



TRANSMISSION OF TRANSITION



There has been an exponential rise in the referrals of gender-confused young women to gender clinics in the UK.

Could YouTube transition videos be playing a causative role?



TRANSMISSION OF TRANSITION

Vlog:

A set of videos that someone regularly posts on the internet in which they record their thoughts or experiences or talk about a subject.

Vlogger:

Someone who makes vlogs and posts them on the internet

How much influence may YouTube transition vloggers have over children and young people?

Do transition vloggers shape young people's views of their gender identity by providing a particular ideological lens through which to interpret their life and difficulties?

By looking into the world of YouTube transition vlogs and bringing together observations on the language, filters, signs and suggestions embedded in them, this article examines their intentions towards, and possible impact on, the minds of young female viewers. To get a sense of this social media platform, let's briefly trace the origins and significance of the YouTube vlogger.



Template of a lonely teenage girl

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**YouTube vloggers have
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their own, dubbed
'The YouTube Voice'**

By June 2006, YouTube had already become established in the internet world of children and young people. Around this time, YouTube videos under the name of Lonelygirl15 began to appear, posted by a 16-year-old called Bree (Lonelygirl, 2006).

Bree was a fun teenager, who described herself as 'a dork', and her videos were pitched in an informal, goofy and intimate style, showing her alone in her bedroom, perched on the end of her bed with a floral quilt and a collection of stuffed toys. Hanging on her bedroom door, viewers could see a pink feather boa. Bree talked about everyday teenage concerns such as being lonely and of troubles with parents and schoolwork. Her direct conversations to camera were interspersed with speeded up sections of video in which she clowned around and pulled funny faces to music. Now and again, she leant in close to the webcam and whispered. Bree was easy to watch and follow. Viewers were quickly introduced to her boyfriend Daniel and intrigue was added by hints from Bree that her parents were involved with a strange cult. Within weeks, Bree's YouTube vlogs were a huge hit and teenage fans were hooked.

A few months after launching the vlog, 'Bree' was rumbled. It turned out that the character of Bree was fictitious, her part being played by an actress hired by two filmmakers. The duo had been interested in exploring how easy it would be to set up a fake YouTube

vlog with a scripted narrative that could evolve over time (Cresci, 2016). Through the use of professional filmic techniques such as quick, frequent cuts and short-burst storytelling, the filmmakers had created YouTube's first viral success of a vlog. The format of Lonelygirl15 became a template for legions of teen vloggers thereafter. They copied the format, setting themselves up as one or two characters in a bedroom, chatting informally with their audience about their day to day life, and conspiratorially sharing secrets. Successful blogs still mirror Lonelygirl15's high energy, upbeat friendliness mixed with vulnerability, an invitation to shared intimacy and an absorbing narrative. 'Bree' began each of her videos with a formulaic cheery 'Hi Guys!' or 'Hey Guys', which continues to be one of the most common introductions used by YouTube's 'content creators.' Nowadays, YouTube vloggers have adopted a standardised way of speaking all of their own, dubbed the 'YouTube Voice'. They overstress vowels, add extra vowels between consonants, stretch out vowels and use aspiration to emphasise words—techniques which get and keep the attention of the audience (Beck, 2015). They also speed up and slow down the pace of their speech, use their head and hands a lot, and exaggerate facial expressions such as raised eyebrows and wide open mouths. Liberman, a linguist, likens the YouTube Voice to an 'intellectual used-car-salesman voice', making 'high-energy sales pitches' (Beck, 2015).



Photo credit: Lonelygirl15 Studios Creative Commons Attribution-Share Alike 2.5 Generic license.

The love for YouTube vloggers

YouTube vlogs and vloggers have proved hugely appealing. Surveys have shown that teens 'enjoy an intimate and authentic experience with YouTube celebrities' who are not subject to the traditional, carefully orchestrated images of Hollywood (Ault, 2014). Teenagers are reported as saying they appreciate the candid sense of humour, lack of filter and risk-taking spirit presented by their favourite YouTube stars (Ault, 2014). It is the sense of 'ordinariness' cultivated by YouTube vloggers which makes them 'relatable' (Ault, 2014).

In 2015, a survey of 13-18-year-olds in the US asked children to rate ten popular English language YouTubers and ten popular traditional celebrities in terms of 'influence'. YouTubers took the top eight slots. The celebrity brand strategist who conducted the survey believed the viral nature of promoting YouTube stars across the internet was contributing to their expanding power among teens, commenting that 'YouTube has an inherent ability to create contagious content' (Ault, 2015). There is now strong evidence that vloggers can foster deep and personal

connections between themselves and their audience, and that teenagers are developing emotional attachments to YouTube stars that can be as much as seven times greater than those towards a traditional celebrity (Ault, 2015).

Marketeers were quick to catch on to the power of the YouTube vlog and some of the top YouTube vloggers are now reputed to earn millions (Lynch, 2017). Not surprisingly, many young people aspire to follow in their footsteps.

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Smartphones and iGen

Online video watching has become part of everyday life for adolescents born after 1995, who are now described as iGen (Twenge, 2017). This cohort has grown up with the internet, social media and smartphones, and iGen's oldest members were only in their early teens when smartphones were introduced in 2007. Smartphones are the most popular device for watching online videos and we know smartphone users are much more likely to consume online videos daily than desktop users (Facebook, 2017). Smartphones have allowed young people to easily consume bite-sized chunks of information—perfect for YouTube videos whose average length is around 4 minutes. Binge watching of video content is a new trend worldwide (Ofcom, 2017), and YouTube's autoplay feature—where a new, related-topic video will start playing automatically after a previous one ends—makes binge watching on a smartphone almost inescapable.

iGen teens see less of their friends in real life than previous generations did, and the number of young people who get together with their friends nearly every day dropped by more than 40% between 2000 and 2015 (Twenge, 2017). Today's teenagers are more likely to be found alone in their bedrooms, tuning in to their favourite vloggers, many of whom they consider have a better understanding of them than their real-life friends (Google, 2016). They make virtual friends with others they have never met but about whom they feel they know so much. 'Parasocial relationships



psychologically resemble those of face to face interactions but they are of course mediated and one sided' (Chandler and Munday, 2011). Young people who have prolonged exposure to YouTubers can develop intense parasocial relationships

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They make virtual friends with others they have never met but about whom they feel they know so much.

with vloggers, and the more they view them, the higher the relational importance of these relationships becomes. Those who both binge watch and subscribe to the regular updates of their favourite vlogger are highly susceptible to being influenced

by them. Parasocial relationships are intentionally promoted for the purpose of manufacturing 'markets' by YouTube content creators. The YouTube Creator Academy channel offers tips and techniques on knowing and engaging with an audience, in order to build a 'fan family'. YouTube content producers actively work to elicit parasocial responses in their viewers and measure click rates and comments as key indicators of the intensity of their relationship development with their viewers (Chen, 2014 in Kurtin et al, 2018). Researchers have suggested that embedding health and other behavioural messaging in YouTube content may be extremely effective for educational purposes and propose future studies investigate the impact

of messages communicated by YouTube celebrities (Kurtin et al, 2018).

The power of the YouTube vlogger is strong. Is it reasonable, then, to hypothesise that teenage YouTube vlog viewers could be negatively influenced by the vloggers to whom they become so firmly attached? Could YouTube vlogs be used to propagate transgender ideology, for example, to cultivate gender confusion and manufacture 'the transgender child'? At the heart of this new smartphone and iGen world, there is a problematic potential for undiluted and undue power and influence over children and young people who are confused about gender.

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TRANSMISSION OF TRANSITION

How do transgender vloggers use YouTube?

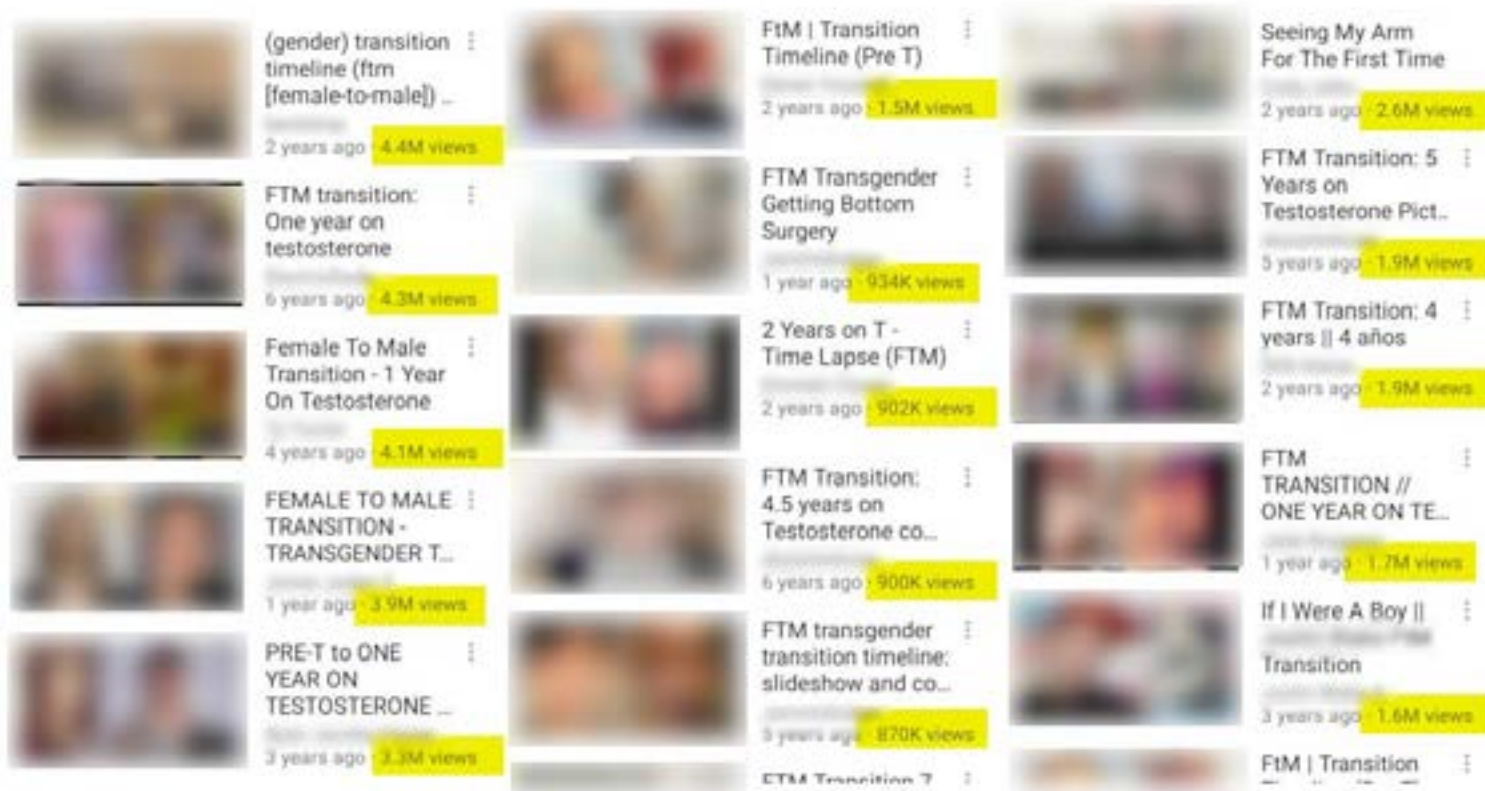
Channels typically adopt a story-telling narrative following a hormone timeline, for example, a set of pre-testosterone videos are followed by updates depicting 'One week on Testosterone', 'One month on T', 'Look at me one year on T', sometimes followed by videos celebrating the results of 'top surgery'

It is not surprising that transgender vloggers have utilised the YouTube platform in order to broadcast their experiences and opinions around gender identity formation, gender dysphoria and treatment. Mirroring the rest of YouTube, most successful transition vloggers are white, deemed attractive and in their mid-teens or early twenties. They follow the formula established by the early YouTube vloggers closely: the same 'talking head' style, a format historically used by activist filmmakers to grant expertise to working class women, women of colour and lesbians (Horak, 2014). Their channels typically adopt a story telling narrative following a hormone timeline, for example, a set of pre-testosterone videos are followed by updates depicting 'One week on Testosterone', 'One month on T', 'Look at me one year on T', sometimes followed by videos celebrating the results of 'top surgery' including 'reveals' in which the vlogger exposes their post-operative body and scars. Such key milestones on the trans journey are interspersed with advice, opinion pieces or general 'checking-in' chats which drive the continuation of the viewer's attention.

According to Horak (2014), transition videos are successful because they exploit YouTube's inclination for the 'personal' and the 'spectacular.'

Head and shoulder framing of the camera captures a transman's display of changes to the voice, facial hair, upper-body muscle development and binding or removal of breasts. Cameras zoom in to show physical changes, and time-lapse techniques visually and dramatically compare 'before' and 'after' selves of young vloggers going through transition. 'Highs' and 'lows' of transition are shared, goals are celebrated and a compelling emotional narrative of transformation unfolds before the young viewers' eyes.

While there has been much promotion and celebration of YouTube transition vlogs, has there been a careful assessment of their impact?



YouTube transition videos have a huge following (images are blurred to respect the privacy of these young people).

TRANSMISSION OF TRANSITION

Transgenderism goes mainstream



Photo credit: Ted Eytan
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Social contagion, infectious behaviour and gender dysphoria

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“We believe the biggest influence was the online pro-transition blogs and YouTube videos. We believe she was hugely influenced by the ‘if you are even questioning your gender you are probably transgender’ philosophy”

YouTubers had started to vlog about their transition around 2006/7 and by 2010 had cultivated a genre of their own (Raun, 2010). By 2015 an elite group of transgender vloggers had gained hundreds of thousands of subscribers (YouTube, 2015). The rise of the YouTube transition vlog had therefore paved the way for a surge of transition stories to break into mainstream media in late 2014 and early 2015. Time Magazine ran an article declaring 2014 to be the ‘Transgender Tipping Point’ (Steinmetz, 2014). Transgender star Laverne Cox won an Emmy Award and was represented in a waxwork figure at Madame Tussauds, and Caitlyn Jenner’s Twitter account launch attracted 1 million followers in just over four hours. Running alongside

Social contagion has been defined as ‘the spread of affect or behaviour from one crowd participant to another; one person serves as the stimulus for the imitative actions of another’ (Lindzey and Aronsson, 1985). Self-harm and suicide rates can vary proportionally according to the extent of intensity and content of exposure to these behaviours, and social contagion is now an accepted risk factor in suicide research (Marsden, 1998; Littman, 2018). As Littman shows, social contagion is also recognised as a factor in anorexia; it seems entirely plausible therefore that it could also be implicated in gender dysphoria. Many parents certainly think so:

We believe the biggest influence was the online pro-transition blogs and YouTube videos. We believe she was hugely influenced by the ‘if you are even questioning your gender you are probably transgender’ philosophy. (Littman, 2018)

At a recent conference on child and adolescent mental health, Polly Carmichael, Director of Tavistock GIDS, was asked about a link between social media and the increase in gender clinic referrals.

this, in 2007, the first of the iGen cohort were becoming teenagers and getting smartphones. In parallel, in 2007, annual referrals to the Tavistock GIDS gender clinic began to slowly rise—with a huge, dramatic and unexpected spike beginning in 2015.

It seems possible that there could be a connection between the rise in smartphone use, YouTube watching and gender dysphoria rates.

She acknowledged that:

without a doubt there are some young people who are finding a community, friends and all sorts of things through joining a group who have an interest around gender and I think that for some of those we would be very foolish not to acknowledge that it’s probably the case that they are caught up in something rather than it being an expression of something that has arisen from within. So there is a lot of concern. (Carmichael, 2018)

Academic and clinical commentators have recently raised concerns that platforms such as YouTube are leading young people to believe that transition is the only solution to their individual gender confusion or discomfort and that the typically uncritically positive depiction of transition may be resulting in adolescents pressuring their families and doctors for medical treatment (Brunskell-Evans and Moore, 2018). Parent- child relationships are reported to deteriorate after a young person starts to identify as transgender, with the young person spending less time with family members and only trusting information about gender dysphoria from transgender sources, usually solely or including YouTube transgender vloggers (Littman, 2018).

Key messages of the YouTube transition vlogs

CONTESTED EXPERTISE

Unlike medical professionals, vloggers don't undertake the role of the clinician i.e. by listening to the individual patient's narrative and then making a diagnosis. Instead, they offer mostly generalised advice – taking on the role of educators. There is an asymmetry to this communication, as bloggers rarely respond to viewers' questions.
(Dame, 2013)

If a young person asks questions of a YouTube transgender vlogger, they will encounter responses that are general in nature and designed not to alienate the viewer, frequently prefaced with endearments such as 'you do YOU!' or ambiguous palliatives such as 'there's no right or wrong way'. The transvloggers' 'expertise' for advising gender-confused children and young people is assumed by virtue of their own lived experience—their subjective identity is not up for debate. They serve as 'information centres for the questioning', and girls are significantly more likely to have sought out or had contact with trans individuals prior to identifying as transgender (Dame, 2013). Those vloggers who have moved further along the medical transition pathway claim a higher social status within the trans community, creating 'a hierarchy of surgery and testosterone' (Raun, 2016) and an associated hierarchy of vlogger expertise and rank. The more drastic the lived experience of medical intervention undertaken, the more 'qualified' trans vloggers consider themselves to be to advise others. Carmichael (2018) expresses concern about this unfettered expansion of guidance from self-appointed 'experts' whose claimed wisdom is neither assessed nor accredited:

I have been shocked by some of the things that are swilling around the internet that young people have access to. There are numerous groups on Reddit and Tumblr that

many of the young people that are attending our service are going onto ... maybe it's also the dissing of expertise, in a way, so that there is a feeling that this is about who I am, so what does anyone else know? It's a very odd situation in some way.

For self-appointed experts who present YouTube vlogs, there is no requirement for public accreditation of their claims and no accountability. For children and young people who become captivated by the YouTube transgender vloggers, there is only hearsay and induction into the transgender ideology on offer as a resource through which to navigate their personal concerns about gender—and no safeguarding.

'AM I TRANS?'

The UK Department of Health confirms 'there is no physical test ... for detecting gender variance that may develop into adult dysphoria ... clinicians must rely on the young person's own account' (Department of Health, 2008). There is no requirement to have experienced gender dysphoria since childhood and no age by which one needs to have 'figured things out'. 'In today's social landscape no one really understands the complexity of gender identity development' says the Tavistock GIDS website (GIDS). It is not surprising, given this lack of clinical definition, that 'Am I trans?' is a question frequently asked of trans vloggers. It is also not surprising that 'Am I trans?' is a question transgender YouTube vloggers cannot answer. Some offer a description of their own feelings:

I always felt incredibly uncomfortable with myself and just like something was wrong, I can't really put my finger on it to explain it better than that, it's just knowing that things don't feel right but not knowing why. (Jammidodger, 2017)

The terms 'gender' and 'sex' are commonly used interchangeably and

'male' and 'female' are used in place of 'masculine' and 'feminine'. The following all-encompassing explanation and instructions are given in a vlog viewed over 267,000 times (at the time of writing):

In order to be considered transgender ... you have to be someone who does not identify with their birth given sex ... given the fact that gender is a spectrum, you have male on one side, female on the other, and also knowing that transgender just means that you do not identify with your birth given sex, that means you can be transgender and not necessarily feel completely like the opposite gender ... You don't have to be born as a female like I was and necessarily feel like a male all of your life and just know you were supposed to be a boy in order to be transgender. ... So, if you are asking the question am I trans, the answer is probably yes ... how can I figure out where I am on the spectrum? ... Much like science and sexuality the best thing you can do to get results is experiment ... dress like a guy for a month and see how that feels to you, have people start using different pronouns with you and see if you like that ... maybe you are not anywhere on the spectrum, and you're just like your own gender, that's fine, you can still call yourself trans. (Turner, 2015)

Clearly, the vlogger's advice could draw young viewers into transitioning behaviour. However, one comment thread below the vlog reveals **seven** girls in a row (at the time of viewing the comments) who might simply be caught up in 'rapid onset gender dysphoria' and not likely to transition if left to their own devices:

it kind of bothers me that I have only felt a lot of discomfort with being female for about a year (I'm 17). I have never been a typical girl but being seen as a girl by others never felt wrong to me. It seems so strange to my (sic) that my gender dysphoria has started so late

I am 20 and only recently started feeling like this, but I have heard of people who discovered that they are trans at the age of 40+ and became happy, so I suppose both of us are plenty early!

Same over here (but I'm 15)

Same tho I'm 12

Same. I'm 17 and I am starting to feel my dysphoria since a year ago or so. But it's getting stronger everyday

I have dysphoria ever since I was 12. I'm 13 now

I'm hoping this is normal because I began feeling gender dysphoria this year and last year

There seems to be confusion all round.

A feeling of being 'in the wrong body' can stem from a range of comorbidities—such as friendship difficulties, communication problems and trauma but this is rarely ever discussed in the vlogs. For young people seeking an answer to the ordinary discomforts of childhood and adolescence, transgender vloggers can offer transition as an allegedly guaranteed pathway to the alleviation of problems.

Penny, a 16 year old girl who had a mastectomy at 15 and who is now seeking a reversal said:

From the very start, people online told me that if I was uncomfortable with my body, I was probably trans

(Robertson 2020)

To further the induction to transition, the transgender vloggers can then provide further instruction on how to obtain a medical diagnosis of gender dysphoria.



Key messages of the YouTube transition vlogs

In Littman's parent survey, 69% of parents suspected that when their child first announced a transgender identity, they used language that they had found online: the announcement did not sound like their child's voice and often sounded as if they were reading from a script

TELLING YOUR STORY AND GETTING YOUR DIAGNOSIS

The diagnosis of gender dysphoria relies on self-affirmation for both the clinic and the young person themselves; therefore, their narrative becomes all important to them. In Littman's parent survey, 69% of parents suspected that when their child first announced a transgender identity, they used language that they had found online: the announcement did not sound like their child's voice and often sounded as if they were reading from a script (Littman, 2018). Young people can learn from YouTube vloggers exactly what they need to say to obtain a transgender diagnosis. Worryingly, this obviates the need for them to come up with their own language and wrestle with conflicting emotions and experiences.

Multitudes of transgender vlogs offer feedback and advice around clinical assessment. Presented in the manner of offering exam tips, the vloggers disclose what questions they were asked and their replies. These vlogs act as a guide for young people preparing to visit their own GP or therapist. There are, for example, at the time of writing, over 30 YouTube vlogs from UK girls identifying as male which give accounts of their first appointment with the private clinic of GenderCare in London. These give directions on how to get there, where to find the nearest ATM cash machine for drawing out the clinic fee and a comprehensive run through of the consultation and what they said to achieve the desired outcome of a medical diagnosis of 'being transgender'.

A young detransitioned woman recently reported her experience of transition to a national UK newspaper:

Online, there is a lot of advice about how to behave in your meeting at the gender clinic so you'll get what you want. (Dodsworth, 2020)

For parents, clinicians and young people, transgender vloggers forge the presentation of young people's confusions about gender and identity. How can anyone be sure of the authenticity of a young person's identification as transgender, especially if – as in so many cases – identification as transgender comes out of the blue and following a period of binging on YouTube?

The resource gallery of YouTube transgender vlogs means anyone can learn what to say for a guaranteed diagnosis. Having guaranteed the medical diagnosis, the transition vloggers can then offer advice on how to 'educate' family and friends into concurring with it. 8

HOW TO DEAL WITH PARENTS

The education of parents and close family members is a common topic for transgender vloggers. Sometimes those parents who affirm their child's conviction of transgenderism make a guest appearance, to be quizzed by the vlogger about how they first felt when learning of their child's transgender identification and how they have supported it since. These appearances are intended to persuade parents who are not endorsing medical transition for their child that affirmation is best. One vlogger's parent, agreeing with the opinion of her transitioned child, says:

If you have relatives or friends or parents that don't understand it, or are ignorant to it, or can't open their minds to it then basically they don't care, they don't love you ... the ones that don't support you and can't accept it and they think it's weird or anything, cut 'em out.

(Sam Collins, 2016)

Certainly, parents who do not ratify their child's identification as transgender are not represented amongst YouTube transitioner vlogs. When a child suggests their own parent is not affirmative, the vloggers often position them as intent on their child's unhappiness. Transcritical parents are cast as 'bigoted', 'old fashioned', 'transphobic' and ignorant of the new knowledge of gender identity. Parents are urged to 'listen' to their trans-identifying child and expressly follow the instructions of transgender vloggers. Parents who question their child's transgender presentation, or encourage their child to explore alternative reasons for their bodily discomfort, often find their parent-child relationship deteriorates rapidly (Littman, 2018).

The vlogger ThatGuyOli (2017) invests a GenderCare clinician with somehow knowing more about a young person than their own mother—as does the clinician:

Parents think that they know everything that is going on with their kids ... for the most part you don't know what they are thinking.

Later the mother asks:

How do you know after 45 minutes with my daughter that this is the right thing for her?

The clinician's reply is recorded as:

This is an opinion, it's a very subjective thing, there's no MRI scan, there's no test you can do to prove someone is trans, this is just an opinion from a professional.

With a diagnosis and wider social affirmation in place, transition vlogs can next be turned to for the alleviation of profound anxieties about medical intervention.

THE EFFECTS OF HORMONES AND SURGERY

YouTube trans vlogs revere testosterone, colloquially known as 'T', 'Vitamin T' or 'man juice', evacuating it of any harmful connotations. Gender therapist Aydin Olson-Kennedy, Executive Director at the Los Angeles Gender Centre and himself a transman, refers to having had '10 years of testosterone goodness' (MilesChronicles, 2018). Olson-Kennedy invokes the image of a child's plastic toy with removable body parts:

...there's some folks who want to take testosterone, [or] oestrogen, but don't want to have any surgeries, there's some folks who want to have surgery but no hormones, think Mr Potato Head right, 'I would like a little bit of that but I definitely don't want that'.

(MilesChronicles, 2018)

Transmen vloggers focus on the external bodily changes that testosterone causes including facial hair, acne, higher temperature, body odour, increased sexual drive, mood changes, muscle development, increased appetite and clitoral growth. The long-term concerns of hormone interventions are downplayed:

There are speculations that testosterone can lead to an increased risk of certain cancers, but really there is no evidence ...

... testosterone is not dangerous ... really there are not that many bad things about testosterone, there is the odd change that some people might think is bad, there's the odd health check that you might not want to get, but really overall testosterone is a magic and wonderful thing.

(Jammidodger, 2018)

In contrast, advice from Tavistock GIDS clinicians is less encouraging:

Although puberty suppression, cross-sex hormones and gender reassignment are generally considered safe treatments in the short term, the long-term effects regarding bone health and cardiovascular risks are still unknown. (Cohen-Kettenis & Klink, 2015; Klink et al., 2015 in Butler et al, 2018)

The potential side effects of testosterone use in females are known to include acne, alopecia, reduced HDL cholesterol, increased triglycerides, and a possible increase in systolic blood pressure (Irwig, 2016). There is a lack of high-quality data in the study of testosterone therapy for girls who identify as male, and few prospective or long-term studies (Irwig, 2016). Nonetheless, trans vlogs encourage young viewers to transition without delay.

IT'S ALL GOOD...

Once identified as transgender, young women and girls are incited to obtain testosterone and get surgery. Vlogs announcing the achievement of these goals carry celebratory titles and a stream of congratulatory comments underneath (Marchiano, 2018). Young people are encouraged to subdue their doubts and push ahead towards what they are told is 'self-actualisation'. Trans vloggers spur them on:

Stop thinking of your family, stop thinking how anyone else is going to react to you coming out, are you happy with your life right now? Seriously, are you happy with yourself? If not, you need to change something, you need to seriously sit down with yourself and figure it out ... stop waiting around for anyone

to give you approval. Being confused and being scared is normal but do not let fear control your life. You're gonna live a sad life if you let fear control your life, for real. (Taylor, 2018)

Just do it. Just be the best you can be. Just be whatever the hell that is. As long as you're not hurting anyone else, you're fine. (McKenna in Lorenz, 2018)

If you want a beard, just go out and get your beard (TheRealAlexBertie, 2014)

Gender therapist Aydin Olson-Kennedy, who identifies as a 'transgender queer man who happens to be married to a straight cisgender woman', says in a vlog viewed nearly half a million times (at the time of writing) that gender therapy is for anyone having 'something happening with their gender'. When the young vlogger admits to a fear of identifying as something which then might change, Olson-Kennedy provides reassurance:

We can't actually know how we feel about something until we're there, and so, um, helping people relieve themselves from like 'but I'm so nervous about blah blah blah' and it's like 'we'll totally figure out when we're there'. (MilesChronicles, 2018)

Vloggers often say transition enables them to 'inhabit a new, warmly illuminated world. Images of sunrises and metaphors of being 'born again' are common, as are expressions of gratitude' (Horak, 2014). Transition is 'often articulated as a birth or re-birth signalling a new start in life and new identity' (Raun, 2010). Describing children on the autistic spectrum, Marshall (2018) says:

Some of them have said to me that they have watched famous YouTubers who have transitioned and their life just looks fabulous ... they are following these people who seem to have wonderful lives on YouTube ... and it reinforces them to proceed with taking hormones and transitioning.

One recently detransitioned young woman recounts her journey to transition:

I started watching popular videos on YouTube about girls becoming good-looking boys. I began to think that my body would look better if I took testosterone. I set myself a goal of looking male. And that quickly went from being a goal to feeling like a need. By the time I was 16 I had strong [gender] dysphoria. (Dodsworth, 2020).

Whilst transitioning may produce an initial euphoria and relief from worries, there is little research on the long-term outcomes (Littman, 2018). Slowly, some young people who have experienced transition are finding the courage to speak a different truth. One vlogger recently described dysphoria as shifting around the body after medical intervention and lamented that this is a problem rarely aired:

I think dysphoria worsening after surgery is something that a lot of people don't really talk about—I've never really seen a huge discussion about this. I've never really heard people say 'I've got top surgery and now I feel like shit' and I think that's the thing about the human brain, once you've fixed one problem in your life, another problem arises ... I think we should have a more open discussion about how dysphoria can be worsened by medical transition because medical transition is not this big saving thing. It isn't something that is a cure. Young trans people and people earlier in their transition should know that. It's a harsh reality to face but I think I would rather have faced it sooner rather than later.

(JakeFtMagic, 2018)

Another popular female to male transitioner is bravely beginning to vlog about ongoing struggles with depression, not alleviated by hormones, surgery or wide social affirmation:

...realistically I've probably been depressed ... since I was like 16, maybe 15, ever since I started to kind of understand like my gender identity and like probably maybe even my sexuality and the negative repercussions of that like getting bullied and just feeling crap about myself in general ... but I think because I knew I was trans, I never even considered depression a possibility, I always thought it was my gender dysphoria just making me feel terrible and I thought, you know, once I was on testosterone I'd be happy but then suddenly I was on testosterone and I was still unhappy and then I was thinking, OK, once I've had surgery surely then I'll be truly happy, then I had surgery and for a while I was happy. (TheRealAlexBertie, 2018)

These admissions from young people are chilling evidence that medical intervention is not a cure-all for childhood or adolescent distress.

DON'T DELAY: TRANSITION OR DIE

Transition vlogs promote the belief that delaying transition will have detrimental effects on young people's mental health and future life happiness. The vloggers carry a menacing warning about delayed intervention:

Transitioning saved my life ... it allowed me to live as myself and actually live my life and had I had to continue living as female, feeling as uncomfortable and wrong as I had, then, to be honest ... I don't really know where I would be and it's kinda scary to think about. (JammiDodger, 2017)

Without taking my first steps in medical transition I would not be here right now ... that's something very important, specifically like parents of transgender kids need to see. It's very very controversial to put kids on cross-sex hormones, it's very controversial to start hormone blockers, it's very controversial to even be trans as a kid ... so maybe this is a video that you show to your parents. (Rider, 2018)

The vlogger admits to feeling bad about pushing their parents towards an acceptance of medical intervention at such a young age, yet advises others to do the same:

I pushed my parents harder than I have ever pushed my parents ... because I was so sick of not living my authentic self and I told them straight to their faces that they could not expect me to keep staying around if I could not do the thing that I needed to do. ... It doesn't matter if you're a minor, like if you have to make changes in your life, like if you have to do massive things that you know minors don't usually do or don't usually have the consent of doing, you have to push for it... (Rider, 2018)

Gender-confused teens and their parents have come to have a deep fear that transitioning delays can ultimately lead to suicide, but the data does not back this up (Biggs, 2018). Clinicians from the Tavistock GIDS record that parents and young people are increasingly anxious about the risk of suicide, but nevertheless advocate keeping options open and not immediately rushing to intervention. They state that 'keeping options open is important to allow a young person to feel able to change paths if they want to' (GIDS). Young people's testimonies on the GIDS website bear out the importance of this. Robin says:

When I started to feel dysphoric of my body, it got very bad, very quickly. It went from a mild to severe hatred of my body and I wanted hormones and surgery to make myself feel less bad about myself. ... It gradually lessened as I went to GIDS and as I was taking antidepressants prescribed by my psychiatrist ... I came to GIDS wanting everything changed about me, and now starting to get to the end of my GIDS journey, not wanting anything changed about me physically. I'm shocked and many others that I'm close to are shocked that I have completely changed my outlook on myself and what I want for the future.

By its nature and intention, the transition vlog eliminates any exploration of the context of a transgender identity. Vloggers can be constrained both by the need to validate their own decisions and by the income generation possibilities of growing their channels via subscribers. They know what their audiences want to see and hear. Surgery and testosterone updates can increase viewing rates tenfold and some videos can garner up to half a million views.

Conclusion

Vloggers have a powerful influence over their audience. As transgender issues entered the mainstream media around 2014, young women watching on their smartphones were reported by their parents to be binge watching FTM transition blogs—and consequently self-identifying as transgender on the basis of non-specific symptoms. By September 2018, the UK Equalities Minister launched an urgent inquiry into the number of teen girls being referred to the UK's only children's gender clinic, the Tavistock Gender Identity Development Service (GIDS). A source at the Government Equalities Office said 'There has been a substantial increase in the number of individuals assigned female at birth being referred to the NHS. There is evidence that this trend is happening in other countries as well' (Rayner, 2018).

An in-depth exploration of the content of YouTube transition vlogs to provide data for all future enquires is required. Parents, clinicians and researchers are aware of the influence of transitioning vlogs on children and young people and yet, incredibly, to date there has been little public or clinical acknowledgement of this phenomenon. In every other area of a child or young person's life we know the importance of social media on their identity, and we aspire to safeguard against harmful influence. It is unconscionable that in this area of transition vlogs, central to understanding the invention of transgender children and young people, crucial impact data has not been collected and analysed.



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