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 JOURNAL OF
 ADOLESCENT
 HEALTH

www.jahonline.org

Original article

How Are Transgender and Gender Nonconforming Youth Affected by the News? A Qualitative Study

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Article history: Received August 20, 2019; Accepted November 2, 2019

Keywords: Transgender; Gender nonconforming; Youth; News; Media

 A B S T R A C T

Purpose: News stories about transgender and gender nonconforming (TGNC) people have become more common in recent years and TGNC youth may be disparately affected by this information compared with their cisgender peers. The aim of this study was to understand how TGNC youth react to news stories about TGNC and other gender and sexual minority (GSM) identifying persons.

Methods: As part of a larger study, 23 TGNC youth were recruited from the Seattle Children's Gender Clinic to participate in a semistructured interview. Interviews were audio recorded, transcribed, and thematically analyzed.

Results: Participating youth ranged in age from 13 to 19 years (mean = 16.9 years). Of the 23 participants, 43% identified as having a transfeminine gender identity, 39% transmasculine, and 17% nonbinary/gender fluid. Four main themes were identified: (1) news coverage of current political climate affects gender transition; (2) negative news coverage of GSM people contributes to concerns about mental well-being and safety; (3) geographical location affects perception of news; and (4) positive news coverage of TGNC people increases visibility and hope.

Conclusions: Exposure to negative news about GSM people may contribute to increased levels of stress among TGNC youth. With increased visibility, participants described frustration associated with inaccurate portrayals of the TGNC community in the news; however, with increased visibility, there is also a growing sense of shared community and opportunity for acceptance of TGNC people. Given the scope of responses to negative and positive news on GSM people, TGNC youth may benefit from increased support to promote resilience when interpreting the news.

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 IMPLICATIONS AND
 CONTRIBUTION

With increased access to news stories online and increasing visibility of TGNC people, TGNC youth mental health may be affected by news story content. In this qualitative study, TGNC youth described both positive and negative impacts when confronted with positive and negative news coverage of the gender and sexual minority community.

Transgender and gender nonconforming (TGNC) is a term used to describe individuals whose gender identity or expression is different from the sex they were assigned at birth [1]. This

Conflicts of interest: The authors have no conflicts of interest to disclose.

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umbrella term describes a spectrum of gender identities and includes nonbinary individuals whose identities are outside the gender binary and are not exclusively masculine or feminine. TGNC youth have significant and often unmet mental health needs during their adolescence, which can be a time in which gender identity is actively developing [2]. A recent study regarding the prevalence of TGNC individuals in the U.S.

estimated that about .7% of youth aged 13–17 years and .7% of young adults aged 18–24 years identify as TGNC [3].

Over the past decade, there has been a marked increase in awareness of issues uniquely impacting TGNC youth and young adults. For example, particular attention in news media has been given to gender and sexuality-based school bullying and homicides, familial rejection, and suicide experienced by TGNC youth [4–8]. In addition, in news and social media (e.g., Twitter and Facebook), there has been a significant increase in the presence of TGNC individuals because of popular culture (e.g., Laverne Cox, Sam Smith, and Janet Mock) [9].

With growing public awareness of the unique challenges facing TGNC youth and increased representations of TGNC individuals and communities via social media, there has also been an influx of news media coverage on federal, state, and local policies that discriminate against TGNC people. Most notably, extensive news media coverage has been focused on state and local bans on TGNC people using a bathroom that aligns with their gender identity [10]. Other news coverage has focused on the current administration's (the Trump Administration's) efforts to ban TGNC people from serving openly in the U.S. Military [11]. Although news media coverage of issues impacting TGNC individuals and communities raises awareness of the unique experiences and challenges among TGNC people, this coverage also has the potential to contribute to negative mental health outcomes, particularly among TGNC youth.

Prior qualitative work exploring the potential influence of social media content on gender and sexual minority (GSM) people also suggests that exposure to negative and positive information related to gender diversity during adolescence may have an impact on identity and adolescent development [8,9]. Previous studies have also demonstrated that exposure to negative news and media coverage of GSM people can promote negative mental and emotional health outcomes among GSM youth and emerging adults [8,9,12]. However, there is a paucity of data exploring the experiences specific to TGNC people with news coverage during key developmental periods. The few studies that have included TGNC youth have explored both potential negative and positive effects of social media but have not studied the specific effects of news stories [8,9,12]. Social media and the ubiquity of the internet have made national and international news increasingly accessible for adolescents. With increased exposure to news stories that relate to their identity, TGNC youth may be personally and disparately affected by this information.

The goal of this study was to explore how TGNC youth experience news media coverage of TGNC and broader GSM communities, including perceived effects on mental well-being.

Methods

Recruitment

Participants were recruited from the Seattle Children's Gender Clinic from October 2016 to March 2017 to participate in a semistructured interview that covered a variety of issues with the potential to affect mental health and quality of life for TGNC youth. Responses to the subset of questions regarding the effects of local and national news were used for the current analysis; themes from other subsets of interview questions will be presented in other articles. Eligible participants were those who identified as having a gender identity other than their sex assigned at birth and

were between the ages of 13 and 21 years. We used a maximum variation purposive sampling technique, also called heterogeneous purposive sampling, to allow for inclusion of perspectives of youth across the gender spectrum. Participants were recruited until thematic saturation was achieved [13]. All participant responses were included in analysis. This research was approved by the Seattle Children's Institutional Review Board before initiation of study activities. All participants provided assent/consent to participate in research activities. Parental permission was obtained for participants aged <18 years.

Data collection

Two interviewers trained in qualitative methods conducted semistructured interviews with participants by telephone and in person. Before interviews, participants completed a brief self-sociodemographic survey via an online survey tool (REDCap; Tennessee). An interview guide was developed to explore factors influencing the quality of life among TGNC youth. One section of the guide focused on the influence of news media stories about GSM people and included the following interview prompts:

1. How do local or national news stories related to transgender or LGBTQ people affect you, if at all?
2. How do they affect your mental well-being?
3. Has your awareness of what's in the news impacted your gender transition plan?

Interviewers were 2 cisgender women, one identifying as Asian and the other as white. Interviews ranged in duration from 15 to 60 minutes, with an average of 34 minutes. All interviews were audio recorded and then transcribed by a professional transcription company.

Analysis

Descriptive statistics were generated from the online survey. Interview transcripts were deidentified, checked for accuracy, and uploaded to the Web application Dedoose (California) to facilitate qualitative analysis. We used thematic analysis techniques as described by Braun and Clarke, which includes (1) familiarizing yourself with your data, (2) generating initial codes, (3) searching for themes, (4) reviewing themes, (5) defining and naming themes, and (6) producing the report [14]. Two coders, the same individuals that conducted interviews, independently read transcripts to establish familiarity. The coders read 4 interview transcripts to develop initial codes, identify new codes, merge existing codes, and finalize a codebook. An inductive approach was applied to identify relevant themes, and the study team members met weekly to discuss persistent themes and patterns within the data. The team used Dedoose to apply thematic codes to relevant transcript quotations and analyzed code queries to assess the significance of each theme. Disagreements were resolved by discussion at regular weekly meetings throughout the coding process. High agreement among coders was achieved regarding the significance of each key theme. Finally, step 6 was the preparation of this article.

Results

The final sample included 23 TGNC youth who had a variety of gender identities: 10 identified as transfeminine (43), 9 as

transmasculine (39%), and 4 as nonbinary or gender fluid (17%). Participant ages ranged from 13 to 19 years, with an average age of 16.9 years. The majority of youth identified as white (82%) and were enrolled in high school (82%). [Table 1](#) provides full participant characteristics.

We identified 4 key themes related to how participants' perceptions of the news coverage about GSM people influenced aspects of their daily lives and future planning: (1) news coverage of current political climate affects gender transition; (2) negative news coverage of GSM people contributes to concerns about mental well-being and safety; (3) geographical location affects perception of news; and (4) positive news coverage of TGNC people increases visibility and hope. We describe each theme in the paragraphs that follow and provide illustrative quotations from participant interviews in [Table 2](#). For each theme and subtheme, the number of participants that discussed that topic is included in parentheses.

News coverage of current political climate affects gender transition

Some participants (5) described the current political climate as hostile to TGNC people and directly affecting their plans for social and gender-affirming transition. These participants discussed accelerating the initiation and pace of their gender-affirming transition because of increased concerns that the federal government would eliminate or block access to gender-affirming care, including hormones and surgery ([Table 2](#); Quotes 1 and 2).

Table 1
Participants demographics

Characteristic	TGNC youth (n = 23), mean or N (%)
Age	16.9 (range: 13–19)
Gender identity	
Transmasculine	9 (39.1)
Transfeminine	10 (43.5)
Nonbinary	4 (17.4)
Sex assigned at birth	
Female	11 (47.8)
Male	12 (52.2)
On hormones ^a >6 months	
Yes	11 (47.8)
No	12 (52.2)
Race	
Asian	2 (8.7)
Native American/American Indian	2 (8.7)
White or Caucasian	19 (82.6)
In school	
Yes	19 (82.6)
No	4 (17.4)
Type of school	
Public	10 (43.5)
Online	2 (8.7)
Charter	1 (4.3)
Private	1 (4.3)
College or university	5 (21.7)
Parental financial support	
Yes	21 (91.3)
No	1 (4.3)
Not answered	1 (4.3)

TGNC = transgender and gender nonconforming.
^a Hormones include testosterone and estrogen.

Negative news coverage of GSM people contributes to concerns about mental well-being and safety

Many participants (17) described negative news media coverage about GSM people and how such coverage adversely affects their mental well-being. When asked about their responses to news media coverage of GSM people, participants (6) of all gender identities represented in this study specifically commented on the Trump Administration's efforts to deny TGNC people the ability to serve in the U.S. Military and its negative emotional impact ([Table 2](#); Quote 3). Some participants (8) described experiencing depression, anxiety, and/or fear for their safety in response to specific GSM news, such as stories of violence against TGNC people in bathrooms and the 2016 Pulse Nightclub shooting in Orlando, FL ([Table 2](#); Quotes 4–6). Some participants (5) discussed frustration associated with narrow or inaccurate portrayals of TGNC people in the news. This included either overreporting negative or positive news or covering certain TGNC public figures, such as Caitlyn Jenner, as representative of the entire TGNC community ([Table 2](#); Quotes 7–9). Two participants were also concerned that stigmatizing news media coverage might validate local community members' negative opinions regarding GSM people and incite further acts of hatred ([Table 2](#); Quote 10).

Geographical location affects perception of news

A few participants' (5) perceptions of the news media coverage about TGNC people were described as being influenced by their geographical location. Despite the content, negative news was described as having a more personal impact on participants if the news story or event occurred in the same geographical location in which the participant lived. For example, one participant attending school in New Orleans discussed their safety and mental well-being concerns after learning about the deaths of 2 transfeminine people of color in New Orleans ([Table 2](#); Quote 11). Other participants (4) discussed being less concerned with news stories of violence or stigma against TGNC people because they live in areas of Washington State with laws that protect TGNC people ([Table 2](#); Quote 12).

Positive news coverage of TGNC people increases visibility and personal hope

Many participants (15) expressed feelings of happiness, increased hope, and/or visibility after exposure to positive news reports of TGNC people. A few transfeminine and transmasculine participants (4) specifically described public figures, such as Laverne Cox, an actress; Danica Roem, a politician; and a transmasculine Olympian, as evidence of progress and success among the TGNC community ([Table 2](#); Quotes 13 and 14). In contrast, none of the nonbinary/gender fluid participants discussed positive role models in news media during their interviews. Although some participants (4) expressed feelings of isolation in their personal lives, seeing positive news stories inspired feelings of pride and created a shared sense of community ([Table 2](#); Quotes 15 and 16). Two participants in our sample described the importance of resilience and maintaining a sense of optimism and steadfastness in their gender identity in the midst of negative news media coverage on TGNC or GSM people. One participant described feeling empowered and compelled to create community-level change to overcome persistent negative news

Table 2
Illustrative quotations from TGNC youth regarding news media

Themes/context	Quote (#)	TGNC youth characteristics
1. News coverage of current political climate affects gender transition	(#1) When Trump came into office...people were talking about how the rules regarding medically transitioning might become stricter... I was planning on doing it all as soon as I turned 18, but it did kind of put the sense of urgency into me, and I did try and get my mom to let me start doing things earlier, which she said no. (#2) It has made me kind of want to tick up the process and make it move a little bit faster. My original plan, a couple of years ago, was to wait until I was in my early 20seconds to get top surgery, but now I'm scared that that might not be a possibility, so I'm really focusing on trying to get that as soon as I can.	- Participant #7, aged 18 years, transmasculine - Participant #23, aged 18 years, transmasculine
2. Negative news coverage of GSM people contributes to concerns about mental well-being and safety Subtheme: Being unable to enlist into the military affects mental well-being	(#3) [Trump] denying service of trans people for serving the military.... I wanted to serve my country, but because of that one thing he said, it's like I kind of cannot now. So that's one thing I feel put me down....I do not agree with the whole mental disorder, gender dysphoria, but because of what he said, it made me really feel like I was a mental disorder. It made me super anxious about myself. It was like he was advertising trans people as a new species or something. Why cannot we serve? There's nothing wrong with us.	- Participant #13, aged 16 years transfeminine
Subtheme: Contributing to depression and/or anxiety and safety concerns	(#4) They make me feel pretty depressed. And so I try to stay away from it ...but it just makes me feel like, a lot of the times the country does not want us to exist and stuff, or it would be easier if we just stopped existing, I guess. (#5) It really puts me down because knowing that there's still people out there hunting down people who are LGBTQ + makes me feel very unsafe anywhere. Out in the streets, if I'm not in my gender box, I feel like I will be attacked because of the random attacks that are happening over the world. And then, also, having a president that has his own beliefs...about the LGBTQ + really does not reinforce that feeling. It makes me feel even more worried about where I go. (#6) I thought [news story on bathroom bill] would keep me from ever being able to go into a bathroom again out in public.	- Participant #6, aged 14 years, transmasculine - Participant #13, aged 16 years, transfeminine - Participant #19, aged 18 years, transmasculine
Subtheme: Portraying transgender community narrowly or inaccurately	(#7) ...news puts on a lot of negative stuff more than positive stuff. And when they do put on the positive stuff you're like, "What is this? Why are you putting this on here [laughter]?" Well, that's because when they do put the positive stuff on there, it's celebrity news, right? (#8) Sometimes I think the media can...blow most stories of trans success out of proportion a little bit...Other people tend to be like, "Oh. Things are going so well for trans people nowadays." But even though there is a lot more trans visibility than there was in the past, that's still not very much, and that does not mean that there's not still a lot of hate and systemic oppressions against us. (#9) Everyone tries to make Caitlyn Jenner to be like the figurehead of the trans community when, in reality, she's a bit of an asshole. And so I feel like she, being who she is, kind of painted a little bit how people perceive the trans community. They'll be like— oh, well if Caitlyn Jenner is like this, and she's so outspoken about being trans, a lot of trans people must be like that.	- Participant #11, aged 14 years, nonbinary - Participant #15, aged 18 years, transfeminine - Participant #14, aged 18 years, transfeminine
Subtheme: Validating negative opinions of local community	(#10) I would say because of his [Trump's] beliefs, certain things he says out to the public, on live, in front of millions of people, it does not really impact me personally, but it will impact others. And then, because of that, they may feel encouraged to follow his thing which will spread more negativity about the LGBTQ + people which, in a way will, affect me in the long run.	- Participant #13, aged 16 years, transfeminine
3. Geographical location affects perception of news	(#11) Because I am currently going to school in New Orleans, and I remember...the first time that I visited, I think 2 transwomen of color had just been murdered. And I remember hearing that on the news...It definitely made me a lot more apprehensive about how people perceived me and just sort of gave me just a general anxiety, and I guess, especially, in New Orleans. (#12) [news on bathroom bill and suicide rates is] disheartening, but I mean, also glad to be in one of the few good states when it comes to that stuff. Like I'm pretty glad to still be in Washington and not...anywhere in the South. And I definitely appreciate that more when I look at the tide of news stories coming out of those states and how they're mostly negative.	- Participant #15, aged 18 years, transfeminine - Participant #18, aged 19 years, transfeminine
4. Positive news coverage of TGNC people increases visibility and hope Subtheme: Sense of progress and acknowledgement of transgender community	(#13) You know, sometimes there's good news. There's that— who won public office. Danica Roem, I think. [And how'd that make you feel?] Pretty excited actually. It's a good sign, you know? Progress starts small, but it eventually becomes a tidal wave...I hope to see more transgender people in office. (#14) ...when there was a transgender man who ran in the Olympics a few years ago. That did make me feel happy just knowing because he was allowed to run in the men's division and not in the women's division. And so seeing things like that makes me happy because it shows that change is happening and that in more areas people will recognize me as a man and not as a woman.	- Participant #18, aged 19 years, transfeminine - Participant #7, aged 18 years, transmasculine

Table 2
Continued

Themes/context	Quote (#)	TGNC youth characteristics
Subtheme: Shared community	(#15) ...when it's something good, it makes me feel really glad that I'm not the only one in the world that's transgender or LGBTQ+, and it gives me that nice feeling of having someone spiritually...Just knowing that I'm never alone. There are others in the world that are dealing with I'm going through or even worse. So it's just a good feeling to have to knowing that I'm never alone. (#16) ...a transgender person...committed suicide, but their family would not claim the body. And that was like, "Oh, that's disgusting. It's still your person. You do not just do that." But then the community came together to pay for a casket and a funeral and a service for this person and...I'm really glad that they had that community for them. And I'm hoping that...if something were to happen around where I live that that would be the response. (#17) If anything, it makes me more determined to make change in this world. I do not like how things are, and I do not think I ever will, so I have to make change, because nobody else will...The fact that there's some change towards the good does give me hope that I can actually do something about the situation that we have in this world. That there is capacity for change. That things will not stay the same. All you got to do is push it in the right direction. (#18) [Has your awareness of what's in the news impacted your gender transition plan?/No. They have not. I'm just going to keep on transitioning. I'm going to keep on doing it. I do not really care what people say about it...it's who I am inside. They cannot stop it.	- Participant #13, aged 16 years, transfeminine - Participant #9, aged 17 years, nonbinary - Participant #4, aged 17 years, transfeminine - Participant #3, aged 15 years, transfeminine
Subtheme: Resilience despite negative news		

GSM = gender and sexual minority; TGNC = transgender and gender nonconforming.

(Table 2; Quote 17). Another participant's resilience is seen in their motivation to continue gender-affirming treatments despite news depicting harassment or difficulties for GSM people (Table 2; Quote 18).

Discussion

Given the dearth of available data on the impact of GSM news stories on TGNC youth, especially as such stories become more accessible via the internet and social media, more research is needed to better understand potential impacts on TGNC youth. To the authors' knowledge, this is one of the first qualitative investigations to document the experiences of TGNC youth regarding news media.

Key themes were identified relating to GSM news coverage, including the increased presence of TGNC people in these stories and the impact such news might have on the mental well-being of TGNC young people. In our sample, news media coverage on GSM people directly affected youth participants both negatively and positively. Coverage that participants felt depicted violence and stigmatization of GSM communities negatively affected mental well-being by increasing feelings of depression and/or anxiety, whereas positive stories about the perseverance and accomplishments of TGNC individuals and communities were perceived as providing hope and resilience. This study echoes a core finding from McInroy and Craig that adolescents' engagement with news and social media can influence their mental health in both positive and negative ways [9].

Adolescence and young adulthood are uniquely sensitive periods during which information can both positively and negatively influence developmental trajectory [8]. It is important to take this into consideration for groups that are uniquely vulnerable to stigma, such as TGNC youth, as these groups may experience more significant impacts on mental well-being from exposure to media. The Youth Resilience Framework posits that both risk factors and protective resources are consistently present throughout a person's life, but the interaction of these vulnerable and protective poles have the ability to form resilience [15]. Viewed through the lens of the Youth Resilience Framework, our findings suggest that coverage of positive news stories and embracing the importance of shared community among TGNC people may counterbalance negative portrayals and act as protective resources that can promote resilience and improved mental well-being in TGNC youth.

We also found both differences and commonalities in how TGNC youth across the gender spectrum digest, process, and make meaning of news stories about the TGNC and broader GSM communities. With respect to differences, although there were no gender identity-specific prompts in the semistructured interview guide, none of the nonbinary participants in our study described a positive public figure, which is consistent with limited research on and visibility of nonbinary people [16]. In terms of commonalities, we found that transmasculine, transfeminine, and nonbinary participants all discussed the military ban of TGNC people, other changes in policies affecting TGNC people under the current administration, and the negative impacts of these political news stories on their mental well-being.

Although findings from this study shed light on a previously underreported topic impacting a vulnerable population, there are some limitations. First, the authors who conducted the interviews also coded the interview transcripts, which may have compromised objectivity. Second, the main limitation of this

study is the homogenous sample. The study sample was restricted to TGNC youth receiving gender-affirming care in Seattle, WA. Because of local and state policies and the general political climate in Seattle and because participants were receiving gender-affirming clinical care, our sample was likely biased toward youth supported in their gender identity from their families, peers, and community, compared with other TGNC youth in the country. This likely also affected how they experienced local and national news stories, as evidenced by the fourth key theme of this study, geographical location affects perception of news. Furthermore, data were drawn from a small, mostly white (83%) and binary gender, meaning transmasculine or transfeminine (83%), identified sample, thus limiting our ability to more fully understand how TGNC youth across gender identities, race, and ethnicities experience news media. Specifically, our sample did not include any black or Hispanic participants, which is notable because multiple studies have found unique risk factors associated with race among TGNC people [17–19]. Future studies on this topic should endeavor to include a broader sample of youth in terms of gender identity, geography, race, ethnicity, and parental/social support.

Findings from this study provide important insights into a topic that has not been previously explored in the literature relating to the health of TGNC youth. We sought to better understand how this vulnerable population experiences news coverage of GSM people and explored the potential influences on mental well-being. TGNC youth are at risk of negative mental health outcomes associated with exposure to negative news stories on GSM people. This is particularly significant because rates of attempted suicide have been reported as high as 50.8% among some TGNC youth [20]. This study emphasizes the importance of developing strategies to highlight news stories of positive TGNC representation and a shared sense of community to promote resilience in the face of negative local and national news stories. With increased stories of violence and TGNC-specific governmental policies on news outlets, news reporting organizations and lawmakers should specifically consider consulting with TGNC youth and advocacy organizations to better understand the potential impact of policies and their news coverage. In addition, as seen in our study, TGNC youth are experiencing pressure to medically transition at a faster pace because of fears associated with policy changes under the current administration. This highlights the importance of medical providers not only being up-to-date with local and national policies affecting TGNC people, but also supporting TGNC youth by helping them understand their ability to obtain gender-affirming care. When news stories are circulated, particularly ones that are negative toward GSM people and gain significant media attention, it is important that medical providers or any persons working closely with TGNC youth recognize the news' potential impact on TGNC youth and provide them with additional support such as mental health resources.

Funding Sources

This study was supported by Seattle Children's Center for Diversity and Health Equity Grants program and Seattle Children's Clinical and Translational Research Faculty Research Support Fund program.

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