Exploring Challenges and Triumphs within the Transgender Community through Comics-Based Research

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Exploring Challenges and Triumphs within the Transgender Community through

Comics-Based Research

by Carly Caldwell, Master in Art Therapy Counseling

A Research Project Submitted in Partial
Fulfillment of the Requirements
for the Degree of
Master of Arts
in the field of Art Therapy Counseling

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ABSTRACT

EXPLORING CHALLENGES AND TRIUMPHS WITHIN THE TRANSGENDER COMMUNITY THROUGH COMICS-BASED RESEARCH

by

CARLY ELAINE CALDWELL

Chairperson: Jayashree George

Transgender people are marginalized and pathologized within our society, which leaves transgender individuals vulnerable to numerous negative outcomes. The minority stress model describes the factors experienced by marginalized communities contribute to adverse outcomes (Meyer, 2015). Health care professionals are often not properly equipped to serve the needs of transgender individuals due to marginalization and pathologization. Used to challenge harmful stereotypes, as a form of cultural resistance, and to incite social change comic books and zines have been used as forms of expression for individuals with marginalized identities. Through the creation of a comic book, I aimed to educate others, encourage feelings of empathy, and reduce erasure of transgender people. Findings highlight the necessity of positive transgender representation for trans individuals and how interacting with stories of trans folks can encourage empathy and educate others about transgender individuals and their experiences.

Keywords: transgender, LGBTQ, visibility, minority stress, comics-based research, arts-based research, zines, transformative paradigm
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CHAPTER I
INTRODUCTION

Gender identity is one’s internal knowledge of their gender. When an individual's gender assigned at birth does not align with their gender identity, that individual is transgender (Haefele-Thomas, 2019; Hill & Mays, 2013). There are numerous factors that impact the outcomes of transgender individuals. Transgender individuals face minority stress (Matsuno, & Israel, 2018; Meyer, 2015), which occurs due to prejudice and stigma, causing adverse health outcomes. Mental health symptoms such as anger, shame, isolation, depression, anxiety, and suicidality are at an increased likelihood of developing because of minority stress (Austin et al., 2017; Beaumont, 2012; Matsuno, & Israel, 2018; Meyer, 2015). Sociopolitical oppression and discrimination, including microaggressions, exclusion or erasure, hate crimes, and systemic bias, constantly impact the lives of individuals who have been historically marginalized (Nadal et al., 2014; 2014; Karcher, 2017; Zappa, 2017). Often in transgender individuals these experiences begin young and contribute to feelings of anger, shame, isolation, depression, anxiety, and suicidality (Austin et al., 2017; Beaumont, 2012).

While minority stress theory describes how living within a marginalized identity contributes to adverse outcomes, it is also necessary to recognize how important it is to the human experience to feel “seen” as one knows themselves to be (Iantaffi & Barker, 2018). It can be dangerous for a transgender person to make themselves visible but being visible through art making can also be a means of empowerment (Haefele-Thomas, 2019). This visibility can also provide empowerment and hope for other transgender
individuals throughout their own gender journey (Haefele-Thomas, 2019; Kaye, 2018, 2021).

Having accessible, empathic representation of transgender individuals and the process of finding and exploring their identities can aid in reducing the social stigma, while also providing hope and empowerment to the transgender community. There has been a lineage of zines created and dispersed as a transgressive action. Zines have provided a space for individuals to express and push back against the confining norms of society. Zines have been used as a form of cultural resistance and social change. This makes zines a useful way to disseminate information that may not be widely available via the mainstream (Crawford, 2017; Zobl, 2004, 2009). Through reading personal accounts of transgender individuals about their experiences and then interpreting these experiences of identity exploration into a comic book is intended to visually explore different gender journeys. Additionally, the comic books can be made more widely available to ensure the information has the potential to reach the communities it is intended to serve, transgress oppressive forces, and bring agency to transgender individuals (Zobl, 2004, 2009).

The transgender community is not a monolith of opinion and experience and ignoring this allows the erasure that marginalizes the community to pervade. Developing a better understanding of some of the various ways transgender individuals exist and understand their identities can help reduce the stigma faced by this community. The aim of this study is to promote a deeper understanding of transgender individuals to promote visibility and reduce the erasure and stigma faced by this community through a transformative arts-based paradigm.
CHAPTER II
LITERATURE REVIEW

The common experiences, lack of properly equipped professionals, and minority stress within transgender individuals was reviewed through the intersections of mental health, transgender identity exploration and art making (see Figure 1).

Figure 1.

_Venn Diagram of Research Terms_

Experiences in Mental Health Care with Transgender Individuals

The minority stress model describes multiple processes by which marginalized communities, including the lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) communities, experience stressors related to their marginalized status (Austin et al., 2017; Hendricks & Testa, 2012; Matsuno, & Israel, 2018; Meyer, 2015). These experiences occur on a
continuum of distal (referring to events/experiences outside of the individual) to proximal (internalized beliefs that have been absorbed through socialization) (Austin et al., 2017; Hendricks & Testa, 2012; Matsuno, & Israel, 2018; Meyer, 2015). For example, microaggressions such as being misgendered by a colleague at work would be a distal source of stress; whereas internalized transphobia would be a proximal source, as it comes from cultural messages that have been absorbed and engrained (Austin et al., 2017; Hendricks & Testa, 2012; Matsuno, & Israel, 2018; Meyer, 2015). External experiences that occur in response to an individual’s minority status, anticipation of these experiences, and internalized negative attitudes and prejudices all have the capacity to contribute to psychological and physical harm (Hendricks & Testa, 2012). Erasure of transgender experiences adds to the continued pathologization of transgender individuals (Zappa, 2017).

Mental health care for transgender folks often lacks competent, affirmative care, and transgender clients often face discrimination (Austin et al., 2017; Benson, 2013). The lack of transgender-sensitive healthcare is a struggle that transgender individuals identify as a primary barrier to treatment (Roller, et al., 2015). Roller, et al. also identify that the lack of knowledge and/or hostility by providers, and lack of healthcare coverage for transgender-specific needs make it difficult for transgender individuals to take a more direct route to meeting their healthcare needs.

On the extreme end of the pathologization of transgender individuals is “conversion” therapy, which aims to change sexual orientations and/or gender identity. In opposition to this pathologization lies the “gold standard” for care of transgender folks, which is a gender affirming approach by “supporting and validating the identities,
strengths, and experiences of transgender individuals” (Austin et al., 2017, p. 2).

However, due to the historical treatment by healthcare providers, transgender individuals are less likely to trust those within these fields and be less likely to use mental healthcare spaces to address life challenges (Barbee, 2002; Benson, 2013; Zappa, 2017). Transgender individuals often face increased stress related to their gender identities while also being less likely to gain benefit from mental healthcare services as a result of the lack of understanding by clinicians who may not have received adequate, if any, training on sex and gender (Austin et al., 2017; Benson, 2013; Hendricks & Testa, 2012).

Transgender people experience disproportionate levels of depression, anxiety and overall psychological distress exacerbated by the experience of enacted and felt stigma (Bockting et al., 2013; Matsuno, & Israel, 2018; Meyer, 2015). Bockting et al., found that stigma can be experienced in a variety of ways including verbal abuse, physical abuse, and as barriers to receiving proper health care or other necessary services. While the impact of stigma is pervasive in the transgender community, there are also factors that protect individuals from the harmful effects of stigma. Peer support, family support, and identity pride have all been identified as protective factors that reduce the harm caused by stigma (2013).

Interventions seeking to address the mental health of transgender individuals should acknowledge and address their experiences with minority stress (Benson, 2013; Matsuno, & Israel, 2018). Bias and stigma results in unique stressors, which cause adverse health outcomes (Meyer, 2015). Recognizing the impact of minority identities and examining the specific experiences of individuals allows for more specifically tailored interventions (Borgogna et al., 2019).
Impact of Art Making on Mental Health

Art making can be a powerful tool for mental health recovery and can be utilized both within art therapy and on its own as a coping strategy. Van Lith et al. (2011) utilized qualitative in-depth interviews with 18 individuals who participated in arts-based programs during their mental health recovery. These interviews were conducted with the purpose of exploring the role that art making had in their mental health recovery. Interpretative phenomenological analysis of the interviews led to the identification of 11 major themes, which were grouped into the three “meta-themes” of qualities conducive to the art making context, how the art making process benefits mental health recovery, and how the image benefits mental health recovery (Van Lith et al., 2011). This study highlighted the participants' experiences of using art making as an aid in the development and enhancement of the self. Art making was identified as providing a “voice” that communicated perceptions, values, and beliefs, while the created art provided insight, communication, and connection.

In a case study of 12 adult participants with ongoing, severe mental illness Van Lith (2015) identified four themes throughout a series of interviews. These themes were connection to inner self, developing a sense of achievement, motivational force when unwell, and psychologically safe space. Engagement in the creative process was found to aid in resolving inner conflicts, problem solving, and as a means of communicating the internal experience. The art making was found to be both a mechanism of change and a coping practice (Van Lith, 2015).

Each of these studies exemplify how the process of art making can be used as a coping strategy within mental health recovery, a means of expression, and as a way of
developing insight and connection with the authentic self (Van Lith, 2015; Van Lith et al., 2011).

Art making can support one’s mental wellbeing and can support identity exploration and creative expression. This makes art a useful tool for aiding individuals who desire or need support in these areas. Transgender individuals are at an increased risk for mental health challenges due to the minority stress they experience. Art making can benefit transgender individuals in their identity exploration as well as a creative coping practice to support their mental wellbeing.

Art as a Means of Identity Exploration and Expression

Art can be used to resist cultural norms and stereotypes, art can empower (Haefele-Thomas, 2019). Art can be used as a way for individuals to explore their gender identity and expression (Beaumont, 2012). While is can be dangerous to be an “out” transgender person, being visible to other transgender individuals also helps to empower and create hope within the transgender community (Haefele-Thomas, 2019; Kaye, 2018, 2021). Erasure of transgender experiences adds to the continued pathologizing of transgender individuals (Zappa, 2017).

Making space for transgender people to be safely visible is both empowering and necessary for building a society that is more just. Haefele-Thomas’s Introduction to Transgender Studies (2019) contains interviews with some transgender artists who describe their experiences with using art for empowerment and social change. Shawna Virago, a transgender musician, provides further perspective.

There is nothing better than being a transgender, or gender-expansive artist. I have so much permission and space to create the kind of songs I want to, and also I get
to keep challenging myself to keep smashing binaries and margins and to build something with other gender revolutionaries, a more just society (p. 413)

Sean Dorsey, a transgender choreographer, dancer, and writer, identifies that making art offers “insight, healing, education” (p. 413).

Julia Kaye (2018, 2021) is an artist and illustrator who has utilized art as a means of self-expression and to process her journey with her gender identity as a transgender woman. Creating comics that followed her journey as she began her gender affirming process allowed her to “navigate the early days of my transition and the complexities of dealing with gender dysphoria” (Kaye, 2018, p. 4). She identifies how having public figures to look up to allowed her to feel hopeful and normalized her feelings related to her transgender identity and hopes that through sharing her comics with others that they can also gain from her story (2018, 2021).

Another way in which marginalized individuals have worked to feel seen is through the production and distribution of zines. Zines are small-circulation, nonprofessional, and noncommercial magazines which are produced, published, and distributed by the creator(s) themselves. Zines have long been an outlet for marginalized individuals to express their frustrations with societal constraints and as a means of empowerment (Crawford, 2017; Zobl, 2004, 2009). The freedom of expression that zines allow makes it an effective way to express and expand upon the narrow representation (cisgender, white, heteronormative, male) that is common within mainstream. For these reasons, zines have also been a valuable tool for cultural resistance and social change (Crawford, 2017; Zobl, 2004, 2009). Zines have been, and continue to be, a way for queer and transgender communities to push back against suffocating societal norms,
creating a space to uplift and empower communities that are often silenced (Hastings, 2020).

These examples provide some insight into the power of art making as a transformative process for transgender individuals, allowing them to find their power and share it with others within the community. These examples also show the importance of media representation, not only for those within the transgender community, but also as a means of encouraging empathy and understanding from those with limited experience or knowledge about transgender people.
CHAPTER III

METHODOLOGY

The purpose of this study was to use comics-based research to explore and understand experiences within the transgender community. I used comics-based research (CBR) as a form of arts-based research. CBR is multimodal, using visual and textual components, to collect, analyze, or represent research (Kuttner et al., 2020; Leavy, 2020). Comics were used as a way to both analyze and represent qualitative data gathered from reviewing literature and informal personal accounts of transgender individuals. Following a transformative paradigm, where the lens is to elicit change (Leavy, 2020), I distributed the comic book. Making this research available in the form of a comic allows that the research to be more widely available in order to reach the communities it is intended to serve.

**Researcher Stance**

Due to the qualitative nature of this study, it is necessary that I practice reflexivity over my biases. I am a white individual who was born and raised in America, come from a middle-class Christian/Agnostic upbringing, and do not experience physical disability. These aspects of myself have given, and continue to give, me significant unearned privilege. I was also assigned female at birth in a patriarchal society, live with mental illness, and practice a secular pagan spirituality. These aspects are viewed by society as less desirable and are intersections of my identity in which I experience oppression. These intersecting and, at times, opposing ranks all contribute to my experiences and viewpoints. They also color the ways in which I interact with and understand with others and the world around me – this will be true regardless of my setting but is especially
necessary to recognize when training and working as an art therapist and conducting research. The ways in which I understand the world are not universal and cannot be separated from me, nor anyone, in order to conduct bias-free research. As a result, my stance as a researcher draws from queer, intersectional feminist frameworks. I used bracketing and the support of my chair to help recognize and balance my responses to the research.

Procedure

Through conducting a literature review and reading personal accounts, I developed a better understanding of transgender individuals’ experiences, and then those common experiences were highlighted and depicted in the form of a comic. I read twelve zines (see Appendix A.), an anthology of queer comics titled No Straight Lines (Hall, 2013), the Gender Book (Hill & Mays, 2013), and Julia Kaye’s comic collections (2018, 2021); the complete list of zines and comics are listed in Appendix A. For this study, data was collected by reading zines centered around transgender identities and experiences and reviewing literature on transgender experiences with mental health and healthcare. While reading through this content I kept notes and made sketches (see Figure 2) related to the themes I picked up on and storylines which I felt needed to be included in my comic book.

Once my characters were created and concept designs of each character were developed, I drafted a rough idea of the storyline. I presented several themes I wished to explore within the comic (see Figure 3), the rough draft of the storyline, and the characters during the first critique, during which I accepted feedback and suggestions on the comic book. A number of topics were discussed for how to move forward with the
comic. Topics discussed included disability, how to address issues of trauma within the comic, preferential language regarding gender assigned at birth (e.g., the use of “male-to-female” versus “assigned male at birth”), and the importance of “chosen family” as a form of support. The feedback received during the critique was overwhelmingly positive and encouraged me to move forward with a focus on exploring challenges experienced by individuals within the transgender community, the search for acceptance, and chosen family.

Figure 2.

Note and Sketch sample

Critique One

After completion of the first draft, an online critique was held via video conferencing, the invitation to the critique was posted in various online community spaces a week prior to the critique. These critiques were a way to gain valuable input from transgender individuals and allies and ensure that the self-expertise of transgender individuals was utilized during the comic creation process (Zappa, 2017). Input received during this critique was documented and taken into consideration during the development
of the comic book. Following completion of the comic book, a final critique was held through the same process as the first critique. All changes to the comic book were finalized following this critique to have the completed comic book ready for publishing.

**Figure 3.**

*Themes to explore presented during first critique*

![Themes to explore](image)

Following the first critique I refined the storyline of the comic and worked to put the storyline into the comic format. These scenes included vignettes of Hannah’s early childhood to highlight the influence of forced gender roles, Hannah’s coming out to her sister, and Hannah’s introduction to the “Pride club” in college (see Figure 10). These scenes were used as plot points to connect the overarching storyline of the comic.

**Critique Two**

A total of 16 completed pages were presented at the second critique, along with short summaries to fill in the unfinished pages. The results of this critique were once again positive, encouraging me to continue the comic as planned.

Once the second critique was completed, I worked to fill in the missing pages of the comic and fully develop the storyline. This process led to me including one more character that was not in the original cast. This character, Elijah, is a physically disabled
black transgender man, his disability being that he lost a leg after being hit by a car (Figure 11). I chose to introduce this character by having him disrupt transphobic comments directed toward Hannah. His inclusion was intended to further highlight the importance of allyship and community for transgender folks.

Once the bulk of the comic was completed, I added a content warning disclaimer to inform viewers of content involving transphobia, homophobia, and images of giving birth (see Figure 4). This content warning was added following a suggestion from a transgender man who explained that images of giving birth could be triggering to trans men who have given birth. Additionally, definitions of important terminology were included at the beginning to aid in educating people who may be unfamiliar with the concepts presented throughout the comic (see Figure 5). These definitions were written using *The Gender Book* (Hill & Mays, 2013) and the National Center for Transgender Equality’s *Understanding Transgender People: The Basics* (2016) as references.

**Figure 4.**

*Content warning*

![Content warning: This comic includes topics such as birth, toxic gender role expectations, transphobia, homophobia, and some harsh language.](image-url)
Figure 5.

Definitions of terms

Terms You Should Know
Gender identity - One's knowledge of their gender - knowing that you are a man, woman, or another gender.

Sex - The biological and physiological characteristics of a person, including hormones, chromosomes, and reproductive organs.

Gender/Sex Assigned At Birth - The gender/sex that is assigned to a person based on the appearance of the genitals they are born with.

Transgender - A person who's gender is different than the gender assigned at birth.

Cisgender - A person who's gender matches the gender assigned at birth.

Non-Binary - A person who's gender is not strictly aligned with either "man" or "woman". A non-binary person may experience their gender as both, neither, or a combination of masculine and feminine.

Deadname - A name that a person no longer uses, often the name given at birth that the individual decided no longer fits them.
**Distribution**

I uploaded it online and shared the link to several online communities including Facebook groups, Discord servers, and Twitter. A link to an anonymous response form was included at the end of the comic to allow individuals to share comments, thoughts, and feelings in response to reading the completed comic (see Figure 6).

**Figure 6.**

*Link to feedback form*

---

![QR Code](https://forms.gle/xpZMWJAwTsjYPf7v5)
Once the comic was finalized and shared digitally, I printed 100 cards including a QR code and link to the digital comic book (see Figure 7). The QR cards were then given to others to share and distribute. The QR cards were also distributed by placing them in public spaces for individuals to discover. Public spaces the cards were placed include Drost Park in Maryville Illinois, a Walmart in Marion Illinois, a Hobby Lobby in Carbondale Illinois, and multiple locations on the Southern Illinois University Edwardsville campus. A flyer advertising the comic, along with QR cards, was also placed in a Starbucks in Collinsville Illinois (see Figure 8). Sharing the comic in multiple spaces online and distributing the QR code/link to the comic in public spaces allowed for the comic to reach a broader audience. The QR cards were chosen as a more cost-effective means of sharing the comic with others.

Due to cost concerns, only three physical copies of the comic have been printed (see Figure 9). One of these comics was given away to a transgender man in the southern Illinois area. Another copy was given to a non-profit organization which provides housing and supportive services to individuals with an HIV/AIDS diagnosis located in St. Louis Missouri. The third copy remains with me, which has allowed me to share the comic with a number of people with whom I have spoken.

Figure 7.

*QR code card example*
Figure 8.

*Poster and QR cards in a Collinsville Starbucks*
Figure 9.

*Photo showing two of the three printed comics*
CHAPTER IV

RESULTS

Results are two-fold, one the zine and the second being the responses to viewing. From the exploration of zines and literature, themes that appeared included dysphoria, body politics, need for self-expression and exploration, and freedom from stigma, oppression, and hate.

It was important to me that I develop a cast of diverse characters with unique experiences. I developed the characters with race, gender, and body image in mind. I began by creating four main characters; Hannah, a transgender woman who knew from a young age she was not like “other boys”; Dorian, a femme nonbinary individual with a supportive family; Ace, a nonbinary individual who is also asexual; Hector, a transmasculine person who previously identified as a lesbian; and Elijah, is a physically disabled black transgender man. I made a point to vary the character’s skin tones, body shapes, and gender experiences. The comic follows Hannah through her childhood to early adulthood as she is bombarded with harmful stereotypes and bullying, before exploring her gender expression and identity and developing a supportive friend group (chosen family) who help her find self-acceptance.
Figure 10.

Selected comic vignettes

Figure 11.

Elijah’s introduction

Elijah

He is a punk trans guy. He lost part of his right leg after being hit by a car. Elijah is fiercely passionate about social justice—especially for black, trans, and disabled rights.
Survey Responses

Responses to the comic were received in a number of ways; as comments on Facebook posts, replies within Discord servers, via email, via the response form at the end of the comic, and in person responses. The response form received a total of seven responses, other forms of response were difficult to track and were therefore not calculated.

Responses were entirely positive and only 1 response included suggestions on how to improve the comic. Many of the positive responses were general admirations of the work itself, including responses of “beautiful job”, “it looks great!”, and “I loved it. Thank you for sharing.”. A smaller number of responses were more in depth. One of the longer responses was received from an anonymous transgender man who shared some of his gender journey and challenges. The anonymous trans man ended his response by writing, “This story really just... as someone who has been there... it explains everything perfectly. It really does. It really hurts how accurate it is.”. Aside from shortening the response to protect this individual’s privacy, the previous quote is typed exactly as the original responder typed.

Some respondents shared their reactions to seeing representations of chosen family. Once such comment is as follows, “I’m using my first ever comment of this discord to say hello I LOVED THIS. This is amazing and I teared up at the end. FOUND FAMILY!!! HELL YES. I’m gonna share this with some friends from the star trek fandom because this is totally up their alley”

Other responses commented on the importance of trans centered stories. Here is one such example quoted in its entirety:
This is so beautifully told. It’s difficult for some cisgender people to understand the journey of gender identity from birth to adulthood and this does that beautifully. My heart was broken when I saw how happy Hannah was with her makeup on and wearing dresses, only to have to change back to a societal construct of “male” when her sister visited. The superfluous social construct of masks that must be worn to appease others becomes personal when told visually through Hannah’s eyes. The value of having other trans and non-binary peers to support you is apparent in this story and I feel it’s so important to have readers understand that value as well.

Finally, the response which offered suggestions to improve the comic read as follows:

Chosen family is such a significant part of LGBTQ+ culture, I think it could be helpful to maybe add an explanation of this at the end, just to further offer education to people who may not be familiar with this concept. Also, just me, but I would have loved to see Hayleigh being introduced to Hannah’s friends/family! Thank you for telling this story, Joey.
CHAPTER V

DISCUSSION

The findings of this study highlight the importance of elevating marginalized voices for eliciting empathy, educating both allies and helping professionals, and providing support for those within marginalized communities so that they feel seen and accepted. Transgender individuals are at a higher risk of adverse outcomes due to their marginalized status (Hendricks & Testa, 2012). Developing ways to highlight the struggles that transgender people face, and the resilience of the community, aids in reducing stigma.

The responses to the comic highlighted how representation can increase empathy for trans people, as respondents identified how they “felt for” and their “heart broke” for Hannah as she traversed the challenges throughout the comic. Reducing the erasure of transgender people can reduce the harm that results from being hidden and pathologized (Zappa, 2017). Through the identification of challenges faced by transgender people it also provides education to those outside of the community, allowing allies and helping professionals to better acknowledge and address the issues faced by the community (Benson, 2013; Borgogna et al., 2019). The responses received following the completion of the comic were consistent with my intentions of informing others and making stories of transgender individuals more visible.

Training healthcare professionals to increase clinical competency with transgender individuals can be done through exposure to transgender individuals and common challenges experienced within the transgender community. By increasing familiarity with transgender issues healthcare professionals can help to reduce the
barriers faced by transgender individuals to receive the adequate care they need (Matsuno & Israel, 2018). This comic could benefit helping professionals by providing useful terminology related to gender expression and identity and increasing their awareness of issues faced within the transgender community. However, it is unknown due to not being able to identify the response demographics in terms of occupation.

The results also show how necessary it is for transgender people to see stories with which they can identify and feel seen (Haefele-Thomas, 2019; Kaye, 2018, 2021). The response that best highlights this is that from the transgender man who shared how deeply moved he was by seeing an accurate representation of some of his own experiences. Other transgender individuals who responded identified feeling happy to see accurate representations of chosen family, as noted in the survey responses. This is in line with other personal accounts that share how visibility can be a means of empowerment and hope (Haefele-Thomas, 2019; Kaye, 2018, 2021). This information gained from this study is clinically significant in that it shows how education and visibility can benefit transgender individuals as well as the helping professionals who may serve them.

**Alternative Explanations and Limitations**

There are other explanations that may account for the entirely positive responses to the comic. The comic was shared in several openly queer and trans affiliated groups and communities online, which likely impacted the responses received. The individuals most likely to view the comic were likely ones who are aligned with the mission of supporting and empowering transgender people. The comic was not only shared in queer accepting places, however. It is also possible that those who are disinterested in supporting transgender individuals were less likely to interact with the comic, and
therefore less likely to fully read or respond to the comic. These factors undoubtedly impacted the type of responses received. Due to this it is important to recognize that this comic would likely have very different responses from individuals who seek to continue the pathologizing and marginalization of transgender individuals.

**Future Directions**

This research project focused on the development of a comic book with the intent of creating a tool for empowering transgender people and educating people outside of the transgender community. It would be beneficial to continue researching ways to make this education more widely available to helping professionals, as well as people in the broader social context, in order to reduce the stigma and harm faced by marginalized communities. Further research should be done on facilitating resilience and empowerment within the transgender community.

Within the art therapy field, zines can be used to disrupt the social structures that often harm transgender individuals (Zappa, 2017). Through the use of this comic as an educational and empathy building tool, art therapists can become better equipped to work with transgender clients. Since this comic is framed through the experiences of transgender individuals and was completed with input from transgender individuals, it also aids in reducing erasure that occurs when art therapists position themselves as experts (Zappa, 2017). Through increasing empathic responses toward transgender individuals, art therapists may be better equipped to provide a compassionate and supportive environment for treatment with transgender individuals, this could aid in the development of self-acceptance that may benefit the mental health of trans people (Beaumont, 2012).
Conclusion

This research focused on the creation of a comic book that highlighted significant experiences within transgender individual’s lives. This was done by engaging in queer and transgender centered stories in the forms of zines and comics, as well as through online critiques of the comic as it was developed. The responses to the completed comic highlight the importance of education and representation for the empowerment and de-stigmatization of transgender people. These findings help to highlight how necessary it is to have positive transgender representation for trans individuals and how interacting with stories of trans folks can encourage empathy and educate others about transgender individuals and their experiences.
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APPENDIX A

LIST OF ZINES AND COMICS


https://archive.qzap.org/index.php/Detail/Object/Show/object_id/396


https://archive.qzap.org/index.php/Detail/Object/Show/object_id/203


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Jaksonian7x. *Project 76 #2 - The Politics of My Body.* [zine].

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https://archive.qzap.org/index.php/Detail/Object/Show/object_id/214


APPENDIX B

TRANSCEND COMIC: AN EXPLORATION OF THE CHALLENGES AND TRIUMPHS WITHIN THE TRANSGENDER COMMUNITY
Thank you for taking the time to read this comic!

Creating it has been a deeply meaningful experience and I hope it can provide some good in the world.

Content warning: This comic includes topics such as birth, toxic gender role expectations, transphobia, homophobia, and some harsh language.
**Terms You Should Know**

Gender identity – One’s knowledge of their gender – knowing that you are a man, woman, or another gender.

Sex – The biological and physiological characteristics of a person, including hormones, chromosomes, and reproductive organs.

Gender/Sex Assigned At Birth – The gender/sex that is assigned to a person based on the appearance of the genitals they are born with.

Transgender – A person who's gender is different than the gender assigned at birth.

Cisgender – A person who's gender matches the gender assigned at birth.

Non-Binary – A person who's gender is not strictly aligned with either "man" or "woman". A non-binary person may experience their gender as both, neither, or a combination of masculine and feminine.

Deadname – A name that a person no longer uses, often the name given at birth that the individual decided no longer fits them.
Congratulations Mom! It's a Big Strong Baby Boy
Don't play with that, it's a *Girls* toy!

Toughen up! Big boys don't cry!

Go change! Dresses are for *Girls*.
What's wrong with me?

Why can't I just be a normal boy?
*Whisper, Whisper*

GAY!

Ahahaha!

Bump!

Just ignore it. Just ignore it. Just ignore it.

I HATE it here
Today in math I got spit on by the two jerks I sit by. They don’t even know me!

It isn’t fair! Why do we get treated like shit just for existing?!

mm-hmm... Sometimes I wish I didn’t exist...

Yeah

Nod

Nod

Nod

Nod

mm-hmm
Don’t forget to call when you get there. I won’t forget.

Good luck at college, buddy.

Thanks, Dad.

I’m gonna miss you!

I’ll miss you too.
Hello?

Hey sis...

Hello!

I got my driver's license! Get ready because I'm gonna visit you soon!

That's great!
Your hair is getting so long!

Oh, I love your nails!
You seem so much more free now

Sis, I have something I want to tell you...

but, please don't tell mom & dad...
I always felt like I was a **freak**, and it's taken me some time to understand that I'm **not** a freak! I'm **transgender**.
Thank you for telling me, I'm so proud of you!

I love you too, sis!

...Are you crying?

I love you, sis!

I'm just so happy!
So, do you wanna see my new dress?

Yeah, Obviously!

Woooo!!!

Could you help me with my Makeup? I've been practicing, but I'm not very confident yet...

Of course!
I feel beautiful.

You are beautiful.

Now, don't cry, you'll mess up your make-up.

Hey! Shut up!
Ignore them. You look GREAT sweetie. I'm Elijah. What about you?

Oh! Thank you... I'm Hannah.
Oh jeez, maybe I shouldn’t be here. What if they hate me? What if I do something stupid? What if -

-Oh no...

Hey! Don’t be a stranger! All are welcome. You new to campus?

Yeah, I am.

I’m Dorian, my pronouns are she and they.

It’s nice to meet you.

Folks, let’s give a warm welcome to our newest Pride Club member.

H-hello. I’m Hannah, pronouns: she/her.
4:30 PM Sat, Sep 22

# QueerAF

Dorian
Hi friends! My new friends Hannah & Elijah are going to join the chat!

Bot
Welcome @Hannah
Welcome @Elijah

Hannah
Hi everyone! I'm Hannah. My pronouns are she/her/hers. I look forward to getting to know you all! 😊

Elijah
Hey folx, I'm Elijah (He/him)

Hector
Hi Hannah! Hi Elijah! I'm Hector (He/him).
Nice to meet you!

Ace
Hello, I'm Ace, I'm non-binary & use they/them pronouns. Welcome to the team!

Hannah
Thanks everyone!

Elijah
Thnx y'all

Dorian
😊
So, I'm going home for the holiday & I'm nervous... I haven't come out to my parents yet & I'm not sure how they'll react.

Do you think it's safe? They won't try to hurt you, right?

I think it will be safe, I'm just not sure they'll be accepting. They're not the most open-minded.
I know what you mean - my parents were not thrilled when I came out as a lesbian - even less so when I told them I'm a trans guy.

They still call me my deadname, I don't even try to correct them anymore - it's just exhausting.

So now I just keep my distance. It's better for everyone that way.
I don’t plan on ever telling my family that I’m non-binary. It just isn’t worth starting an argument over my “fake” gender.

Ah yes, as opposed to “All-natural” organically grown genders

Ahaha! Exactly!
Hannah, I haven't had this same experience but I think it's important that you be honest with yourself. Do what you feel you need to & make sure you are able to stay safe. If they can't accept you as you are, they don't deserve to know all of you anyway.

Thanks y'all, you've been so helpful❤️
9:17 PM Thu, Nov 22
≡ # QueerAF

Hannah
So, it went about as well as I expected it to go... Shouting happened & my parents told me that I’ll always be their “Son”... 😞

Dorian
Oh honey, I’m So Sorry 😞

Elijah
We love you❤️ You are a woman, regardless of what they say!

Hector
That’s right, you are loved and valid I wish I could hug you right now

Ace
That’s awful Hannah :-( let us know if there is anything we can do for you

Dorian
Hannah, Maybe you can come over to my family’s home during the winter break!

Hannah
I would love that Dory❤️ Thanks y’all, I don’t know what I’d do without you! 😢 I love yall
Meet the Cast

Hannah
Hannah is a transgender woman. She was assigned male at birth, but realized at a young age that she is a girl. She is a lesbian who loves sundresses and roller skating.

Hayleigh
Hannah’s younger sister. The two have always been close. Hayleigh is cisgender, she was assigned female at birth and identifies as a woman.

Elijah
He is a punk trans guy. He lost part of his right leg after being hit by a car. Elijah is fiercely passionate about social justice - especially for black, trans, and disabled rights.
Dorian
They are nonbinary and use she/her pronouns. Her family is extremely supportive and can often be seen cheering at Dorian’s drag performances.

Hector
He is a trans man. He previously identified as a lesbian, but because identity is fluid the labels he uses have changed! He is an avid bicyclist.

Ace
Ace is nonbinary and uses they/them pronouns. Ace met Dorian through an online video game forum. Ace is asexual/biromantic and chose their name as a reference to their asexuality.
To provide me with valuable feedback regarding your experience viewing my comic, scan the QR code or follow the link below.

https://forms.gle/xpZMWJAwTsjYPf7v5

For more information about supporting Transgender folks:
https://spark.adobe.com/page/rBSD11DvCmbaj/