

The Representation of Gender Variance in Media

Matthew Stevens

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Contents	page no
Introduction.....	3
Chapter 1.....	5
Chapter 2.....	9
Chapter 3.....	13
Conclusion.....	17
Bibliography.....	18

Introduction

Representation in mainstream media is a complex issue in today's society. The aim of this dissertation is to evaluate the representation of a minority group of individuals who identify under the trans-gender umbrella. This refers to individuals who identify with an alternate gender identity than the one assigned to them at birth, based on physical anatomy. This dissertation will research into existing representations of this community in media products, as well as current understanding of these individuals in mainstream society.

Chapter One will target current representations of this group and evaluate what effect this is having on the community in addition to society as a whole and its understanding of this subject. This chapter will also research discussions as to the definition of the health condition gender dysphoria, as this is the diagnostic of people who identify on the trans spectrum and its categorisation in the standards of care. In addition, this chapter will provide points as to why the current representation of this minority group needs to be improved. Research undertaken in this chapter will include the World Health Organisation (WHO) and opinions of Dr. Say as well as findings from GLAAD's evaluation of representation of the trans community in current media.

Chapter Two will discuss feminist views of the trans identifying community and evaluate how these views are causing damage and miscommunication on the subject of this community. This chapter will also assess damaging statements made by individuals in mainstream media and how this has added to the negative image of trans people. In addition, this chapter will also discuss how the misinterpretation and incorrect categorisation of gender dysphoria has potentially fuelled the negative representation of the community. Individuals researched for this chapter include, Germaine Greer and Piers Morgan as well as theories from Janice Raymond.

Chapter Three will discuss and evaluate considerations for the representation of the trans community in an upcoming project, entitled 'We Are Human'. It will do this by assessing the potential benefits and complications this project will have on the representation of trans identifying individuals. This chapter will also discuss how this project is going to represent me as a filmmaker. Individuals researched in this chapter will include

the works of Jake Graf and Lewis Hancox in addition to existing campaigns like My Genderation.

Chapter One

This chapter will focus on, and discuss, arguments that confirm gender variance as a sexual identity issue, and will discuss how transgender and other gender variant people are currently being represented in media. This chapter will refer to the recent change in the World Health Organisation's (WHO) definition of gender dysphoria and opinions expressed by Dr. Lale Say. This chapter will also discuss representation of trans and gender variance in characters in film and television products, question the effect this has on the trans community and the mainstream audience, and provide reasoning as to why this representation needs to be improved.

For several years, trans identifying and gender variant individuals have been considered as having a mental health issue due to the feeling that the sex assigned to them at birth is not compatible with their view of their identity. This has been primarily due to the representation of them in the media by mainstream outlets and reinforced by the medical community with it being diagnosed under mental health diagnostics. However, in 2018 it was announced by the World Health Organisation that they "no longer classify transgender people as mentally ill" and that it was being "moved out of the mental disorders chapter and into the organization's sexual health chapter" (Pickman and Griggs, 2018).

"It was taken out from the mental health disorders because we had a better understanding that this wasn't actually a mental health condition and leaving it there was causing stigma," said Dr. Lale Say, coordinator of WHO's Adolescents and at-Risk Populations team. "So in order to reduce the stigma while also ensuring access to necessary health interventions, this was placed in a different chapter" (Pickman and Griggs, 2018).

In the above statement, Dr Lale Say agrees that there was a misunderstanding on the condition of gender dysphoria (now referred to as gender incongruence), and that leaving this condition in a chapter with other mental health issues was a cause for its stigma and further lack of understanding in mainstream society.

"By changing the class of this condition, the WHO is effectively saying to everyone and to the world that this is not a mental disorder and we support people who are transgender," [Dr. Jennifer] Conti said. "It's a really meaningful step because it promotes inclusivity, it promotes acceptance." (Simon, 2018)

By this change the WHO are accepting their error on the diagnostic terms of gender dysphoria and re-categorising the condition, not only into a chapter that could provide less

stigma and discrimination from health professionals and the public alike, but also providing a potentially easier pathway to medical treatment, should an individual require it.

This amendment has also prompted other health boards to provide the same change, such as “the American Medical Association and American Psychiatric Association, say being transgender is not a mental disorder” (Lopez, 2018). They go on to state that:

Gender dysphoria — a state of emotional distress caused by how someone’s body or the gender they were assigned at birth conflicts with their gender identity — is a widely recognized medical condition. If untreated, it can lead to severe mental health issues, including debilitating depression, anxiety, and suicidal ideation (Lopez, 2018).

The key in this statement is that the condition of gender dysphoria isn’t the cause of mental health issues in itself, it is if the condition is left untreated with some type of transition. Therefore, this statement suggests that “being trans isn’t the medical condition; living as trans is in fact the treatment to the medical condition”. This is something that the trans community have been striving to tell medical professionals for years, and in some cases, has delayed their medical transition because doctors are keen to correct the mental health issues first before the gender identity issues, when in reality, it should be reversed.

“People who defy the gender binary have been around for millennia, but the popular media is only beginning to acknowledge them” (Schreiber, 2016). In terms of the current representation of trans identifying and gender variant people in mainstream media, the portrayals are still poor and inaccurate. It is no secret to the trans community that they “often get misrepresented in the media [.....] current transgender representation in the media has the power to reinforce negative stereotypes” (Jobe, 2013, p. ii) and that these “representations generally distance the transgender characters from the audience as objects of ridicule, fear, and sympathy.” (Miller, 2012, p. iii). In a publication by GLAAD, a non-government media monitoring organisation based in the United States, they “catalogued 102 episodes and non-recurring storylines of scripted television that contained transgender characters, and found that 54% of those were categorized as containing negative representations at the time of their airing.” (GLAAD, n.d.). They also found:

“Transgender characters were cast in a "victim" role at least 40% of the time, cast as killers or villains in at least 21% of the catalogued episodes and storylines. The most common profession transgender characters were depicted as having was that of sex workers, which a fifth of all characters were depicted as (20%). Anti-transgender slurs, language and dialogue was [also] present in at least 61% of the catalogued episodes and storylines” (GLAAD, n.d.).

As a representation, this provides a negative view on trans individuals and their experiences and in turn, portrays them as weak due to their victim stance, while also demonising them by casting them as villains or killers in some storylines. It also depicts them as highly sexualised beings in some storylines and over half of the products researched, there was evidence of some degrading language.

With degrading and inaccurate representations such as these, it is not surprising that this is having a negative effect on the community. There has been research conducted to determine how these portrayals encourage a negative way of thinking among trans individuals, and “it [research] found that negative representations can worsen the dysphoria of trans people causing feelings of shame, making one respondent feel like [they] will never be accepted in society as [their] true self” (Fisher, 2018). This fosters and heightens the already negative stereotypes of trans people and therefore discourages individuals from coming out to friends, family and potentially coming forward to access medical treatments over fear of being discriminated against or refused. This “negative portrayal of trans people in the media is particularly worrying because so many of our children and young people who happen to be transgender [attempt] suicide— nearly half (45 per cent)” (Fisher, 2018). This clearly shows that, due to a knock-on effect of lack of education because of misrepresentations and negative portrayals of trans people in media, this is having a negative effect on the entirety of the transgender community.

Primarily, it is the view of the trans and gender non-conforming community that depictions of gender variant characters have only been included in writing and shown in programmes and films as an act of attempting to appear inclusive and portray diversity. GLAAD President Herndon Graddick has stated that: "Media has a history of telling the world a story that transgender people are always victims or villains, instead of true depictions that show the transgender community as citizens worthy of equality and respect” (GLAAD, n.d.) meaning that this is not a new occurrence. Representations of trans people in negative views have been happening for potentially decades, with a very small number of

products providing a somewhat accurate or appropriate representation of the community, leading to a stigma of the community in mainstream society. Jobe (2013) suggests that “by and large, the media is unethical in its portrayal of transgender characters. Trans people are used to sensationalize stories and to pull in higher ratings so producers can make more money” (p. 30) which furthers the point of the marginalised community of trans and other gender variant people as being used purely for financial gain. This point is echoed by doctorate student J. Miller, when they say that “in the end, transgender representations work to support heteronormativity by constructing the transgender characters in specific ways to prevent audience members from developing deeper connections with them” (Miller, 2012, p. iv).

This is why the representation of the trans and gender non-conforming community needs to change; there needs to be a shift in accepting characters of their identities and for there to be accepting language in a varying range of genres as well as encouraging protagonist characters for the community to empathise. This may then encourage an effect on the acceptance of the trans community in larger society and inspire further changes in trans rights such as healthcare, public facilities and general societal acceptance that humanises the community.

Chapter Two

This chapter will focus around a counter argument to the previous discussion in Chapter One, in that transgender identity continues to be labelled as a mental health issue, and the idea of inclusion into the binary when a person has transitioned, is unrealistic. Public figures featured in this chapter include the comments of Germaine Greer in revoking statements from a previous occasion, opinions of Piers Morgan on a daytime talk show where he voiced concerns over non-binary individuals, and other feminist views on the transgender experience, such as opinions from Janice Raymond.

Until 2013, Gender Identity Disorder had been a diagnostic category in both the American Psychiatric Association's DSM-IV-TR (Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders) and the World Health Organization's ICD-10 (International Classification of Diseases and Related Health Problems).[....] trans experiences continue to be captured by diagnostic categories in manuals which provide criteria for mental disorders. (Bettcher, 2014)

From the statement made above, it is clear that, until as recently as 5 years ago, to be gender variant in any way, meant that a person is regarded as mentally ill in order to receive some kind of treatment. This also seems to be the view of an extremist group of feminists, who often discriminate and ostracise transitioning women (M-T-F) from spaces that they should have access to, like bathroom facilities and services such as Womens' Aid and women-only homeless shelters. These feminists insist that they are not transphobic or bigoted in anyway and are only concerned on behalf of other female bodied individuals, including women who require spaces to be female-only, based on religion and their children. These statements are horrific and degrading to trans identifying women, due to the pure lack of acceptance of their gender identity, and often are explanations as to why an individual has a reluctance to come out as trans and begin the process of transitioning.

Public figures have also chimed in on these statements. Germaine Greer, a noted writer and key personality in the second- wave feminist movement has declared on previous occasions her beliefs on trans identifying women and has stated: "I'm not saying that people should not be allowed to go through that procedure, what I'm saying is it doesn't make them a woman" (McMahon, 2015), implying that, in her mind "trans women were not "real" women" (Wahlquist, 2016). These types of statements are exclusionary of the trans experience and paint individuals who have endured years of hardship to get to a state where

they feel comfortable in their own skin, which ultimately is the primary goal for anyone in society, as outsiders and not even worthy of being classed as a human being on some occasions.

One such occasion where this occurred was on a daytime news show, Good Morning Britain on 17th May 2018, where Piers Morgan, a noted journalist and his co-host Susanna Reid, were interviewing Fox & Owl Fisher, who are noted for their activism for the transgender community and both identify as non-binary, meaning that they don't identify themselves as male or female, in terms of their gender identity. In this video clip (Good Morning Britain, 2018), Morgan and Reid air concerns over the amount of non-binary individuals and raise scenarios, such as criminals who may define as non-binary and their placement in gendered prisons if they are convicted. Morgan decides to question Owl (who utilises 'they' pronouns) and asks them if they were convicted, would they feel "happy" if assigned to a female prison based on their gender marker and passport to which they reply: "more than a male prison". Morgan then retorts that: "so actually, you don't mind being gender.....fine, if it's convenient". Not only is this displaying a close-minded view of this issue but also belittles both Fox and Owl as it appears that in Morgan's mind, they're only contributing to this debate to cause a stir and he doesn't consider their identities as valid. He goes on to address that "it's all based on confusion" and that he's "just trying to get [his] head around it" and is "happy to be persuaded by it if it makes logical sense" which just furthers his view that the identities of Fox & Owl don't make any difference to his opinions that are already in place, being that gender non-conforming people are not valid and are almost second-class citizens, judging by the tone of voice that he is using. At the conclusion of the interview, Morgan expresses "it's a real thing, it's a real thing, it's happening now all over Britain," which is a clear attempt at instilling fear in the public watching this interview, as this issue in recent years has gained notoriety and the public are often scared of situations and issues they don't quite understand. Fox does confront him on this point quickly, in a calm and non-threatening manner, and asks him: "please stop fearmongering" which is what Morgan does throughout this interview.

In recent years, an emerging group of feminists have primarily led to the negative connotations of trans identifying people. The common term for this group is Trans-Exclusionary Radical Feminists or TERF's. This group of people often fuel the negativity

towards trans people and particularly trans women as, like Germaine Greer, they believe that they are not 'real' women. They often believe that an individual cannot simply 'choose' what gender they are; whatever the sex assigned at birth dictated by physical and medical characteristics, that is the gender that they belong to, no matter how much they try and change it with medical intervention. This point is dictated in Janice Raymond's *The Transsexual Empire* in which she states: "Membership in the category *woman* is determined by chromosomes and the individual's history of experience being assigned to a sex role [gender]. In light of this, Raymond maintains that MTF transsexuals are really men and FTM transsexuals are really women" (Bettcher, 2014). This view excludes trans identifying people from being accepted in a mainstream society, purely on the bases of their birth characteristics, which can lead to a question of excluding others based on other birth 'defects,' such as facial deformities and hereditary diseases. However, this point is never raised in the defence of trans identifying individuals, most likely due to a lack of understanding.

Other feminists have reinforced that point that they believe it's inappropriate that people are 'choosing' their gender identity by stating that: "whether you are legally male or female is purely a matter of choice. It would be nothing to do with your biology or your socialisation" (Green, 2018). This point claims that it doesn't matter about the biology of the person or how a person was socialised in terms of gender roles, it is now purely a 'choice' to define the self as male, female or something outside the binary. As a result, this dehumanises the trans experience entirely and reduces it to a simply choice, when in reality, it isn't a case of waking and realising the whole time they identify as a gender other than the one assigned at birth, it has often come from years of self-loathing and fear of rejection from society due to misconceptions.

Negative views from feminists have, on occasion, fuelled protests and sparked accusations on the nature of the individuals reasoning for transitioning, often referring to individuals who transition from male to female, as it is believed that these individuals are transitioning to gain access into women-only spaces in order to commit sexual assault. However, "the thesis that MTF transsexuals are rapists because they appropriate women's bodies to themselves or through deception is difficult to assess since no arguments seem to have been given in its defence" (Bettcher, 2014). The reasoning for this lack of defence is

primarily due to fear that if the community speaks out, it will only fuel this accusation further and put trans identifying women in a position where they are unable to access any female-only facility, whether they have completed full gender reassignment or not. Statements like these where terminology, such as 'deception' is used, only fuels fear in the public's mind relating to trans identifying people. They reinforce that identifying as trans, or encountering a trans person, means that individuals are 'deceiving' or have been 'deceived' in some way into believing their gender identity, which differs from the sex assigned at birth and, therefore puts the trans person in danger, potentially.

"To a large extent, (non-trans) feminist discussion of trans issues seems to have circulated around the perceived problematic status of trans people (and, in particular, transsexuals). Moreover, there has generally been an over-emphasis on MTFs in particular." (Bettcher, 2014)

The above statement suggests that most feminist discussion on trans issues stems from the 'idea' of 'potential' issues that could happen with trans people, not what is actually happening, which is sparking fear of trans identifying people when in reality, they are just people aiming to live like anyone else. In addition, feminists are often referring to people who transition from male to female and there is not as much discussion on people transitioning from female to male, which leads to a question of 'why?'

Chapter 3

This chapter will discuss the representation of trans identifying people in a proposed project entitled 'We Are Human', currently a working title. Furthermore, this chapter will look at the project and evaluate the potential benefits and complications in terms of its representation of people with trans experience. It will also look at how these films are likely to represent myself as a filmmaker.

'We Are Human' aims to be a series of short documentaries, featuring people with transgender experience in Wales and intends to focus on a variety of issues specific to the Welsh pathway of transitioning in recent years. These documentaries will attempt to portray what society deems as the extra-ordinary of their lives as the individuals 'ordinary'. These documentaries are planned to be in the poetic mode of documentary rather than the typical expository style, featuring interviews with the intent of presenting information in an alternative and artistic way.

With this project, there have been a number of considerations with the representation of trans people in Wales, both positive and negative. These documentaries intend to provide a variety of voices to be heard from the community, and this can be achieved with the format of the entire campaign, due to the concept of making at least 7 shorts as opposed to one full length film. This will hopefully allow for a broad range of identities to be featured from either end of the gender binary, as well as in the spectrum of non-binary individuals. This aims to provide a range of representation from the community in Wales and ensuring that an aspect of diversity is achieved to provide inclusion. Also, as these films are being made regarding the community in Wales, it will provide a representation of the community on a regional level and allows an audience to view individuals 'closer to home,' as opposed to figures in the spotlight, such as Caitlyn Jenner and Laverne Cox in America, whose pathway for medical treatment and societal acceptance is different than in the UK.

Nevertheless, as the format of these films aims to be a series of 7 short documentaries, it is still only broadcasting a small number of voices within the wider community and therefore, has the potential to show certain points of view that differ from one trans identifying person to another, such as varying ranges and types of dysphoria and

alternative views on medical treatments. This could provide controversy with the project for both a mainstream audience and an audience of trans perspective, as it could be misleading a mainstream audience into thinking that the representation of the issue in the documentary in question is the same for every trans person, which it may not be, and for an audience with trans perspective, it could come across as providing a narrow view of the issue being discussed. In addition, as this campaign intends to feature the specifics of the Welsh experience, it could have a negative impact on the projects interest from an audience as well as its potential distribution channels. This can likely be due to the lack of interest of a subject that is central to one specific region of the UK in other parts of the UK for example, a Welsh programme broadcast in Ireland. This isn't to suggest that this is guaranteed to happen to this product however, it has to be considered.

This campaign proposes to display information in an alternative way to the standard expository documentary style, which features interview setups with cutaway segments/re-enactments of events. It intends to do this through poetic visuals and a voice over track of the person involved, talking about their experience with the subject matter the film is discussing. The intend with delivering this campaign in this way is to provide a different way of looking at the subject of transgender individuals and intends to invoke an emotive connection between the audience and the person in the film. With this intention in mind, this campaign can add to existing works done by other filmmakers within the transgender community in the UK such as Jake Graf and the combined works of Lewis Hancox and Fox and Owl Fisher, with their ongoing project, My Genderation. These creators have produced films in the past that provide an alternative view on transgender issues in the UK, primarily portraying the thoughts and views of the trans identifying individuals and their experiences on a variety of topics, from the exploration of gender and non-binary identities and discrimination faced in recent times. These creators however, have yet to create an adequate number of films specifically related to the Welsh experience of transitioning due to their work taking them across the country and internationally which leaves a lack of representation of the Welsh pathway of transitioning, which differs from the rest of the UK.

Presenting this campaign in the poetic style does have its disadvantages however, as it could be viewed as staged or unrealistic in its representation because the visuals for this type of documentary are typically artistically influenced and often feature some kind of

symbolism for the topic or discussion. This could devalue the project as the intent is to portray the person in the most authentic light and portray their 'ordinary' to others and some audience members may argue that adopting poetic style visuals isn't providing an authenticity to the film, but rather making it an artistic statement at the expense of a potentially sensitive subject. Also, because similar pieces have been produced on a larger scale by other filmmakers, it could be seen as non-essential to have this campaign produced because it could be argued that it has been done before and this project therefore lacks originality.

Regarding representation in this film and the campaign in its entirety, the intent is to portray the individual as a human being primarily, no different to any other and that their experiences are just part of their life journey. It intends to do this by showing visuals of the person featured in their everyday life, going about everyday tasks such as making coffee, brushing their teeth, making food, going to work and taking part in a hobby to name a few scenarios, while also showing some of the extra-ordinary of their lives such as caring for scars, administering hormone treatment and in some cases just leaving the house as that can be a challenge for some individuals. The primary intention for this decision with the visuals is to portray the person as more than just their trans identity. This may need to be reviewed across the entire project as the message may not be entirely clear due to the visuals saying the person is more than their trans identity however, the voice over track is specifically exploring issues relating to their identity, which almost defeats the object of the visuals.

With the poetic style of documentary, its main objective is to encourage an audience to empathise with the subject of the film and see the issue/theme of the piece from an alternative point of reference. This can have its disadvantages in this campaign, especially if an audience is not entirely on board with trans issues from either previous experience or their view has been influenced from elsewhere. If this is the case, then this film could be regarded as 'forcing' an audience to empathise with the trans experience, which is not what this film intends.

In addition to this, by displaying some of the extra-ordinary of a trans identifying persons' life such as scar treatment and hormone administration, especially if that is in an injection form, it could be seen as potentially 'glamorizing' certain aspects of transitioning,

which is not what this project wants to do and if it is seen this way, it will devalue the piece entirely and reflect on myself as a filmmaker.

Moreover, representation in this film and the entire project will need to be inclusive of the spectrum of gender identities in order for the project to be effective as an activist piece, that being one of the intentions of this campaign. This puts pressure on the director, which is myself, to locate and portray not only a variety of identities within the community, but also diversity in ethnic background, age, sexuality and disability among others.

In terms of the representation of myself as a filmmaker, this film and the potential series of films that are intended for this project, displays a passion for activism with the trans community on a regional level due to lack of representation in mainstream documentary and films circling the community as well as showing this subject in a different way artistically, with the intent of providing more clarity to the subject. This project can also provide a sense of comfort to an audience that these films are being produced appropriately and are providing accurate representation due to a director being part of the community featured in these films. However, it can also suggest a sense of 'playing it safe' for myself as a director since these films are in a genre that is comfortable and about a topic that is very familiar. It also puts pressure on the project to get the representation entirely accurate because it has been produced by someone within the same community as the subject discussed.

Conclusion

In conclusion, it is clear that there are many influences on the representation of trans identifying individuals in mainstream media. However, up until most recently, the representation was often negative and therefore harming the trans community into fear of speaking out. This has also led to miscommunication about the very nature of being a person under the transgender umbrella and in some cases, delaying treatment due to lack of education.

Representation, as discovered in this dissertation, is repeatedly a reflection on the attitudes of the named community in society. With such negative views on the trans community already from groups such as feminists, this has an impact on the medias representation of the community. However, without these negative views, there would be no requirement for a healthy debate among society and therefore no development of learning to accept an alternative view on a subject.

This however, is in the process of changing. With positive representations of trans characters in recent productions such as Glee, things are moving in a forward direction. In addition, education on this particular subject can improve with the amendment of the WHO categorisation of gender incongruence as a sexual health condition as it proves a negative stereotype wrong and can encourage further discussion on the health of trans people.

For the upcoming project 'We Are Human', a number of considerations have been evaluated and proves that representation is a complex issue. It has come to attention that not everyone who will view this campaign will have the same reaction from it and there may even be some who disagree with the representation in this film and its successors. However, this should not discourage this project from being produced. If anything, it should encourage this film to be a contributor to the conversation.

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