2013). A qualitative exploration of transgender identity affirmation at the personal, interpersonal, and sociocultural levels. *International Journal of Transgenderism*, 14(3), 140–154. <https://doi.org/10.1080/15532739.2013.824847>
- Nuru, A. K. (2014). Between layers: Understanding the communicative negotiation of conflicting identities by transgender

- individuals. *Communication Studies*, 65(3), 281–297. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10510974.2013.833527>
- Nyong'o, T. (2010, September 30). School daze. <https://bullybloggers.wordpress.com/2010/09/30/school-daze/>
- Oakley, A. (2016). Disturbing hegemonic discourse: Nonbinary gender and sexual orientation labeling on Tumblr. *Social Media + Society*, 2(3), 1–12. <https://doi.org/10.1177/2056305116664217>
- Prosser, J. (1998). *Second skins: The body narratives of transsexuality*. Columbia University Press.
- Puar, J. (2010). November 16). In the wake of It Gets Better. *The Guardian*. <http://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/cifamerica/2010/nov/16/wake-it-gets-better-campaign>
- PyTumblr. (n.d.). <https://github.com/tumblr/pytumblr>
- Reinecke, L., & Trepte, S. (2014). Authenticity and well-being on social network sites: A two-wave longitudinal study on the effects of online authenticity and the positivity bias in SNS communication. *Computers in Human Behavior*, 30, 95–102. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chb.2013.07.030>
- Renninger, B. J. (2015). “Where I can be myself . . . where I can speak my mind”: Networked counterpublics in a polymedia environment. *New Media & Society*, 17(9), 1513–1529. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1461444814530095>
- Singh, A. A. (2013). Transgender youth of color and resilience: Negotiating oppression and finding support. *Sex Roles*, 68(11), 690–702. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11199-012-0149-z>
- Spade, D. (2011). *Normal life: Administrative violence, critical trans politics, and the limits of law*. South End Press.
- Stone, A. R. (Sandy). (1987). *The empire strikes back: A posttranssexual manifesto*. <http://sandystone.com/empire-strikes-back.pdf>
- Strauss, A., & Corbin, J. M. (1998). *Basics of qualitative research: Techniques and procedures for developing grounded theory*. SAGE.
- Thom, K. C. (2018, November 29). Andrea Long Chu’s NYT essay on her painful transition is important—And also deeply flawed. *Slate*. <https://slate.com/human-interest/2018/11/andrea-long-chu-new-york-times-criticism-response-transgender.html>
- Toomey, R. B., Ryan, C., Diaz, R. M., & Russell, S. T. (2018). Coping with sexual orientation-related minority stress. *Journal of Homosexuality*, 65, 484–500. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00918369.2017.1321888>
- Tumblr. (2018, September 12). *Application developer and API license agreement*. https://www.tumblr.com/docs/en/api_agreement
- Turkle, S. (1995). *Life on the screen*. Simon & Schuster.
- Vivienne, S. (2017). “I will not hate myself because you cannot accept me”: Problematizing empowerment and gender-diverse selfies. *Popular Communication*, 15(2), 126–140. <https://doi.org/10.1080/15405702.2016.1269906>
- West, I., Frischherz, M., Panther, A., & Brophy, R. (2013). Queer worldmaking in the “It Gets Better” campaign. *QED: A Journal in GLBTQ Worldmaking*, 1, 49–86. <https://doi.org/10.14321/qed.0049>
- What We Know: The Public Policy Research Portal & Center for the Study of Inequality at Cornell University. (2019). *What does the scholarly research say about the effect of gender transition on transgender well-being?* <https://whatweknow.inequality.cornell.edu/topics/lgbt-equality/what-does-the-scholarly-research-say-about-the-well-being-of-transgender-people/>

Author Biography

Oliver L. Haimson (PhD, University of California, Irvine) is an assistant professor at University of Michigan School of Information. His research interests include social media, life transitions, and transgender identities and experiences online.