

Not the Normal Trans Story: Negotiating Trans Narratives While Crowdfunding at the Margins

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This study reports findings from in-depth semistructured interviews with 20 transgender-identifying individuals to understand how they negotiate privacy while crowdfunding to finance top surgery. Participants expressed privacy concerns about the body becoming public and fears of being criticized or attacked. Crowdfunding also necessitated a discussion of the fact that participants had breasts, which was distressing to some. Despite all of this, most participants embraced the crowdfunding experience as an opportunity to share their stories and to reject what they viewed as the normal trans narrative as too narrow. Findings suggest an intensification of privacy calculus theory as it applies to individuals from marginalized communities: Perceived costs and benefits of online disclosure may be greater when publicizing an identity that is often subject to attack. In addition to privacy calculus theory, we use the identity shift framework and taxonomies of privacy to explore tensions between publicness, privacy, self-expression, and support.

Keywords: trans, crowdfunding, social media, privacy, privacy calculus, identity, identity shift, trans narrative

During a 2014 interview, TV news host Katie Couric asked trans model and activist Carmen Carrera, “Your private parts are different now, aren’t they?” Carrera dismissed the question, saying it was a private matter. Later in the show, trans actress Laverne Cox was also interviewed and corrected Couric, stating, “The preoccupation with transition and with surgery objectifies trans people” (Maciulis & Couric, 2014, TV interview). The conversation that ensued shed light both on the media’s obsession with private trans bodies and the frequent oversimplification of the trans narrative that assumes that trans individuals are always “trapped in the wrong body.” Trans rights activist and author Janet Mock (2012) eloquently criticized this narrative on Twitter: “‘Trapped in the wrong body’ is a convenient, lazy explanation but it fails to describe #trans people & our bodies every time.”

Although the body can be an essential part of the trans narrative, activists and scholars have pushed for the creation of trans identity that is fluid and specific to the individual (Stryker, 2006; Stryker,

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Currah, & Moore, 2008). Online platforms such as Twitter, YouTube, and Facebook have been essential tools for many trans individuals who, as part of a marginalized community,¹ want to be able to define their gender identities on their own terms (Haimson, Bowser, Melcer, & Churchill, 2015). How, then, do these complexities play out when using the Web for online fundraising, or *crowdfunding*, for gender-confirming surgeries? Online contexts that emphasize seeking tangible and social support, such as crowdfunding, often encourage or require users to share details of their personal stories (Gonzales, Kwon, Lynch, & Fritz, 2016). For trans participants, this may involve disclosing highly personal and often stigmatized information. The result highlights tensions between protecting privacy, creating and performing complex gender identities, and accessing both emotional and financial support online.

To explore this tension, we use data from 20 interviews with trans individuals² crowdfunding for top surgery.³ Our goal is to understand how the costs and benefits of online self-disclosure may be magnified for trans individuals and perhaps for other socially marginalized populations as well. We propose that these experiences reflect an intensification of *privacy calculus theory*: the decision to disclose personal information in exchange for online impression management and support (Gonzales et al., 2016; Krasnova, Spiekermann, Koroleva, & Hildebrand, 2010). In addition to privacy calculus theory, we also use the identity shift framework (Gonzales & Hancock, 2008) and taxonomies of privacy (DeCew, 1997) to help us understand how needs for publicness, privacy, self-expression, and support often conflict and resolve online. Our aim is to broaden existing privacy theory as it applies to a wider segment of the population, particularly the experiences of those people most susceptible to public and personal criticism and abuse. In doing so, we build theory in a way that addresses important and common, but often marginalized, human experiences, including the trans experience.

Privacy Calculus: Negotiating Informational and Expressive Privacy

Early computer-mediated communication research focused on the importance of anonymity on the Internet for maintaining privacy in an otherwise public space. Cooper (1998) suggests that the Internet has more affordances than traditional communication, including accessibility, affordability, and importantly, anonymity. Users could take advantage of the anonymity of the Internet to express their identities (Ben-Ze'ev, 2003); in fact, many still are drawn to the Internet specifically because it affords anonymity (Walther & Boyd, 2002). More germane to this article, research suggests that socially marginalized communities, particularly LGBT communities, may use the anonymity of the Internet in specific ways, seeking social support through anonymous online interactions (Fox & Warber, 2015; McKenna & Bargh, 1998). For example, anonymous online groups have formed around a range of topics, from married moms leaving their heterosexual relationships to people organizing LGBT activism, among

¹ For this article, a *marginalized community* is a group of individuals who are systematically isolated from political, economic, or social realms because of their identities.

² We use the term *trans* as an umbrella term to encompass all our participants. Although all our participants were fundraising for top surgery, they did not all identify as transmen. Therefore, we chose to respect their gender identities by using the nonspecific but encompassing term *trans*.

³ *Top surgery* is the removal of the breast tissue and the reconstruction of the chest typically performed for transmasculine individuals (Rachlin, Green, & Lombardi, 2008).

other things (Cooper, 2010; Cooper & Dzara, 2010; Shapiro, 2003). Trans communities, however, may be socially marginalized from both the mainstream heteronormative and the LGB homonormative world; trans individuals then are intentionally and systematically separated from both social spheres (Stryker, 2008b). Therefore, the option to remain unidentified on the Internet has often been key to enabling trans community building.

Types of Privacy

Crowdfunding often does not allow for these same affordances of anonymity and privacy. DeCew (1997) suggests that privacy is represented by three facets: accessibility privacy, informational privacy, and expressive privacy. Each of these facets is determined by the control a person has over various aspects of life. DeCew defines *accessibility privacy* as the ability to control one's physical space, *informational privacy* as the ability to control one's data, and *expressive privacy* as the ability to maintain levels of intimacy by choosing one's audience. Informational privacy and expressive privacy are both of interest to studies of online privacy. When fundraising for health reasons, crowdfunders must often give up some informational privacy, by revealing personal health information and information about the body, and expressive privacy, by disclosing to a wide circle of people to gain the most support (Gonzales et al., 2016).

How then, if at all, does that negotiation of privacy differ for trans-identifying individuals? It is possible that social marginalization may amplify both the benefits and costs of online self-expression and support seeking. That is, individuals in marginalized communities can use the Internet to broadcast their own stories, declare their marginalized identities, and, in the case of trans-identifying individuals, to visually display their transitioning identities and bodies (Burgess & Green, 2009; Siebler, 2012). This can empower often voiceless or marginalized communities that may not otherwise enjoy authentic media representation and can enable access to a broader support network (McInroy & Craig, 2015). Yet, at the same time, trans individuals often do not have control over their privacy, particularly their bodies; surveillance of the trans body is the norm in America, whether that be by the state, doctors, or the media (Fisher, 2016). Therefore, negotiating informational and expressive privacy may be a more complicated, intensified experience for trans individuals, both while crowdfunding and in real life.

Privacy Calculus

Research has shown that Internet users have many strategies for managing disclosures of private information; users may adjust privacy settings or limit what they disclose (Ellison, Vitak, Steinfield, Gray, & Lampe, 2011). Vitak and Ellison (2013) investigated Facebook users and found that they often demonstrated a nuanced negotiation of benefits and risks when deciding how to use the social networking site. One way to understand this negotiation of personal information in exchange for social and financial support can be understood through *privacy calculus theory*, which states that "individuals are willing to disclose personal information in exchange for some economic or social benefit" (Culnan & Armstrong, 1999, p. 106) and was first posited to understand how online consumers decide to share vital private information in exchange for goods or services. More recently, scholars have used privacy calculus theory to understand how social networking users decide to disclose personal information (Krasnova et al., 2010)

and how crowdfunders negotiate the tension between sharing highly personal information to raise money for health-care expenses (Gonzales et al., 2016). In short, research suggests that if a need is great enough and the network is trusted, people may be willing to disclose information to a wider network to gain support.

Within the trans community, however, informational privacy is often closely tied to body presentation, a much more salient, visible, and potentially stigmatized part of identity. Some trans individuals may be dealing with gender dysmorphia—a feeling that their bodies do not match their genders—which may be amplified when the discordance is announced online. At the same time, Siebler (2012) notes that trans bodies are “discussed, displayed, and regulated more than other stigmatized groups” (p. 83). Trans bodies are often dichotomized as masculine or feminine. Yet, as trans individuals transition to different gender identities, they may or may not want to or be able to *pass*—to appear to be their preferred gender—which is often determined by social or outside forces. Consequently, there is a constant, daily negotiation of privacy and identity in real life that differs for each trans individual. It is thus possible that trans individuals will use similar strategies to protect and negotiate privacy, specifically privacy regarding the body, while crowdfunding. At the same time, and perhaps because of these experiences, these same individuals may especially benefit from acts of support that come from both within and outside the community via crowdfunding. Therefore, we first ask:

RQ1: From the perspective of trans individuals, how is both informational and expressive privacy negotiated when crowdfunding?

Creating and Performing a Gender Narrative

Butler (2004) and Butler and Williams (2014) suggest that gender is performed by all individuals, regardless of gender identity, as it is created by repeated expressions of cultural norms. The term *transgender* refers to “people who move away from the gender they were assigned at birth, people who cross over (trans-) the boundaries constructed by their culture to define and contain that gender” (Stryker, 2008a, p. 1). Trans individuals, who may be crossing cultural norms of gender, are therefore likely to be acutely aware of their gender performance. Importantly, the term *trans* as a gender concept is not interpreted or defined in the same way by every person. Stryker (2008a) recommends that “we understand genders as potentially porous and permeable spatial territories (arguable [*sic*] numbering more than two), each capable of supporting rich and rapidly proliferating ecologies of embodied difference” (p. 12). Therefore, trans individuals, when creating their stories online, may have keen and underrepresented insights into how gender is performed.

Self-Presentation and Performance Online.

There is some evidence that the Internet and social media help to support LGBT identity formation and community visibility (Phillips, 2005). Seeking information online is an essential part of the coming-out process and may, in some cases, help LGBTQ individuals to communicate with their intimate families and to amplify their own voices and identities (Bond, Hefner, & Drogos, 2009; Craig & McInroy, 2014; Fox & Warber, 2015; Gray, 2009b; McKenna & Bargh, 1998). Past research suggests that self-

presented narrative, particularly online, may be essential to LGBTQ identity creation (Pullen & Cooper, 2010) and to trans identity performance (Haimson, Bowser et al., 2015). Phillips (2005) argued that marginalized LGBT groups may use online profiles and presentations to create or redefine new community identities, and Gray (2009b) suggests that the retelling and remediation of one's coming-out story is vital and often accomplished online. Because LGBT identities are often marginalized, having space online to create, present, and perform a self-narrative that is fluid, complex, and nonheteronormative may help individuals negotiate a contested identity.

Traditional Trans Narrative.

Even though the Internet offers new spaces for narrative construction, marginalized individuals still struggle to be represented with breadth and complexity. For example, in the trans community, trans men can be dismissed as butch lesbians, made invisible by reducing trans men to body parts, or conceptualized as only existing in reference to their female-bodiedness (Cromwell, 1999). Previous research has presented the traditional trans narrative as a process that usually starts with an individual knowing as a child that one is in the "wrong" body (Devor, 2004; Hiestand & Levitt, 2005; Levitt & Ippolito, 2014), but others have pointed out that trans individuals experience and explore fluid gender identity differently and in more nuanced ways (Budge et al., 2013; Riggle, Rostosky, McCants, & Pascale-Hague, 2011). There is still a considerable lack of information in media about transgender issues, leaving many trans youth feeling alone and uncertain about more nuanced trans narratives (McInroy & Craig, 2015). Indeed, the invisibility of trans issues also means that many trans individuals feel the burden of explaining their identities repeatedly (Austin, 2016), and trans stories of coming out and identity creation are often left out or marginalized online (Alexander, 2002; Pullen & Cooper 2010). Farnel's (2015) textual analysis suggests that trans crowdfunding sites are places where identity, the body, and the audience intersect in important and rich ways.

Crowdfunding for marginalized groups may create a platform for users to write and narrate their own personal stories and potentially receive positive feedback to reinforce complex and often fluid identities. However, to our knowledge, previous researchers have conducted textual analyses of trans crowdfunding sites but have not spoken directly to trans individuals about their experiences navigating identity presentation online. This study will thus explore how trans individuals present their gender identities online in their own words. To do this, we secondly ask:

RQ2: How do trans individuals create and perform complex and fluid gender narratives online?

Identity Shift Online

Finally, previous identity-shift research suggests that presenting an identity online, especially with affirming feedback through social media platforms, can lead to a stronger sense of identity (Gonzales & Hancock, 2008; Walther et al., 2011). Most of that research, however, has been experimental. Some recent qualitative work suggests that even when presenting negative identities—such as illness—fundraisers felt more vulnerable but also more open (Gonzales et al., 2016). Research with LGBTQ populations suggests that sexual minority groups seek out and gain social support and friendships online

(Gray, 2009a; McKenna, & Bargh, 1998; Ybarra, Mitchell, Palmer, & Reisner, 2015); however, it is unknown how trans individuals will feel after describing fundraising for top surgery and whether any evidence of identity shift or identity reinforcement will take place in this context. Thus, we pose a final question:

RQ3: How does presenting a marginalized identity online and receiving feedback shape trans individuals' identities?

Method

Participants

We used the site YouCaring.com to contact 49 trans men who were fundraising for top surgery. We contacted participants directly via e-mail through their crowdfunding websites, explaining that we were interested in understanding how people used crowdfunding and asking if they wanted to participate in a semistructured interview about their experiences in exchange for \$35. Of those contacted, 20 participants agreed to be interviewed. Researchers interviewed the 20 trans participants through Skype or on the telephone in semistructured interviews lasting 45 to 75 minutes. Then, 12 of the 20 participants also agreed to fill out an optional demographics survey (see Table 1). Of those surveyed, age ranged from 18 to 33; two participants were of Hispanic descent and 10 identified as White; six participants made less than \$25,000 a year, five made between \$25,000 and \$50,000, and one made more than \$100,000. Gender identity varied substantially by individual, with individuals identifying as transman, transguy, man, transmasculine, queer, transgendered, genderqueer but transmasculine, and genderqueer trans.

Table 1. Demographics of Participants.

Pseudonym	Gender Identity	Age	Race/Ethnicity	Education	Household Income
Liam	Transmasculine	30	White	Graduate	< \$25,000
Jayce	Male	32	White	High school	< \$25,000
Skyler	Transman	17	White	Less than high school	> \$100,000
Robert	Male	26	White	High school	\$25,000–50,000
Brody	Transmasculine	27	White/Hispanic	High school	< \$25,000
Tray	Queer	39	White	Graduate	\$25,000–50,000
Charlie	Queer	28	White	Bachelor's	< \$25,000
Christian	Transman	28	White	Bachelor's	< \$25,000
Aldon	Transmasculine	22	White	Bachelor's	< \$25,000
Cain	Transguy	26	White	Bachelor's	\$25,000–50,000
Dean	Transguy	23	White	High school	\$25,000–50,000
Sam	Male	33	White/Hispanic	Associate's	\$25,000–50,000

Analysis

The first author conducted all but one of the interviews; the second author conducted the remaining interview. Given the sensitive nature of these conversations, we began by explaining our interest in understanding more about the use of crowdfunding websites and then urged participants to voice any discomfort with questions or to stop the interview at any time. Additionally, all participants were given pseudonyms to protect their identities and personal information. During the interviewing process, a document of supplementary notes was built, and after the interview, key content was transcribed by the first author. These text files were iteratively reviewed, along with secondary or tertiary review of audio files as needed. After these supplementary files had been created, the first author used a grounded theory approach for an inductive open coding analysis, creating a matrix of themes to organize key points emerging from the data. Using the matrix of themes, the second author reviewed the supplementary files and transcriptions, and using a deductive method, confirmed, adjusted, or clarified the themes relevant to privacy and identity. As a result, we were able to identify core themes and any disconfirming evidence (Miles & Huberman, 1994; Strauss & Corbin, 1988; Yin, 1994). We have presented highlights from these findings below to illustrate reoccurring patterns in the experience of trans individuals crowdfunding for top surgery.

Results and Discussion

All of the participants created profile pages on YouCaring.com but used other social media sites to promote their YouCaring profiles and to raise additional funds. Almost all participants used Facebook, and many used Tumblr and YouTube, to promote their fundraisers. Additionally, most participants used social media before crowdfunding in ways directly related to how they experienced their own identity formation and managed their security. In many ways, the platforms of social media and social and financial support sites, such as YouCaring, are intricately tied together, making distinctions between the relationship to and consequences of using different platforms difficult. Therefore, instead of narrowly talking about the impact of crowdfunding, the findings sometimes broadly reflect the use of social media in identity formation and privacy negotiation.

Privacy Concerns About the Body and Its Negotiations

When asked specifically about privacy concerns (RQ1), many participants initially said they did not have privacy concerns. Most answered that they were "careful" and would not "do something stupid" such as put their social security numbers online, suggesting that the word "privacy" initially had a specific and narrow connotation. However, many participants also noted that they restricted other personal information or were sometimes uncomfortable sharing details of their lives, their gender expressions, and information about their bodies. This suggests that participants experienced a broader negotiation of privacy, even when they did not consciously use this term. Participants reported different levels of comfort disclosing gender and body information and different strategies for managing their expressive privacy, largely contingent on previous experiences. Findings are consistent with previous crowdfunding research (e.g., Gonzales et al., 2016) but suggest that the privacy calculus may be intensified for marginalized communities.

(Re)Negotiation of Privacy Calculus

The risks associated with loss of privacy, especially related to gender or body information, may be more salient and more threatening for a trans population, given its members' vulnerability to verbal or physical threats (Grossman & D'Augelli, 2007). At the same time, online privacy negotiation was not new for participants, but was rather an extension of ongoing offline privacy negotiation stemming from a history of negotiating marginalized gender expression. Most of our participants had experienced some sort of negativity on or offline associated with their gender or sexual identities before they fundraised, and this negativity often increased their fears of sacrificing informational and expressive privacy in a larger, online arena. As an example, Brody noted that his father disowned him when he discovered Brody's YouTube videos that discussed his transition, suggesting a very real danger of online self-presentations affecting in-person relationships. Other participants mentioned losing friends and family when coming out either as lesbians (which was a common transition for participants) or as trans, fostering well-founded fears of future alienation. As Robert noted, after being bullied and forced to switch schools at 13, he was "wary of what I share with people." For some participants, past negative experience increased the perceived cost of losing some of their informational and expressive privacy.

However, others who had more positive experiences or who had reached a point of greater comfort with their gender identities had a different relationship with privacy. Indeed, a striking finding when talking to trans participants was their variability in comfort and worry regarding online privacy that seemed to correlate with their experiences being open and out offline. Participants who were visibly out either as part of their identities or because they did not easily pass—meaning that others often incorrectly identified their genders—were often more willing to be open online. For example, Lee stated strongly:

I am personally very open. I will scream tranny from the hills. I know a lot of trans people are worried about people finding out. For me I just kind of changed it and I put up a status [of changed gender pronouns on Facebook].

Jayce, who is a drag performer, similarly explained:

I mean I'm half naked on stage every month. I'm just not super worried about it I guess. Putting myself out there with something I'm normally pretty private about felt like a worthwhile risk to take in order to connect with people so that I could get this surgery done; that has been this thing that has been hanging over my head for 15 years.

This quote eloquently suggests that, for some trans participants, crowdfunding is not any more uncomfortable or revealing than living life—a daily exercise in negotiating privacy and a marginalized public self-presentation.

For others, however, crowdfunding raised privacy concerns, especially for those who passed or were not out to their communities. Christian said:

It was hard to say, "This is my story and I need help." I definitely had a feeling of being really exposed. I've gone back and read over and been like, "Holy crap I said all that." It is definitely hard to get used to but I guess I adjusted.

Similarly, Brooks noted that he

tried very hard to have this be my own exploration and now suddenly I needed to swallow my pride and ask for help after years of working towards something. And then I needed to do it in a way that a lot of people are uncomfortable with. It's not like I got cancer, right? It's not like I'm a dad and I have two kids and I got cancer. I'm a young person getting a medical procedure that a lot of people don't agree with. And then I have a video on the Internet that will just be there forever.

These quotes exemplify how those who considered their gender expression a private issue tended to have more discomfort with crowdfunding. The technology not only heightens immediate publicness, but the permanence and shareability of social media create an audience over time—a fact that is not lost on those sensitive to privacy loss. In all, these findings suggest that individuals' experiences offline interact with marginalized identities to influence their privacy comfort levels with the crowdfunding experience. In many ways, crowdfunding was an extension and, to some degree, an amplification of a history of offline privacy negotiations.

The Body as Public

For trans crowdfunders who are raising money for top surgery, the body is particularly salient and relevant because their surgery is to remove a part of the body. In further response to RQ1, many participants felt that they had to sacrifice some degree of informational privacy about their bodies because they were specifically asking for money to alter their bodies. This may be particularly complicated because, as noted in the previous section, many transmasculine individuals spend a great deal of energy offline obscuring aspects of female gender identity. For example, Jayce explained:

I started my page with "Hey! I have boobs! Isn't that weird?" [Audio disturbance.] I never like publicly announce that in any way. My friends told me it was weird because they never thought of me as a person who does have boobs. I mean I had that strapped in good.

Liam explained that, for him,

There is this combination of a sense of embarrassment that (a) I can't afford this myself and (b) to be so public about this and the specifics of the surgery are a little awkward. It just feels like personal and weird to tell people you want to remove your boobs from your body. It doesn't need to be weird but it feels weird.

Being reminded of an unwanted body part made some participants dysphoric, meaning that they thought about how their bodies didn't match their gender identities, which made them anxious. Cain told us:

As soon as I started the fundraiser I got a lot more dysphoric. It made it a lot more real. It made my awareness of my body much more tangible. Just because it became a focus of conversation. It was something people were talking about when we were hanging out and people were posting it on Facebook and liking it and sharing it.

Crowdfunding for top surgery forced participants to acknowledge that certain dimensions of their anatomy did not correspond with their lived identities. This seemed to create a heightened cost associated with losing privacy when crowdfunding for this community, though the emotional consequences depended on participants' histories of negotiating privacy and gender identity offline. These findings reinforce the conclusion that the costs of the privacy calculus may be exaggerated for those with marginalized identities, but they also underscore the fact that those consequences vary by individual history, identity, and privacy preferences.

Limiting Access to Maintain Expressive Privacy

In a final analysis of RQ1, we found that crowdfunders used platform-specific privacy features to negotiate their privacy. This was especially helpful in constraining audiences and managing impressions, which is a defining feature of expressive privacy (DeCew, 1997). This is also consistent with previous research on negotiations of online privacy and support seeking (e.g., Ellison et al., 2011). For instance, Charlie took an entire day to go through all his Facebook connections and block approximately 600 people who were connected to his family so they would not see when he promoted his fundraiser on Facebook. Similarly, Tray asked people not to tag him if they shared his fundraiser on Facebook. Others chose to use Tumblr, a more anonymous site, to promote their fundraisers. Leo said,

It's kind of easier, I guess, to talk about things with anonymous people, which is why I post so much on Tumblr. Only my close, close friends have access to my Tumblr and then people I don't know and don't really care what they think of me.

Our findings suggest that, like others concerned with the scope of their online audiences (Ellison et al., 2011), privacy-concerned trans participants limit access to their content by managing privacy settings and switching between sites. Additionally, as Haimson, Brubaker, Dombrowski, and Hayes (2015) found, trans participants preferred to connect to either close friends or strangers rather than those with other intimate but potentially unsupportive ties, such as family or coworkers. Finally, we should note that whereas some hesitated to discuss sex and body transition in detail, a minority of people were eager to tell cisgender people, even those without close ties, about their bodies and their experiences. Again, this reinforces the notion that what is deemed off-limits varies greatly by person.

Creating and Sharing the Trans Narrative

Analysis of RQ2 revealed that many participants actively sought ways to tell their own stories about their bodies—complex and fluid narratives that were often still in flux. Most participants volunteered a rejection of the “trapped in the wrong body” narrative, consistent with previous work identifying the complexity of trans gender identity (Budge et al., 2013; Haimson, Bowser, et al., 2015; Riggle et al., 2011; Stryker, 2006). The fact that nearly all participants referenced this narrative without being asked—usually, though not universally, to reject it—speaks to the dominance of the simplification of trans identity in popular culture and the role that online presentations may thus serve in helping to complicate that narrative.

Not Trapped

Most of our trans participants mentioned the idea of a traditional trans narrative as an idea that being trans was a lifelong and often suppressed identity of being “trapped in the wrong body.” One participant, Dean, strongly identified with this narrative: “I’ve felt male since I was pretty much old enough to have any concept of self. I lived as a boy essentially.” However, most other participants did not feel this way. As Brooks explained:

My story is not the one you hear about on the news. The idea that you are born into the wrong body and trying to use medicine to fix it. Mine is more that I actually went to a woman’s college. I had the chance to be any kind of woman you wanted to be and I decided I did not want to be one anymore.

Many other participants described how they began to question their gender identity but went through stages of identifying as lesbian or queer for years before identifying as trans. Most also described how they felt their stories were not “normal” and felt that their stories may have been less accepted because of that. Charlie explained how he felt that there is a hierarchy in the trans world, with some trans stories being considered somehow superior in their trans identity:

Obviously there is a variety of experiences. There is not one trans experience. Or, I’ll speak for myself, but sometimes I feel like people don’t think I’m legitimate enough. It is this weird head thing. I’m sure people think that, but those people are dumb.

Charlie—who identifies as genderqueer and uses male pronouns but has kept his traditionally feminine birth name—claims his own unique trans story, despite the fact that he might feel criticized even within the LGBT community. Harper echoed Charlie’s feelings about a hierarchy in the trans world:

People are like, “You’re not trans enough. You should have had these thoughts when you were little.” And some of us don’t. Some of us figure it out a little later. That’s okay, too. People are, “Well, that’s not the definition,” and I’m like, “Well, then I’m not the definition. I’m a half-breed or whatever.”

Indeed, the majority of the participants felt that their trans narratives were not normal, and, as we will demonstrate, many used social media as a way to both explore other narratives and to contribute a more fluid trans narrative to public discourse.

Creating Gender

Like Butler (2004) and Butler and Williams (2014) suggest, gender is a performance, and many of our participants were highly aware of their unique gender performances. This sentiment was expressed in part by the wide variety of ways that trans participants articulated gender identity (e.g., transman, transguy, genderqueer but transmasculine, genderqueer trans). Indeed, participants often took a few sentences to fully describe their gender identities. Their responses were often fluid and occasionally changed during the course of the interview. Tray, who first identified as queer, later clarified, saying:

I identify as trans. I mean my body is in transition. I feel like that is an umbrella term. I don't identify as a trans male though. I use the word *trans*, or *gender nonconforming*, or *queer*. Like sometimes I'll use masculine pronouns but I won't use nouns. Like I won't say *male* or *man*.

Related, Christian explained:

I think I'm like constantly trying to like—there are a lot of things I don't have the right words for, there are a lot of things I spent a lot of my life not trying to articulate or read too much into, so like I feel like in the past two years, the experience of finally finding the right words. It was a big exercise for me to sit down and try to find the right words for it.

For some, crowdfunding was the first time they were prompted to tell their stories. Crafting their stories and choosing words was significant. Online narratives provided an outlet and an example. As Leo explained:

I think being able to compare my experience to other people's has let me formulate my identity. Because the whole genderqueer versus being trans thing was a big struggle for me. Because, I was like, I don't identify with either gender completely but I know that I want to appear male. I wouldn't have even known that was a thing people did otherwise.

Seeing other people's queer identity expression let Leo know there were nonbinary gender performances. This experience motivated him to start his own YouTube channel and eventually to crowdfund, which allowed him to both fundraise and share a step in his transition. Presenting themselves online allowed these trans individuals to present fluid and complicated representations of their gender identities in ways that were authentic and that deviated from the perception of a traditional trans narrative that presumes certainty and gender binaries. Though sometimes risky, online self-expression was a way to reject oversimplifications of gender identity and, as we explore in the next section, to also access a source of self-affirmation and social support.

Positive Identity Reinforcement Online

Finally, RQ3 explores the impact of crowdfunding on trans identity, using the identity shift framework. Despite some concerns, participants overwhelmingly experienced positive identity feedback while crowdfunding online. Consistent with previous research (Cooper & Dzara, 2010; Craig & McInroy, 2014; Fox & Warber, 2015; Gray, 2009a; Haimson, Brubaker, et al., 2015), many had previously found support online, which had already helped them navigate their own gender expression. But being able to openly express and negotiate gender identity through crowdfunding felt, to many, like an opportunity to be more authentic to a wider network of people. The positive feedback received during crowdfunding reinforced participants' willingness to be authentic. We argue that, consistent with the identity shift effect (Gonzales & Hancock, 2008), the publicness of crowdfunding reinforces positive affirmation of one's gender identity and self-perception of authenticity. Despite some concerns, many articulated a sense of relief associated with greater self-expression and access to social support.

Broadcasting Trans

The process of writing and publishing stories on YouCaring.com was valuable for many participants. Hans said: "Anytime I get the opportunity to share my story with people it is just validating and affirming to who I am. When you start to do something over and over you start to know it inside and out." For many, creating the crowdfunding site and fundraising were important steps in the transition process because they also allowed users to share specific narratives to the fringes of their circles. Tray explained:

Actually, that is actually the biggest benefit. The fact that that fundraiser created such a transparency in my life. When you create something public like that you don't know who is watching. You just see that you had 500 views and you know that is scary when you only have 150 donors. You are like, What do the other 350 think about this? But you just get over it really quick. I wasn't expecting to get over it that quickly but you just welcome transparency and you're okay with that.

Transparency was often seen as positive and even essential, suggesting that sharing unique trans stories to the widest circle of connections may help provide a sense of psychological relief, despite the difficulty of doing so. As Jon said:

For a long time I wasn't sure if I wanted to be open about things. I wasn't sure if I wanted to be stealth.⁴ And I struggled really, really hard for the first six months what I was going to do. I felt like the more I suppressed my identity the more awful I felt. And so as I slowly started to lean into these areas of discomfort, like, sharing more personal details, I felt better and better by doing so.

⁴ *Stealth* is a term used in the trans community to note individuals who identify only by their preferred gender and do not identify as trans.

Despite widespread appreciation for the experience of publicizing one's story, Jon illustrates that the act of sharing is not easy. In Cain's case, his girlfriend made his website for him but would not press the Publish button:

She said I had to do that. So I stood there pacing for awhile before I posted it. But once I did it and it was done, it was kind of just rolling with the punches. It was just making that decision and getting up the nerve to do it.

This quote emphasizes that, despite some hesitation, sharing one's story with a large and often unknown network via crowdfunding was meaningful. In other words, intentionally crossing or moving previous privacy boundaries was a powerful and positive force for most of the participants.

It is important to note that many trans crowdfunders recognized that the fundraiser, while significant, was not the end of the process of negotiating self-expression and privacy. Cain mentioned that crowdfunding created an "increased level of visibility" of his gender identify but also noted that "coming out is a continual process. It is not something that happens once. It is an ongoing thing." For many, online self-presentation through social media and financial support platforms may be key to creating, adjusting, and constantly renegotiating their fluid gender expressions, but it is certainly not a process constrained to or completed on the Internet.

Support Affirms Identity

Finally, in addition to the power of narrative creation, participants overwhelmingly reported gains in social support. This finding suggests that the benefits and the costs of the privacy calculus may be amplified for this population. Indeed, the unexpected support, acceptance, and encouragement were often perceived as more valuable than the financial contributions. As Christian explained:

I didn't expect that people would respond to it the way that they did. My sister called me and we had this long talk about stuff that otherwise it probably would have taken us a lot longer to talk about.

Similarly, Liam stated:

There is something deep and meaningful when people that I know donate especially when I wasn't expecting it. And like, when a friend of a friend donates, it speaks to how that person represents me, so in that way it is doubly affirming. I guess just in general it feels affirming of humanity when strangers donate.

Although they were not expecting it, many felt especially supported by the people in their outer social networks who financially supported their campaigns and verbally supported their gender expressions. In turn, they felt more comfortable within their broader communities living their fluid gender expressions. As Brooks noted, after his coworkers were supportive, he "felt more comfortable being an open transperson in the workplace." These findings suggest that unexpected support, especially for those

who are part of a marginalized community, may enhance the payoff of otherwise difficult online disclosures. Marginalization may augment or intensify the perceived costs but also the benefits of the privacy calculus. As Liam said, "It brought so many people out of the woodwork in my life, it adds to my sense of feeling supported in ways I didn't realize. And the world is a little less transphobic than I realized."

Limitations

Building on privacy calculus theory, our findings suggest that, despite concerns about the risks associated with the crowdfunding privacy calculus, trans individuals were overwhelmingly grateful and affirmed through the experience. That is, the privacy calculus may be amplified for individuals from marginalized communities. But these data are not without limitations. First, our use of 20 semistructured interviews limits the generalizability of the findings. Although we gained in-depth knowledge of the experience of a few trans individuals, many more did not respond to our request for an interview. Furthermore, it would have been interesting to see how those trans individuals that considered crowdfunding but chose not to do it would have responded to our questions. This sample is inherently biased toward people who were ultimately fine with the privacy risks associated with crowdfunding or who had exceptionally high financial needs, or both.

Another large limitation of this study is that we interviewed only trans individuals crowdfunding for top surgery, and therefore many who identified as transmen. Several of our participants mentioned the privilege of fundraising as a transman. Christian noted:

If I were a transwoman saying, "Here fund my breast augmentation surgery," that would be a completely different story and I'm aware of that. There is a lot more negativity wrapped up in transitioning male to female. . . . People understand I want to be a dude better than they understand I want to be a woman.

Many of our participants noted the general discrimination and discrepancy in fundraising for transwomen. They also noted the larger risk of verbal and physical abuse for transwomen (James et al., 2016). As Lee noted, "Transmen are the ones that get raped but transwomen are the ones that get raped, beaten, and murdered." Although many still acknowledged their identity marginalization, this study may have shown different results if transwomen were participants. It is worth noting that more research is needed into how transwomen use social media and how they may negotiate both their identities and their privacy online.

In addition to gender privilege, others noted their racial privilege as well. It should be noted that our sample primarily identified as White. Liam talked at length about his experience in the community knowing transwomen of color are being targeted for violence more than other LGBT individuals: "I'm a White transmasculine person. I'm basically the most privileged, oh and I'm from a middle-class background, I'm the most privileged in the trans community, and here I am having this public fundraiser when people are actually dying." The positive civil and human rights reputation of YouCaring.com was, in fact, a reason why some participants chose the site (addressed further in Gonzales & Fritz, 2017), and many acknowledged that race played a role in their communities at large accepting their transitions.

Several participants noted that they were privileged to be middle class and to have middle- or upper-middle-class circles. Indeed, low-income trans individuals may not have the resources to create and maintain a crowdfunding site, and they may not have financially advantaged circles who could support their fundraisers. Our study, while novel and informative, is limited by the privileged experience of our participants.

Conclusion

Trans individuals' stories, their fluid gender expressions, and their experiences are often marginalized. Trans individuals are more likely to encounter verbal and physical abuse based on gender expression than more heteronormative-presenting individuals, and they generally do not receive legal protection to live their own gendered experiences (Fisher, 2016; Grossman & D'Augelli, 2007; James et al., 2016). We found that these experiences of marginalization informed the privacy calculus experience; trans participants anticipated and experienced more discomfort disclosing both informational and expressive privacy online. We also found that participants reported overwhelmingly positive feedback during crowdfunding, which often surprised the crowdfunders and helped to affirm their often marginalized identities, even when financial success from campaigns was limited. In all, these findings suggest an intensification of the privacy calculus paradigm—a heightened sensitivity to both costs and benefits of online disclosure for individuals from marginalized populations.

Our hope is that these findings not only add breadth to research on the trans experience but also suggest ways that privacy calculus theory might be expanded to describe experiences for individuals from marginalized communities more broadly. Although many trans crowdfunders had substantial privacy concerns and fears, they had overwhelmingly positive experiences and received both close- and weak-tie social support. When members of a marginalized group took ownership of their online presentations through crowdfunding, they chose to disclose with both intention and purpose, often complicating the traditional narrative of trans identity. In short, the perceived risks of disclosure were often greater than risks faced by nonmarginalized crowdfunders—open hostility and ostracism rather than just voiced criticisms—yet the gains were perhaps more meaningful when loved ones and strangers explicitly or implicitly affirmed requests for support. As a final illustration of this, Liam stated, “the tradeoff between [crowdfunding] being kind of embarrassing and vulnerable is worth it to be able to get support from my community and raise awareness of issues that all of us face.” Future research on the tensions of privacy and support should continue to explore a variety of marginalized populations to understand the boundary conditions of privacy calculus theory and the shared and distinct experiences of the trans community in negotiating privacy and identity in a highly public digital world.

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