Finding Identity Within Online Communities:  
A Cyber-Ethnography of FTM YouTubers

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This thesis was written in part to pay homage to the strength, kindness, and presence of YouTube trans vloggers and communities. Their individual and collective endeavors have not only allowed me to live as my truest self, but have also pushed me to passionately write the following pages to contextualize their collective knowledge. While I’d like to extend my appreciation to the hundreds of vloggers I have watched over many years, I would particularly like to thank my interviewees, Liam Rutz, Charles Thomy, and Chase Ross, for their compassionate generosity.

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Abstract:

This thesis examines FtM (female to male) transgender YouTubers, their relationships with Internet platforms, with each other, with their bodies, and with mass media. Exploring content uploaded by trans YouTubers, as well as interviews with three YouTubers (Liam Rutz, Chase Ross and Charles Thomy), this thesis examines how the unprecedented modes of presenting and viewing the body through digital self-representation and online community legitimize trans identities. Topics of community, narrative, (self-)representation/archival, vernacular, binaries, accessibility, legitimization, the gendered body in cyberspace, and cyber/auto-ethnography are explored through ethnographic data as well as literature. Findings suggest that self-representational digital media makes trans bodies, identities, and life experiences accessible to both trans and cis individuals.
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Glossary

Account: A YouTube account is a free component of every Google account. Anyone can create a YouTube account, which they can use to comment on videos, subscribe to channels, private-message other users, and upload their own videos.

Cisgender: A cisgender person is someone who identifies as the gender typically associated with the sex characteristics with which they were born. For example, a person with XY chromosomes born with a penis who identifies as male is cisgender.

Channel: Every YouTube account comes with a “channel,” which is a page managed by a YouTube account owner. This is the webpage where their videos are posted, if they choose to post videos.

Collaboration Channel: A collaboration channel is a hub where multiple content creators post videos. All videos posted by these creators will be linked from this page and will display this page name. “FTMtranstastic” is the collaboration channel most referenced in this thesis.

Comments: Every video has a commentary section that allows viewers with YouTube accounts to write responses to videos. These text comments can be directly replied to, as well as voted upon with “thumbs up” and “thumbs down” buttons. The most popular comments (having received the most up-votes) will rise to the top of the comments section.

FTM: “Female to Male;” an individual assigned female at birth (and presumably socialized as female), but identifies more as male. Often FTM individuals present in a masculine way, and some pursue medical transition with the aid of testosterone therapy, chest reconstruction, and/or other medical interventions. This term is contested due to its adherence to the gender binary of “male” and “female.”

Non-Binary: A person who identifies as non-binary does not identify as male or female, man or woman, and therefore does not conform to the socially constructed gender binary. Throughout this thesis, the term non-binary is inclusive of genderqueer and genderfluid identities. Non-binary individuals may use the pronoun “they” (singular), “ze,” (see below), and various other pronouns. The they/them/their pronoun can be used in a sentence as follows: “They are eating lunch with their friend.”

Offline: This term describes the metaphorical and physical space that exists without connective technology. For example, a person reading and turning pages in a book is offline.

Online: This term describes the metaphorical space that exists due to connective technology. For example, a person watching YouTube videos is online, as they are engaging with material on the Internet, an online space. This is also often referred to as “cyberspace.”

Passing: Someone who ‘passes’ is someone who is generally seen as the gender they identify as. For example, a transgender man who is perceived by those around him to be “male” is “passing.”
Playlist: A playlist is a curated collection of videos, often having a point of similarity such as creator, theme, or style.

Private Videos: Users can post videos to their channel privately, meaning that only the channel holder will have access to viewing that specific video. For example, Charles Thomy (Youtube.com/charlesasher) has over 800 videos on YouTube, but only 300 (or so) are visible to the public, meaning that he has around 500 “private” videos that only he, or someone with his account information, can watch (Charles March 1, 2016). This is a way to store video files on YouTube without publically sharing them.

PCG: Professionally Generated Content. This includes videos that have been produced with funding and professional infrastructure.

Stealth: Someone who is “stealth” does not expose their trans identity to the general public, usually passing as a cisgender person. People may be stealth for reasons of safety, reputation, and dysphoria.

Subscription: Anyone with a YouTube channel can “subscribe” to any channel (or be subscribed to), meaning that videos posted by channels they have subscribed to will show up on the front page of YouTube when they are signed in. This can be compared to subscribing to a magazine (offline) and receiving copies of the issue on one’s doorstep as the magazine is released.

Testosterone: Testosterone is a sex hormone naturally produced in cisgender men. Many FTM transgender individuals undergo testosterone therapy to develop masculine physical characteristics.

Transgender: A transgender person is someone who identifies as a different gender than typically associated with the sex characteristics with which they were born. For example, a person with XY chromosomes born with a penis who identifies as female is transgender. Transgender is also referred to as “trans” throughout this thesis.

UGC: User Generated Content. This includes videos that are created by users themselves, without outside professional support. The vast majority of the vlogs referenced in this thesis are UGC.

Vlog: A vlog, or video-blog, is a type of first-person storytelling in the form of a video. The type of vlog being explored in this thesis is in the form of a confessional, and usually involves a video-maker casually speaking to a webcam.

Ze: Ze is a non-binary pronoun used by many individuals, including Author Kate Bornstein, as referenced in this thesis. Ze is an alternative to “He” or “She,” and can be used in a sentence as follows: Ze published a book in 1994.
Introduction

In 2007, while exploring a website I had just discovered called “YouTube,” I somehow found my thirteen-year-old, frizzy-haired, ponytail-wearing self watching a video of a person talking to a camera about how they felt like a boy. Their video was grainy, dimly lit, and clouded by audio feedback from their webcam microphone, but their message was clear – they were assigned female gender roles at birth due to their sex, but they didn’t feel female, and they wanted to do something about the overwhelming dissonance in their life and body. I was intrigued by this video for reasons that remained out-of-focus for nearly eight years. At the time, I dismissed my interest as an academic curiosity, and I continued to associate academic curiosity with my growing and profound fascination with that video and similar vlogs until I spent a semester studying abroad in Edinburgh, Scotland in 2014. It was there that, when struggling to make new connections with my surrounding ‘offline’ community, I developed and deepened my connections with the ‘online’ YouTube “female-to-male” (FTM) transgender communities. Through the enormous amount of time I spent with these communities online (up to ten hours a day), I eventually allowed myself to clarify a personal truth that I had resisted for many years.

This thesis will apply and examine practices of cyber-ethnography and provide ethnographic insight into YouTube FTM transgender communities. With over one billion estimated monthly visitors (ebizmba.com 2015), YouTube has become the second most popular site on the web. With over 3 billion Internet users across the world, representing around 40% of the world’s population, and showing a tenfold increase in users between 1999 and 2013 (internetlivestats.com, 2015), the phenomenon of virtual connectivity has impacted the way populations, cultures, and sub-cultures interact (Gehl 2009, 44). Furthermore, LGBT youth are five times more likely to use the Internet as a tool to find information and connect with others,
with LGBT youth spending “an average of 5 hours online each day – approximately 45 minutes more than non-LGBT youth…” (GLSEN, 2013). The content available online therefore warrants investigation and analysis. What is this online content, what does it tell us about offline life, what themes emerge, and what is the significance of this content? Within the context of this cyber-ethnographic research, I argue that the Internet allows the narratives, experiences, and bodies of transpeople to be self-represented and self-empowered, therefore increasing the legibility and legitimization of their identities to both cis and trans people.

This thesis focuses on transgender YouTube vloggers and their interactions with themes of community, identity/narrative formation, (de)legitimization of identity, self-representation, self-documentation, intersectional feminism, and binaries. It is important to note that several themes and issues of the FTM YouTube community will be left unexplored, though I aim to address the core themes presented in my multi-year experiences on YouTube. Furthermore, this thesis contains elements of auto-ethnography due to my own identity as a transperson and my longtime personal connections with YouTube and trans vloggers. As “Western societies have established the confession as one of the main rituals we rely on” (Foucault 1978, 56), these reflexive video confessionals by transpeople offer unique insights into the many and varied trans communities, into power of self-representation, self-archival, and into cyberculture itself.

Media anthropology, which is a field arguably at the forefront of the future of anthropology, is distinguished from traditional anthropology through its focus on digitally manufactured cultures rather than indigenous cultures (Bengtsson 2014, 864). Cyber communities hemorrhage data – they create and collect millions of digitized interactions every minute – and this data offers insight into the online components of our lives (Gehl 2009, 55). Because every community that exists online has components offline, this data must be
juxtaposed with more ‘traditionally’ obtained ethnographic data; online and the offline are not mutually exclusive, nor can the field of anthropology continue to encourage the ‘internet’/‘reality’ binary. As I experienced when I began interacting with YouTube communities, “online spaces have significant consequences for how people live, and thus how researchers should study social life” (Hallett and Barber 2013, 309). My seemingly benign curiosity in the videos these vloggers were posting became “viral” over my many years of casual watching. My interest in the online space created by these vloggers wherein transness was explored, experienced, and normalized began to grow from a curiosity to an obsession, from an obsession to focused personal questioning, and from personal questioning to self-realization – a narrative, I’ve learned, that is far from unique.

Becoming aware of my transness while studying abroad in Edinburgh, Scotland, I began to virtually meet other Scottish transpeople through YouTube, easing into Scottish trans culture online, which decreased my apprehension about connecting with Scottish trans people offline. As I told Charles Thomy, a longtime vlogger and one of my interview subjects, “I learned how to speak about my transness through YouTube, and through people like you” (Harlow in Charles interview, March 1, 2016). My process of transferring my online experiences to my offline actions exemplifies why many ‘traditional’ ethnographies on solely ‘offline’ fields, that avoid engagement with online spaces, may not discover the most epistemologically salient data (Hallett and Barber 2013, 308). In other words, understanding the overlap between online and offline culture is key to contextualizing and deeply understanding experiences seemingly isolated online or offline. It is for this reason that my fieldwork, which focused on YouTube.com, engaged with online material and experiences as well as offline repercussions.
It must be acknowledged that cyber-ethnography (also often referred to in literature as internet-ethnography, virtual-ethnography, and media-ethnography) as a practice has developed only in recent decades in tandem with technological development. While some of the first cyber-ethnographers designed studies that primarily examined identity, relationship formation, and community building processes through interactions in chat rooms, blogs, and forums, more current cyber-ethnographers engage with participants of online communities in both offline and online spaces (Hallett and Barber 2013, 312). Due to time constraints and the logistics of writing an undergraduate thesis, this study follows in the footsteps of the first cyber-ethnographers, and will focus nearly entirely on data collected online, primarily on YouTube.com and through Skype interviews.

There are “three central features that characterize the emerging field of transgender studies: first, the capacity for new insights into embodied experience; second, the heterogeneity of theoretical positions, identification, embodiment, and disciplinary backgrounds that characterize the contributors to this emerging field; and third, the importance of transgender-identified scholars in producing these insights (see also Stryker 2006)” (Valentine 2007, 146). In attempts to respond to anthropologist David Valentine and theorist Susan Stryker’s three central features of trans studies, this thesis, subjectively written by a transgender-identified scholar, attempts to reveal insights into embodied experiences both online and offline while showing the heterogeneity of these FTM vlogger communities. These insights are intended to build upon and converse with the pioneer theorists of the field, namely Tom Boellstorff (digital anthropologist), Susan Stryker (transgender theorist and founder of Transgender Studies Quarterly), Kate Bornstein (gender theorist and public figure), Donna Haraway (socialist-feminist theorist), and Sandy Stone (student of Haraway and theorist).
Methodology and Cyberethnography

My methodology for this project can be broken into three (3) interconnected parts, with the second and third parts engaging in cyber-ethnographic methods. (1) Because it was important to distinguish my casual vlog watching from my ethnographic research, I studied cyberethnographic methods.¹ I then read core texts on cyberculture, community, embodiment, narrative development, anthropology of the body, anthropology of gender, and transgender-related topics within medical anthropology. Relevant excerpts of this literature research will be woven into ethnographic data throughout this thesis. Much of my own ethnographic data was acquired through the second part of my methodology, which would traditionally be deemed “participant observation” (Rybas and Gajjala 2007). (2) I immersed myself into trans cultures on YouTube, watching videos, reading comments, clicking on recommended channels/videos, and exploring profiles. Because my fieldsite was online and therefore always accessible, I made an effort to engage with the site on a daily basis throughout my research period. Instead of following my usual pattern of checking the YouTube channels I most preferred to visit, I stepped back from my ingrained preferences and let the videos, comments, and video recommendations guide my research, paralleling the experience of a curious Internet user. This included typing keywords such as ‘FTM trans media’ into YouTube’s search bar, clicking a video with a relevant title and intriguing thumbnail photo,² watching/listening to the video while observing the comments section of the video, and clicking on videos that YouTube’s algorithms have dubbed related or recommended.

I combed through several hundred vlogs by trans individuals and groups (mostly identifying as FTM – ‘female to male,’ which is in itself a debated term³) on dozens of channels on YouTube as a participant observer, and transcribed relevant videos that engage with themes
that stood out from part one of my methodology. As I was particularly interested in the idea of online community, many of the videos I cite come from a collaboration channel called “FTMtranstastic,” which was created in 2010 by vlogger Chase Ross and is home to a rotating selection of vloggers who post videos every day of the week on selected weekly topics (discussed in depth on page 34). My ethnographic data came primarily from vlog, enriched by part three of my methodology: interviews with several YouTubers, including (aforementioned) Chase Ross.

(3) I conducted these interviews remotely via Skype and YouTube, as these vloggers I studied live in a number of countries around the world, including Canada, Sweden, and the United States. One of my subjects, Liam Rutz, uploaded a YouTube video called “Harlow’s Questions” in response to my interview questions to his YouTube channel, mirroring the aesthetic of his other videos (some of which are examined in this thesis), which played with the form of interviews in the context of cyberethnography. Engaging with the people behind the screens whom I had been watching for so many years has been a humbling and surprisingly difficult experience, wherein the individuals who I built up in my mind as role models, fellow community members, and empathetic thinkers became all too human; sending emails requesting to set up interviews and corresponding directly through our screens reminded me of the tangibility of our offline lives. It had been all-too-easy to feel a profound connection with these vloggers during all of my years of casually visiting YouTube to watch them talk to themselves, each other, and their audiences, that when it came time to become a ‘participant,’ I felt profoundly vulnerable. This vulnerability was rewarded, however, by the genuine interest and kindness of my interview subjects.
As my three interview subjects have all worked within academia, our conversations were charged with remnants of academic vernacular. This was particularly apparent in my interview with Chase Ross, who has published his research on trans-related topics to Academia.com and is currently writing his dissertation for a Masters in Sociology. During our Skype conversation, Chase remarked about how it felt strange to be the interviewee, rather than the interviewer, as he has been conducting extensive research on tattoos and transpeople after finding ample interested subjects through YouTube (Chase Ross, March 6, 2016). He noted that throughout his Masters research, which involved volunteer participants from his YouTube viewership, he saw that “people want research done about them done on them – trans people doing [research] on trans people… [because] its going to make it so much more accessible for people to read it if you have first hand experience” (Ibid.). As a trans person writing my thesis on trans people, this was invigorating to hear.

Another of my three interview subjects, Liam, is immersed in academia, studying gender and sexuality in Sweden. His involvement in my research included him uploading a video in the style of one of his vlogs in response to my interview questions. Beyond being intriguing simply for his interview format echoing the format being explored in this very thesis, his interview responses were tactful and intellectual, and shares his own intellectual analyses. Taking on a slightly less academic perspective, my third interview subject, Charles Thomy (who is known as Charles Asher on YouTube), while often cited in academic and non-academic texts alike, shares a perspective of the first FTM transgender YouTuber. His background as an English major and Documentary Film concentrator has broadened his visual studies vocabulary and given him an interest in participating in academic projects. I was transparent with each of my subjects about my (many-year) history of watching their videos, and about my goals of this thesis, and I was
met with welcoming, enthusiastic, and thoughtful responses. The words of Chase, Liam, and Charles, as heard through my interviews (or a video, in Liam’s case), joined by the voices of several other YouTubers, will be written throughout this thesis in dialogue with the words of several academics. As my three interview subjects are public figures on YouTube and have shared their personal information online, pseudonyms have not be used.

My studies have broadened my understanding of the importance of accessible online spaces as well as the evolution of academia into increasingly digitized spaces, so I have constructed an interactive website that complements this paper thesis. This website includes text found in these pages, and, most importantly, links to the referenced videos I have been studying. This is in response to Donna Haraway’s concept of Hypertext (Gaggi 1997, 112) – the concept that there is always more underneath the surface text to complicate or compliment the surface material. An example of academic hypertext is Sandy Stone’s *Empire Strikes Back: A Posttransexual Manifesto*, which stands alone as a theoretical text, but also acts as an expansion and response to Donna Haraway’s *A Cyborg Manifesto*. I have had the privilege and access points to view these FTM YouTube videos through an academic lens, enhanced by countless texts and conversations in academic spaces, but the videos themselves hold much more insight and nuance than any pedagogically coded written words could. As such, I encourage readers to view this website in tandem with (or in place of) this paper text, so you are able to click on quotes and video links to watch the vloggers themselves speak directly to you through the mode of hypertext. This process allows you, the reader and viewer, to become a form of participant observer, and demonstrates the power of accessible online mediums. The website can be viewed at hfiga4.wix.com/thesis.
Accessibility

As seen in Figure 1 below, YouTube’s slogan read “Broadcast Yourself” from the site’s creation in 2005 through the year 2012, encouraging video exhibition of nearly any kind (with the exclusion of explicit sexual content or copyright infringement). Demonstrating an immediate appreciation for the opportunity to participate in a visual culture of self-representation, “the first group of trans vloggers started in 2006, the same year that YouTube became the Internet’s most popular visual medium” (Raun 2015, 701). Unlike ever before, these trans individuals were able to represent themselves (and communicate with one another) through an easily accessible audio/visual medium. As noted by writer Sarah Benat-Weiser, “‘broadcasting yourself’ is also a way to brand oneself, a practice deployed by individuals to communicate personal values, ideas, and beliefs using strategies and logic from commercial brand culture” (Benat-Weiser 2011, 278). While the initial intention of these trans vloggers was certainly not to create a brand, though this concept will be explored on page 50, they have created a validating space of self-expression outside the grasp of regulated production culture. YouTube is a place where these trans vloggers can log on, (nearly) regardless of their geographic location, and broadcast themselves to potential viewers.

Figure 1. YouTube logo 2005-2012.

Source: Logos.wikia.com.

For both Charles and Liam, broadcasting themselves involves speaking directly to camera as if it were their audience, capturing an aesthetic that Charles, who is a social media marketer, describes as a “minimalistic, lo-fi, bedroom culture. I want [my videos] to look clean, but I’m not
trying to make a TV show” (Charles, March 1, 2016). Charles has been “broadcasting” himself – posting videos on YouTube – for nine years, since May 7, 2006, and hasn’t changed his aesthetic form of broadcasting throughout these years, unlike Chase. Over Chase’s six years posting on YouTube, he has changed his vlogging aesthetic from mirroring Liam and Charles to a more production-heavy setup with lights, a consistent (cat-filled) background, and a professional camera, as seen in Figure 2, below.

![Figure 2. Examples of vlogging aesthetic of Liam Rutz (left), Charles Thomy (right), and Chase Ross (bottom). Source: Youtube.com/User/WHO Alydia, Youtube.com/user/charlesasher, and Youtube.com/uppercaseCHASE1](image)

While taking different aesthetic approaches, Liam, Charles, and Chase broadcast themselves with the same principle in mind – accessibility. I have found accessibility to be of prime importance to online trans communities and individual vloggers, as being able to easily see, hear, and engage with fellow individuals with marginalized identities is a core goal for most content creators. For Charles, this accessibility, which is sometimes equated with intimacy, comes through a simple aesthetic form: “I want it to be accessible - I want it to feel like I’m
talking to you from a bedroom, and that I’m a real person. … People seem to connect with that because it's so stripped down, and just honest, raw, - people really feel that they know me” (Ibid.). For Chase, however, working within the (proven) ideology that visible higher video production value often leads to higher numbers of views, explained in his interview that his more advanced vlogging style is because he wants more views: “Maybe its because I want more views? But I don’t think its in a greedy way - I want to help people ... I know that the things that I’m saying are helpful, because they keep saying it helps them. So its like, if I can help these people, maybe I can help more people” (Chase Ross, March 6, 2017). Chase’s approach has garnered him over 3,256,000 video views and 40,300 subscribers (as of March 2016, Youtube.com/uppercaseCHASE1), while Liam and Charles’s tactics have earned them lower viewer/subscriber numbers. As of March 2016, Charles has over 7,740 subscribers and 7,967,800 video views, while Liam has 1,785 subscribers and 162,600 video views (Youtube.com/user/charlesasher, Youtube.com/user/WHOAlydia).

Regardless of subscription and view numbers, all three of my interview subjects sustain a high amount of interactions with their viewers on YouTube, beyond broadcasting themselves through video. The user interactions secondary to broadcasting oneself has been one of the more appealing aspects of YouTube to Liam, as one of his main goals in vlogging is making his videos “…accessible to anyone who has access to the Internet … I like the accessibility in that you don’t have to be a master of the internet to find my videos, all you have to do is just type in ‘trans’ and maybe I’ll show up” (Liam Rutz, March 7, 2016). While Liam’s videos do not appear in the first few pages of searching ‘trans’ on YouTube, they do show up on later pages, as do the videos of Charles, Chase, and hundreds of other vloggers. The term “accessibility” will be used frequently throughout this thesis by subjects, referenced scholars, and me. I have defined this
term as the inclusivity of physical/financial/material ability to enter cyberspace, comprehensible online content (including the recent movement towards captioning all vlogs so as to make the content accessible to those with hearing difficulties), intuitiveness of using websites like YouTube, and ease of online communication and interaction.

**Feminist Structure and Content**

As the Feminist Online Media Mantrafesto states, “Political communities demand spaces, both virtual and real, spaces demand access, [and] Access begs literacy” (FOMM 2015). YouTube is an accessible platform, both for those producing and those watching. By the ideology of the aforementioned FOMM, YouTube can therefore be constituted as a feminist platform. Through the hundreds of thousands of videos posted by FTM YouTubers, an ever-expanding space is created for their intersectionally engaged community, and literacy becomes accessible to anyone who desires to add their voice or listen. The feminist nature of YouTube – wherein equal access is inherent – is important to address, particularly when studying gender minorities on the site. Furthermore, the feminist schema through which videos posted by trans vloggers enhances the intersectionality and accessibility of new rising forms of feminism.

For these reasons, I argue that trans vloggers are at the apex of the Fourth Wave of feminism. The Internet is argued to have “enabled a shift from ‘third-wave’ to ‘fourth-wave’ feminism. … [And] it is increasingly clear that the Internet has facilitated the creation of a global community of feminists who use the Internet both for discussion and activism” (Munro 2013). The use of the Internet itself is not why I argue that these vloggers are significant in the emerging Fourth Wave, however – the Wave is characterized by “intersectionality – the idea that different axes of oppression intersect, producing complex and often contradictory results” (Munro 2013).
The expansion of feminism to include those within oppressed gender populations, such as transgender individuals, is just one mode of intersectionality. Other modes of intersectionality include diversity in global location, race, class, ability, sexuality, gender expression, religion, education, (and the list continues somewhat indefinitely) – modes that are represented and explored by trans vloggers on YouTube.

Munro’s text on Fourth Wave Feminism addresses the vernacular expansion that has come with the Fourth Wave (secondary to Internet expansion): “For newcomers, the vocabulary can be dizzying, from ‘cis’ (a neologism referring to those individuals whose gender and sexual identities map cleanly on to one another) to ‘WoC’ (‘women of colour’) and ‘TERF’ (‘trans-exclusionary radical feminists’)” (2013). Once this and related vocabulary is adopted and/or contested through the Internet, however, understanding and communicating with this vernacular becomes second nature, as I experienced. As my research expanded, so too did my vernacular – by the time I Skyped with Chase, I understood all of the many terms that at first seemed like distant “lingo.” I also realized that we used similar non-standard (and non-trans-related) terminology such as “thank” instead of “thanks,” jokingly, and (trans-related) “baby tran” instead of “young trans person,” also jokingly (Chase, March 6, 2016).

Not only have trans populations used the Internet to create, define, and communicate vernacular, but trans populations have used mechanisms of the Internet to enrich their own vernacular. This is exemplified in the asterisk (*) that is commonly placed at the end of the word trans – e.g. ‘Trans*’. The addition of the asterisk to the term ‘trans’ comes from a mechanism incorporated into most Internet search engine; the ‘wildcard’ function of search engines such as Google allows Internet users to type a prefix, followed by an asterisk, to yield results containing all iterations of the word beginning with a specific prefix (Tompkins 2014, 27). For example,
you could enter “trans*” in a search bar, which would yield results for ‘transgender,’ ‘transition,’ ‘transgressive,’ ‘transcend,’ ‘transverse,’ and so on. Similarly, in trans-aware vernacular, adding the asterisk to the end of ‘trans’ “signals greater inclusivity of new gender identities and expressions and better represents a broader community of individuals” (Tompkins 2014, 27), allowing the term to remain inclusive of a variety of non-cis identities such as two-spirit, non-binary, agender, etc. While this thesis does not use the term ‘trans*,’ it is implied that the use of ‘trans’ includes all identities under the ‘trans umbrella’ – that is, all non-cis identities (Currah, Moore, and Stryker 2008).

The collaboration channel FTMtranstastic, to be later discussed in depth, has made their ‘topic of the week’ “feminism” three separate times throughout their time online, discussing topics intersecting with feminism and their personal beliefs. Interestingly, many vloggers admit to not knowing much about the topic and wanting to educate themselves further, particularly through YouTube itself. This adds a level of complexity to their vlogs and vlogging culture, demonstrating the power of the site and its contributors to educate. In one of his 2013 videos, a vlogger named Val recognizes this power:

“Our channel is popular enough where people do stumble onto these videos, and that means that our channel has a lot of power. And it has a lot of power to change people’s thinking for the better or for the worse, depending on how we choose to use that power. … There’s another cool thing about it – every single person that interacts with this channel gets to have that same kind of power. If you make a comment, that comment will be seen by however many people see that video.”
(Val vlog, September 28, 2013)

This power is cultivated and manifests dually; firstly, the sheer visibility that YouTube offers these trans vloggers is a mode of representational power, and secondly, YouTube has the ability to be a medium for influential intersectional, feminist education. With the self-representation and socially progressive (Fourth-Wave) education that YouTube fosters comes
new vocabulary and ways of speaking – a cyber-trans vernacular (see Figure 3). Author Sarah Banet-Weiser states that YouTube is an unstable subject of study “in part because of it’s double function as both a top-down platform for the distribution of popular culture and a bottom up platform for vernacular creativity,” (2011, 278) a creativity that is utilized and stretched to its very limits with nearly every video upload. Vernacular is defined as “the terminology used by people belonging to a specified group or engaging in a specialized activity” (New Oxford American Dictionary 2015). In the case of this thesis, the ‘specified group’ is FTM trans individuals, and the ‘specialized activity’ is vlogging on YouTube. The vocabulary used in their videos, while explained in several videos and other sites, often requires some level of base knowledge (hence why I have included an extensive glossary for this thesis).

Figure 3. Example of user-generated educational material about spectrums and differences of sexual orientation, gender identity, and gender expression. This screenshot shows basic vernacular in discussions of gender identity. Source: Youtube.com/BentonSorensen

**Online Elasticity of Gender Spectrum and Legitimization**
Expanding vernacular of trans communities and identities through the Internet is not only an important way to address the social constructions around gender, but is also a form of legitimizing and creating identity. The nearly ubiquitous socially constructed gender binary has been broken down time and time again on YouTube by trans and non-binary vloggers discussing their experiences with and transgressions of the binary. “Indeed, that “transgender” can stand both as a descriptor of individual identity and simultaneously as a general term for gendered transgressions of many kinds makes it almost indefinitely elastic” (Valentine 2007, 39).

YouTube and its video creators contribute to this elasticity by pairing their own imagery and humanity with vernacular, legitimizing identities that would otherwise be silenced in most offline spaces, as discussed by Judith Butler in her influential text *Gender Trouble*. “The cultural matrix through which gender identity has become intelligible requires that certain kinds of 'identities' cannot 'exist' - that is, those in which gender does not follow from sex and those in which the practices of desire do not 'follow' from either sex or gender” (Butler 2001, 23). The cultural matrix referenced by Butler, however, is altered in online space, where body and mind can be both united and disconnected simultaneously, and where discussion of the gendered properties of both the body and mind can occur without the typical cisgender-patriarchal structures that impose on most offline spaces. Furthermore, as articulated by a vlogger speaking in a video called “NON-BINARY VOICES!,” “on a wider scale, the presence of non-binary people in society is another catalyst towards breaking down the traditional gender roles which our still present today” (Jake vlog, February 25, 2016).

YouTube not only makes visible agentive trans bodies and identities, but it also expands vernacular and opportunities of trans embodiment. “Entering cyberspace blurs the boundaries between the body and gender due to the plethora of possibilities available to the user through the
joining of the real and the imagined. The new space of cyberspace has become important as a contextual feature for new versions of the self” (Billman 2019, 27). This alludes to what Haraway may refer to as a cyborg being in her seminal text, *A Cyborg Manifesto*. The body/mind dualism is further broken by Haraway in her blending of not just the technological with the “natural,” but also with her blending of the human with the technological. Her rejection of dualistic divisions between human/organism and machine enforces her ideology of transgressing socially enforced boundaries, such as the gender binary. The gender binary has been broken down time and time again on YouTube by non-binary vloggers discussing their experiences with and resistance of the binary, and by vloggers applying non-binary vernacular to their syntax.

When asked about how his gender exists online, and how his gender may be different offline, Liam discussed how cyberspace allows a form of safety – when being himself online, he can always close his laptop and walk away if expressing his identity becomes dangerous, a safety mechanism not available offline. “My gender becomes much more expressive online in terms of what I want to show,” Liam shares, “while in a physical reality, like I said, I’m very much confined to how people perceive me and what I’m safe with and comfortable with expressing to people” (Liam, March 7, 2016). Whereas offline interaction includes the threat of physical violence and rejection of gender identity based upon a “passing” or “non-passing” appearance, online spaces protect from physical harm, allow individuals to show/hide “passing” and “non-passing” physical features, and contextualize individuals based only upon how they have defined themselves. It is the safety of cyberspace, combined with the non-traditional forms of communication, endless space for community growth, and control over one’s own aesthetic that I believe promotes the expansion of the gender spectrum and of trans-related vernacular.
The bodies of those often-oppressed – queer bodies – are gazed upon in most physical cultures without the consent of those living within those bodies. This is a form of loss of safety that comes with offline interactions, and manifests in the body being subject to more power dynamics, attention, and judgment than the mind. A major distinction between offline and online life is that online, the mind and the body can be truly disconnected from each other (Billman 2010, 19-20); the body and the mind can exist both separately and together in online spaces, where ideas, desires, and subjective experiences can be expressed free from the body, and the body can be expressed free from the physical limitations of offline space. This was particularly true towards the beginning of Charles’ transition, as he noted in our interview: “it used to be more like I existed online, you know? Like that's where my body lives” (Charles, March 1, 2016). On the one hand, this could be a mode of erasure (Gunkel, 1998) – in non-visual online mediums such as comment sections of YouTube, a black transwoman would need to announce her identities to be understood in context with her subjective experiences. But on the other hand, this could be a mode of freedom; a space to express one’s thoughts, emotions, and opinions without a perceived identity forced upon an individual due to physical appearance. This notion is particularly poignant with trans individuals who may not ‘pass’ as the gender with which they identify in offline spaces but can exist most honestly in cyberspace. Just as cyberspace occupies a space between reality and intangibility, “a transgender person is someone who occupies the borderlands between communities and identities” (Siebler 133), so perhaps an explanation for the strong and populated online communities is due to a similarity in straddling spaces. Kay Siebler’s text also states, however, to my disagreement, that the Internet reinforces gender and sex binaries:

“…For all the strides we have made as a culture of embracing and complicating queerness in the Digital Age – for all the communities and groups that the internet
offers to queer folks finding their way in the world – we have taken a step backwards in relation to breaking out of the gender/sex binaries…” (Siebler 133).

Throughout my many years of video watching, and then throughout my focused research period for this thesis, I found these binaries to be fairly irrelevant in these trans online spaces, building my disagreement with Siebler. The FTM YouTube communities, while certainly defining and embracing elements of masculinity and femininity, often challenge binary ideologies, with one channel even challenging the term FTM by promoting the term “FTX”.5 Furthermore, I could easily identify several non-binary vloggers, as well as many queer trans vloggers and collaboration channels. Interestingly, however, I was surprised to hear a sentiment expressed by Chase, who often discusses gender as a spectrum, as well as his queer identity, in agreement with Siebler: “[YouTube] enforces the gender binary like there's no tomorrow” (Chase, March 6, 2016). I was further surprised to hear Liam, who frequently discusses his genderqueerness, say that “[YouTube] definitely enforces gender binaries” (Liam, March 7, 2016). I’ve questioned how we could have come to know YouTube so differently – could my research have been vastly incomplete? Do their experiences on YouTube lack the comprehensiveness that was attempted in targeted research? Do YouTube’s algorithms show us what we want to see?6 Has my own non-binary identity influenced my research to the point that I choose to perceive the site as more inclusive of identities like mine than the site truly is? Or are we simply examining different angles of YouTube?

I’ve concluded – as much as one can, when drawing conclusions about a constantly shifting medium – that while YouTube certainly expands the gender spectrum through hosting videos by and about non-binary identities (see Figure 4 below), the most accessible videos and channels are both cisnormative and heteronormative. This point was articulated by Liam in his interview video:
“If you look up the most popular videos for transmen - if you just type in 'FTM' - some videos have [millions of views], and these people are all heterosexual, male identified - they're all post-op top surgery, they're all white, ... their gender identity is always male or transmale, but it's never anything other than that. And you could call that a coincidence, which I don’t, or you could say that FTM trans culture definitely pushes those people to the top of the hierarchy of transness and say that they’re doing it the right way, and that their bodies are looking exactly right, [that] we should all strive to look like that …” (Liam, March 7, 2016).

Liam’s description of the most popular ‘mainstream’ FTM YouTube videos does describe many of the most-watched FTM trans videos on YouTube, with several (less popular) exceptions of non-binary, non-straight, non-white, and individuals who haven’t had surgical or hormonal interventions. These individuals and their videos are rare, however, particularly in contrast with the plentiful videos and view counts of their cis-passing, male-identified, straight, white, post-op, testosterone-administering vlogging counterparts. Chase noted that this lack of non-binary queer representation is “…very negative and really reinforces the binary and heteronormative culture that we live in, which sucks because we're the people who are breaking down the binary, but we're not [through our videos on YouTube]” (Chase, March 6, 2016). This is in line with Chase’s call for more intersectional and minority representation on YouTube. For Liam, part of the reason that his non-binary identity and understandings are not overtly discussed – which may give insight to why other vloggers omit non-binary conversations – is due in part to concerns about accessibility of his own videos. He shared, “… I get very hesitant to discuss theoretical ideas of gender, what is gender, what is transness, are we - in a post-structuralist sense - are we creating ourselves this way, and does our expression of our trans identity allow for younger people to also become trans? ... all of these questions that are a little less palatable, I feel like I do present a very palatable, digestible, whatever-you-want-to-call-it, uh, representation of myself on
It is therefore his desire to be accessible that limits the accessibility to his opinions, analysis, and critique of the gender binary.

While it is clear that the collection of ‘mainstream’ FTM self-representations on YouTube is lacking diversity in gender identity, gender expression, sexual orientation, race, and path of transition, from my perspective as a researcher and community member, there is no denying that non-binary voices are indeed being heard through YouTube (see Figure 4), which, to a smaller audience, expands the gender spectrum and accompanying vernacular. A search for “non-binary” on YouTube yields 269,000 results, compared to 307,000 results for searching “ftm,” and 921,000 results for searching “transgender” (YouTube.com, March 2016). Though these result numbers do not indicate the precise amount of videos uploaded on each subject, nor do they give insight about who is uploading or watching these videos, the result numbers show relative interest on YouTube, and indicate that a significant interest in non-binary identities is indeed present, despite not attracting many viewers. Thus, it is evident that the user-centered, user-dependent nature of the site has therefore led to several series of contradictions and ambivalences wherein each user experience is as valid as one another.

Figure 4. Search suggestions on YouTube when typing “non-binary.” The number of search results is also visible to the right of the search bar. Source: Youtube.com
In 1994, over a decade before YouTube’s release, disappointed by the gender and binary perceptions of society, groundbreaking transgender writer Kate Bornstein wrote that ze had “come to see the gender system created by this culture as a particularly malevolent and divisive construct, made all the more dangerous by the seeming inability of the culture to question gender, its own creation…studies conducted by the duly-appointed representatives of the culture were still done on the basis of observation, not conversation” (Bornstein 12). On the contrary to Siebler’s belief that the “Digital Age” has reinforced binaries, and as a response to Bornstein’s call for a conversation on the construction of gender in our culture, the Internet offers ample platforms for the deconstruction of binaries and understandings of gender and sex. By the sheer nature of the Internet, more voices, not just those “duly-appointed,” can be heard and digested from an accessible medium; transgender YouTubers present their autobiographical stories in a format different “than the transgender writers who came before them, using the medium of film and serialization. They do not present a solid, cohesive story right from the beginning, but one that is ever-changing and growing” (Deshane 142-3). YouTube fulfills Bornstein’s desire for culture that questions gender, as it involves conversation, both between the viewer and the content creators and between the content creators themselves. This is where the power of narrative within the context of cyberculture becomes most relevant.

The Internet serves several purposes in the construction of narrative; firstly, it is a place where hundreds of thousands of transgender individuals have shared their narratives, open for any individual to see (and/or adopt into their own narrative). Secondly, the Internet serves as a place to create one’s own narrative. As Tobias Raun wrote in his ethnography about vlogging as a vehicle of transformation, he sees that the Internet can be a “mirror with transformative potentials” (Raun 2012, 366). In the case of YouTube, the (far from static) images reflected in
the mirror – a long-term narrative – can be constructed over time, under the influence of and in context with many others. Chase noted that YouTube “is there to help people explore identity … I think being able to see what you are going to be like in the future is helpful - that's what helped me. So seeing what I might potentially look like and what a life could be if I was trans .... Seeing the actual lived experiences of trans people outside of being trans really helped.” (Chase, March 6, 2016). Being able to look into the metaphorical mirror that is the Internet and see a reflection of diverse lived experiences in the form of mass-autobiography is increasingly more tangible to a variety of viewers as more and more individuals begin recording and posting their vlogs. As noted by Jay Prosser, one of the most common ways that individuals validate and discover their transgender identities is through autobiography (1998, 110). When in the context of cyberculture, “as teens and other people within the transgender community produce vlogs and transition journals, they are creating a wealth of information online for other transgender people to access, building a distinct community, and creating their own forms of autobiography” (Deshane 2013, 70).

Noting similarities and connections that form community throughout the process of narrative analysis is equally important as noting differences, particularly in the context of transgender studies (which nearly always is reduced to a single narrative experience). As written in one of the most respected transgender publications in the US, Transgender Studies Quarterly, “Paying attention to the highly variable and sometimes contradictory narratives that transgender subjects actually use to describe and explain their experiences of classist, racist, sexist, and ableist exploitation is a necessary pedagogical practice” (Galarte 147). Conversations about these contradictions – often presenting as conflicts within the community – are often discussed by vloggers. One example of this pedagogical practice is Chase’s dedication to converse about
expectations within online trans communities surrounding the idea of being “Trans enough,” and who can identify as being trans. While some vloggers believe that an individual must experience a certain collection of emotions, experiences, and desires to identify as “trans,” others (like Chase), take a more liberal approach and view the trans experience as inherently subjective. Not only do Chase and other vloggers engage in dialogues about variable and contradictory topics such as being “trans enough,” but they too engage in dialogue with themselves; on January 5, 2012, Chase uploaded a video called “trans enough,” discussing his feelings, and then uploaded another video on October 6, 2015 entitled “Am I “Trans Enough” (Revisited),” wherein he discuss how his views (and community views) have shifted since his video rom three years before, noting how trans inclusion has evolved over years.

YouTube offers accessible inclusion of individuals that are often silenced, as the very structure of cyberspace legitimizes many identities that marginalized and silenced in mainstream culture. Identities “mediated by class, gender, geographical location, race, caste, and other unequal power relations … have always existed, but have not often been performed in legitimized public spaces. In cyberspace there is a less clear line between “legitimate” and “illegitimate,” authorized and unauthorized public spaces” (Rybas and Gajjala 2007, 181-2). Studying these cultures online allows the ethnographer to understand these identities independent of the power structures generally imposed on oppressed individuals. Furthermore as “bodies and their socially encoded meanings can be understood only in specific spatial, temporal and cultural contexts” (Longhurst 2001, 11), YouTube offers a space for these bodies to be understood in a context unlike any other.

While many identities are indeed legitimized on YouTube, simply through their inclusion, visualization, and (often) prideful self-representation, it is of vital importance to
acknowledge the forms of delegitimizaiton of marginalized identities that exist on YouTube. Liam sees a form of attempted de-legitimization of identity through the high prevalence of hetero-/cis-normativity found in many popular vlogs. However, he doesn’t think that this is inherently de-legitimizing: “I think it’s just someone who is speaking their opinion, and that can be an oppressive opinion, but it doesn’t, in the end, delegitimize anyone’s identity” (Liam, March 7, 2016). What is more overtly de-legitimizing, however, are the ways in which some YouTube spaces reproduce inequalities and exclusions that exist offline. This is most notable in the lack of racial diversity.

One of the more recent topics posted by FTMtranstastic was on Trans Visibility and Representation. Within these videos, each FTMtranstastic contributor addressed issues of visibility and representation both in mass media and on YouTube, and the issue of race frequently arose in frustration. The issue of the lack of racial diversity on YouTube also came up in my interviews with Chase, Charles, and Liam. As Chase shared, "I try as hard as I can to support and promote the people who aren’t white because, especially the people who are most popular (like Skylar, Aidyen, Ty, me, - who people know) are all white. … there is one person on YouTube who is not white who is popular … He’s someone who has a lot of views but nobody knows him” (Chase, March 6, 2016). Chase was referring to longtime vlogger and musician Kamari Marchbanks, who was also mentioned by Charles in his interview during our discussion about race. Kamari, who is known as “Lyrikal” online, is one of the only frequently viewed black transmen on YouTube. Applying Liam’s idea of an FTM trans culture hierarchy, non-white, non-binary, and non-queer identities fall towards the bottom, while cis-passing, straight, white transmen rise to the top. The lack of racial diversity, inclusion, and popularity of
trans people of color on YouTube is a topic that deserves its own thesis, as it speaks to several axes of oppression that are unwavering between offline and online spaces.

**Cataloguing Capability of YouTube**

One unique mechanism of YouTube is its inherent cataloguing capability. Videos capturing changes can be explored by anyone, at any time, from their first post through their most recent post. For example, Charles Thomy posted his first video almost ten years ago (on May 17\textsuperscript{th}, 2006), showing himself getting his 4\textsuperscript{th} ever testosterone shot. It was the punctual cataloguing capability of YouTube that encouraged Charles Thomy to begin vlogging. As the first FTM vlogger, there was no precedence for what trans vlogs were, what could be on YouTube, who would be watching, or what repercussions could be. Charles was an English major with a concentration in documentary film at the time he began physically transitioning, and his film professor sat him down and asked if he was documenting his transition, saying that it would be a mistake if he didn’t (Charles, March 1, 2016). Charles has continued to post videos to his channel, ten years later, about his life, his hobbies, and trans-related topics, averaging several hundred views and dozens of comments per video.

The development of his narrative and body is all online for him to see reflected back and for viewers to relate with, critique, and create dialogue. “As living archives, trans vlogs offer a unique opportunity to access and share embodied trans knowledge that were previously limited or inaccessible, particularly visual accounts of medical transitioning processes” (Raun 2015, 704). Furthermore, as these vlogs are public, viewers can follow the lives of the vloggers they watch. In a vlog called “I’m the future me from 5 years ago,” Chase Ross speaks directly to the viewer: “It’s literally so weird because I know that there are a couple of people here,” he says,
pointing at the camera with a pen, “who have literally watched me since my first video on
YouTube, so for you, you are seeing what I told myself “oh in five years what am I going to
look like?” well this is in five years – I am that five years person that I talked about five years
ago” (Chase Vlog, January 25, 2014).

On an even more metaphysical level, the cataloguing capability of modern technology
has allowed vloggers to be able to have pseudo-conversations with themselves. A vlogger named
Wes recorded a video for himself while he was one year on testosterone, asking his future self
questions. Four years later, he responded to the questions that he asked himself, and posted the
video to YouTube, titled “Interviewing Myself: 1 year on T / 4 years on T.” The video starts with
him talking to his camera outside, and later cuts to video of him (four years later) sitting on a
stool in a house. The first few lines of the video are below.

Wes, 12 months on T: “Hey dude.”

Wes, 4 years on T: “Hey dude!”

Wes, 12 months on T: “I just had my 12 months on T. How many months are you
at now?”

Wes, 4 years on T: “Well, today is September 1st 2015, which means that I am four
years on T now.”

Wes, 12 months on T: “I have so many questions for you…”

Wes, 4 years on T: “Like what?”

(Wes Vlog, September 3, 2015)

He asks himself questions throughout this fourteen-minute video, stretching the uses of YouTube
to its limits. “Although the vlog is repeatedly narrated as a process of documentation, it also
contains performative dimensions. The camera meticulously focuses in on every change—
muscles, hair, and facial features—and in so doing performatively
constitutes these effects as ‘masculinizing’” (Raun 2015, 704). A vlogger (and their viewers) can access and engage with any recorded version of their past selves, observing changes, similarities, trends, and identity growth. These vlogs, while capturing gendered physicalities and arguably performative dimensions, can also be seen as curated archives; “…for the most part, users do the curatorial work which is typically done in archives: gathering, editing, uploading, classification, as well as retrieval and exhibition” (Gehl 2009, 48). In tandem with the inherent self-representation that comes with self-archival, the personal living archives curated by YouTubers acts as another form of publically accessible empowerment and exercise of individual agency.

Transgender bodies are often marked as “that which is becoming (strange or other), always situated in opposition to the original body, which is uncritically associated with being (natural)” (Garner 31). On YouTube, depending on at what point in their physical transitions vloggers began to record and post (if they choose to undergo hormonal, surgical, or cosmetic modifications), their “original” bodies, in a digital form, are preserved online. Paired with the display of their bodies in some form (ranging from simply showing their face to revealing their whole bodies or parts that are sexed and gendered) is a narrative, implicit or explicit. Deshane argues “the transgender subject must determine how to narrate the gap between the body and their mind in order to make the flesh real” (Deshane 6). This narration is necessary on an internal level for transgender individuals in the reconciliation and development of identity, but it can also be accessibly external through the YouTube platform. The digital presence of trans bodies in varying and evolving states allows for a new and unique application of studies of the anthropology of the body.
FTMtranstastic and Online Community

"I love FTMtranstastic - its one of the things I’m so proud of. ...I’m the only original member left on it - I’m on like week 260 or something - I’ve never missed a week! ... It’s awesome to see the waves of people who have come and gone.” – Chase, March 6, 2016
Source: Interview via Skype

“FTMtranstastic” is one of the most popular FTM collaboration channels with over 3.3 million views and over 24,000 subscribers as of March 2016 (Youtube.com/FTMtranstastic), and is the fieldsite of a large portion of my ethnographic data. Since its creation in September 2010, its members have posted a video every day of the week on weekly topics ranging from broad themes such as coming out and using hormones, to more specific topics such as experiences at airports and menstruation. The channel has also had several weeks, relevantly, that are reflexive to online space, such as “Week 22: Cyberspace,” “Week 152: Internet Security and Privacy,” “Week 197: Why YouTube?,” and “Week 218: Secret Life of YouTuber.” These videos are easily searchable by keyword or by weekly topic (as seen in Figure 5, below), averaging around two thousand views per video and a couple dozen comments, some from viewers who seem to have stumbled upon these videos and some who frequently watch and comment. MIT social technology professor Sherry Turkle states that “virtually of cyberspace gives users choices, and through these choices, the ability to know themselves in ways that were not previously thought possible in offline spaces” (Billman 2010, 11). A common narrative both spoken by vloggers and written by viewers/commenters is that, like me, YouTube is how they discovered their trans identities. We, through in intention or happenstance, were introduced to trans identities – and, more importantly, the people possessing those identities – through an online space, and therefore gained the ability to access and create a part of our own identities that otherwise would have remained unexplored.
Figure 5. Selected playlists of weekly topics on FTMtranstastic.

Source: Youtube.com/FTMtranstastic.

Chase Ross is a well-known Canadian FTM YouTuber both online and offline, having been referenced in several dissertations engaging with trans identities and YouTube (Billman 2011; Deshane 2013; Raun 2012,2015). Chase is one of the founding members of FTMtranstastic, which is one of dozens of trans collaboration channels, and has been posting videos on his personal channel since April of 2010. In numerous videos and throughout our interview, Chase has talked about the importance of YouTube in his life, stating that it is a part of his identity (Chase vlog, July 9, 2014). Echoing the experiences of many others, he also discovered his trans identity on YouTube, as discussed in a video posted on the FTMtranstastic channel and playfully titled “YouTube made me a tran.”
“I was browsing through YouTube one night and I found a video...and it was about a trans guy. ...and I thought ‘What the fuck? Trans guys exist? I thought only trans women existed.’ And after watching that video, it never ended – I have literally been on YouTube every single day since that day, and I was 15 back then.” (Chase vlog, March 26, 2014)

Scrolling down on that video page reveals a string of viewer comments (twenty seven, as of April 14, 2016) responding to Chase’s video remarking how similar their individual experiences have been. For example, viewer Søren Wilson commented, “This is EXACTLY how it happened for me.” Skye ID, another YouTube user, found YouTube later in their life, but still commented about how the site has been helpful for them; “Alas, I don't think that the internet was invented yet when I was 15... which was in 1993 (I'm old) but I digress... You Tube has been a great comfort for me, because I've found other people like me, and I know I'm not alone” (Chase vlog, March 26, 2014). These remarks and experiences reveal the impact of virtual connectivity in revealing, legitimizing, and even creating identities. In this case, identity ‘creation’ refers more to the experience of being able to access a part of one’s identity that would otherwise remain undeveloped, rather than inserting an identity that was not innately present. As noted by Banet-Weiser, “viewer feedback on YouTube videos establishes a kind of relationship between the posted video, the videomaker, and viewers…” (Banet-Weiser 2011, 279). This type of potential for communication between content producers and content consumers is just one of the many points of accessibility that YouTube fosters.

This accessibility breeds community, as any viewer could view, comment, subscribe, private-message, and/or post their own video at the click of a few buttons. Even a non-commenting, non-active, semi-consistent viewer could identify as a community member; the simple act of using personal agency to search for these vlogs and engage, even if just actively
listening, is a form of participation. "I think if you just watch the videos and you feel like you’re a part of it," Chase said in our interview. He later discussed how some viewers can’t create a YouTube account to comment or upload videos because their parents check their emails, or because they want to be stealth, and therefore there are "so many different levels of being part of the community" (Chase, March 7, 2016). As stated by David Valentine, author of *Imagining Transgender*, “whether geographically bound or not, community is not a natural fact but an achievement, a process that does not happen without the exercise of agency and power (Anderson 1991 [1983])” (Valentine 2007, 73). In the case of FTM YouTube communities, modes of access, engagement, and community cultivation are explicit and intentional, requiring agency at both the hands of the content creators and the viewers, even if the agency solely includes simply watching videos. Through these many access points, tiers of accessibility and community are created.

![FTMtranstastic YouTube Banner as of March 2015.](Youtube.com/FTMtranstastic)

The FTMtranstastic channel features the slogan “Transition Through Community” on its channel homepage (Pictured above in Figure 6), and its members actively seek to engage with their viewers and with their fellow video creators in nearly every video. The slogan “transition
through community” was created when Chris, a past FTMtranstastic member, was talking with Chase about having a small transtastic organization, and speaks to the process of creating identity in solidarity with others (Chase, March 6, 2016). The organization didn’t end up forming, but it was through the first steps of creating that organization that the slogan was created as they thought that it summed up what they were doing (Ibid.). This community mentality hasn’t waivered, both within the collaboration channel, and within the active FTMtranstastic YouTube community; Chase deeply enjoys working on his collaboration channel, “because we all kind of do it together - like if I’m way too busy, then Tritton will do it, or Reed will do it, or Luke will do it, and make the topic list if I [can’t] - so its really like a community” (Chase, March 6, 2016). The community of creators and viewers is so active that the channel receives dozens of video ‘auditions’ posted by hopeful vloggers vying for a weekly posting spot on the channel, so as to be more direct contributors to the community and to engage with many individuals.

One Scottish vlogger who participated on the FTMtranstastic channel for several years posted a video in June of 2014 saying, “I’ve never felt alone throughout the entire time that I was on YouTube – I reached out to the communities, you know, in the beginning, and I got a response and built friendships” (Fionn vlog, June 2, 2014). This sentiment has been echoed dozens of times by multiple YouTubers, on and off collaboration channels. This is likely in part due to the unprecedentedly democratic format of YouTube; “It enables the production and distribution of personal narratives and community knowledge without the filtering system of a traditional archive” (Raun 2015, 702). As the viewer is able to directly engage with the content creators, fewer sentiments are lost in translation as they would be in a curated published book, traditionally produced movie/TV show, or commissioned podcast, as examples.
For Liam, who is not a part of FTMtranstastic but has been making videos since before the FTMtranstastic channel was created, feelings of being a part of the larger FTM YouTube community are connected to him watching videos, commenting on videos, making his own videos, and reading people’s comments on his own videos (Liam, March 7, 2016). Liam values that he is one of thousands representing the transmasculine experience in a way that can be accessible to others seeking to compare their experiences (Ibid.). For him, adding a voice to the many sharing their transmasculine experiences is where the question of community comes in: “does that mean we all have the same experience? No, but we can relate to each other and put our two experiences next to each other and compare them, or just discuss the similarities and differences there” (Ibid.). The plurality of the community comes secondary to the unfiltered self-representation that YouTube’s medium allows. Furthermore, the democratic and accessible nature of the site has allowed for the community to grow and impact those beyond the website itself. Charles, for example, credits the community for his ability to have his own personal business, engage in “so many opportunities – like this,” and work with the Kinsey institute, University of Rome, Huffington Post, Kindergarten teachers, therapists, and others (Charles, March 1, 2016). The impact of the community and individuals within have reached far beyond the (movable) walls of YouTube, widening the scope of how YouTube can be utilized, how YouTube allows individuals to “broadcast” themselves, and how private and/or public videos can become.

**Blending of Public and Private**

As expressed by Auguste and Emery, FTM vloggers and ex-partners who used to create videos together for a weekly video slot they shared on the FTMtranstastic collaboration channel, the melding of private and public, particularly when discussing a topic as personal and complex
as gender, can be intimidating. In their video entitled “Auguste and Emery talk about the Internet,” Auguste states, “creators offer information to the Internet, so they get to choose when and how they are comfortable share information.” (Auguste and Emery vlog, August 25, 2013).

After explaining how their right to choose information excluded and included in their online presence felt strained due to the amount of feedback and questions they were receiving from viewers, both through the YouTube platform and through other social media sites such as Tumblr and Twitter, Emery stated, “the line between my personal information and public information has become blurry…the internet has become this virtual paper trail that will connect activity to a body” (Ibid.). At the time the video was posted, both Auguste and Emery were considering the possibility of beginning to take testosterone for the bodily changes it catalyzes. This was a decision that they wanted to make themselves, without the influence of their viewers, and without the commitment of announcing their thought processes to an audience of thousands.

Because of the punctuality inherent in the Internet, the virtual paper trail has immediate consequences for the trail-maker – if something is announced on the Internet, follow-through is expected by viewers. Unlike their predecessors, who, few and far-between, would publish (mostly retrospective) polished versions of their trans experiences in the form of books or films (shown in Figure 6, below), these vloggers are able to publish their raw thoughts as soon as they occur. As their identities and/or bodies transform and grow, so too do their bodies of work – their video autobiographies, their personified identities, their individual and collective stories. “These user-created digital trans archives coexist with analog archives of trans lives and experiences housed in libraries and nonprofits. The artifacts and papers curated by professional archivists and preserved in brick-and-mortar settings are, however, inanimate” (Raun 2015, 702), and therefore hold fewer immediate consequences for the owners of the stories. Furthermore, because of the
unprecedented, punctual autobiographical structures and expanding vernacular of self-representation, “When the ‘I’ seeks to give an account of itself, it can start with itself, but it will find that this self is already implicated in a social temporality that exceeds its own capacities for narration; indeed, when the ‘I’ seeks to give an account of itself, an account that must include the conditions of its own emergence, it must, as a matter of necessity, become a social theorist” (Butler 2005, 7-8). These vloggers are therefore create their own trail of social theory, building, complicating, and collectively re-structuring their own theories around their own narratives.

Figure 6. Two of the most well-known and reviewed books by transgender Authors. Left: Stone Butch Blues by Leslie Feinberg (1993). Right: Gender Outlaw: Of Men, Women, and the Rest of Us by Kate Bornstein (1992). Source: Amazon.com.

This virtual paper trail has been less intimidating for my interviewees – all three of them are very open about their lives, not drawing many boundaries for their YouTube presences out of a commitment to accessibility. Of the three interviewees, Charles drew the sharpest boundaries, which essentially is simply the privatization of his videos – if he doesn’t want to share something with his audience, he will simply make the video private, though it still exists on YouTube; "Everything I’ve ever reordered is on [YouTube] ... I edit, if I say something wrong, I’ll just re-take it on the camera … I would say I’m pretty much who you see" (Charles, March 1, 2016).
This demonstrates that vlogging is not just about connecting with others, but is also about connecting with oneself. Both Chase and Liam very intentionally do not set boundaries with their audiences. For the sakes of accessibility and transparency, Liam has posted his full name, the countries/cities he has lived, and other personal information, as he doesn’t consider it to be private information. He shares, “it’s hard to answer why I do this, but I don’t really establish boundaries for myself and my viewers; I want it to be an open dialogue. I haven’t had any problems with that, and probably if I ever encounter problems with this, I will change my way of doing things.” (Liam, March 7, 2016). He also acknowledged that he wants his channel to be open for educational analysis, reflexively pointing out that his lack of boundaries was exactly how I was able to contact him for my research.

Chase’s lack of boundaries, along with desires to be accessible, has more to do with his belief that “if there's one person out there who feels it, there's someone else out there who feels the same”– a lesson he has learned through YouTube itself. (Chase, March 6, 2016) For this reason, he has posted extremely personal videos about his mental health, sex life, body dysphoria, hobbies, eating habits, and anything that he feels may pique the interest of his viewers. Furthermore, his integrity is important in terms of cataloguing his thoughts, as he shares, “It’s basically like a diary where - what's the point in lying in a diary. You’re the only one whose going to read it when you're older - do you want to read lies about where you were 5 years ago? So that's kind of where I’m at with my videos- I’m not going to lie about anything” (Chase, March 6, 2016). Many other YouTubers engage with this little-to-no boundary mentality, which has led the community to have a fairly limitless scope of conversation and confession.
Mass Media Representation vs. YouTube Representation

Mass-media representations of trans people, which come in the forms of television, mainstream news reports (online and offline), podcasts, books, talkshows and other highly-trafficked/consumed media, overwhelmingly portray transpeople as having one, easily cis-digestible, life narrative. This palatable narrative, aforementioned by Liam and exemplified in TV interviews of trans people on shows such as Oprah and Ellen (to be later discussed), consistently adheres to the gender binary, silencing non-binary gender identities, the nuances of the individual trans experience, and the physical and emotional diversity of trans communities. Importantly, these trans narratives are being exploited and shared by the same cis-produced mass media outlets that have shaped and perpetuated expectations of hegemonic masculinity, patriarchal structures, and, recently, a pseudo-progressive and sensationalized transgender narrative. This means that the inclusion of transgender individuals exists within a structure built to exclude transgender individuals, which causes their narratives to adhere to the molds created by the dominant and hegemonic cis-heteropatriarchy. This is addressed by Liam in one of his vlogs called “Trans representation in the media:”

“Trans people are portrayed in the media in a very cis-normative way. … The trans story that is portrayed in media over and over again is this one where ‘I was born in this body – a female body – and I knew something is wrong…and that I wanted a male body – and that I was supposed to have that. And now I’ve had testosterone and gotten top surgery and want bottom surgery. Its constantly…that same little picture of what trans is supposed to look like.” (Liam Vlog, January 12 2015)

Liam’s apt observation about the cis-normativization (essentially un-queering queer identities) of trans narratives is an example of the profound self-awareness and high-level of articulation that is common in trans vlogs. Liam and many of his fellow vloggers embody what theorist Antonia Gramsci would call an “organic intellectual” – one who articulates the interests
of an oppressed class, free from and counter-to institutional hegemony. Liam’s above observation is a key observation in the study of gender and media culture. Because mass media, which is largely produced by and for cispeople, has historically been the access point to learning about marginalized identities, this cis-normativization of trans identities and narratives has had serious longitudinal consequences for both cis and trans individuals. As the most simplified transgender narrative – famously of Chaz Bono and Caitlyn Jenner – of being born in the wrong body is “constantly the story we’re hearing about on TV, it’s constantly the story our therapists are telling us and that other transpeople are repeating over and over again, and this is giving us a very narrow image of what a transition, or a transperson, can live like” (Liam January 12 2015). While Liam acknowledges that the cis-normitivized narratives perpetuated by mass media are indeed representative of some transpeople, he’s confronting the larger issue of the trans experience being packaged and capitalized upon by non-transpeople, marginalizing individuals with more nuanced narratives. As a GLAAD study found that mass-media television portrays transgender characters as “victims” 40% of the time, and that transphobic language is written into 61% of the episodes including trans characters (GLAAD 2012), it is acutely important that self-represented transpeople have alternative outlets of expression, namely through YouTube. Mass media inclusion of transpeople, counter-intuitively, often centers around the cis-experience and/or relatable transgender experiences. Oprah’s Where Are They Now? show, which spotlights guests that were interviewed during the 25-year run of the influential Oprah Winfrey Show, released a segment called “Did This Transgender Woman’s Marriage Survive Her Transition?,” which is available to view on YouTube. The trans interviewee was scholar Jenny Boylan, who was later featured in I am Cait, Larry King Live, The Today Show, NPR articles, and similar mass media, which demonstrates the lack of diversity and varied inclusion in media.
The Oprah segment replayed footage from Oprah’s original interview, which focused almost entirely on Jenny’s wife, and asked exclusively invasive questions to the Jenny. The show went as far as to caption Jenny’s wife as “Deedie – Her Husband Became A Woman” (See Figure 7 below), further (publically) delegitimizing and marginalizing Jenny’s experience. Interestingly, the show’s way of following up with Jenny to answer the question the show poses of “Where Are They Now?” is by playing a pre-recorded clip of Jenny answering the show’s questions via webcam. The clip is similar in form to a traditional YouTube vlog – Jenny sits in a deskchair, engaging with the camera, casually speaking as if she was in the presence of viewers themselves. Her speech, unlike in YouTube vlogs, is edited by Oprah’s producer, therefore packaging her speech to accommodate perceived the needs of the viewers.

Figure 7. Caption from Oprah’s Where Are They Now?. Source: YouTube.com

This packaging and capitalization of individuals is largely due to the placement of transpeople in a type of ‘hot seat,’ a seat far from their own vlogging space (wherein they can interview themselves or each other, rather than be questioned by cisgender interviewers). Their
(known) presences in media are not standard, and therefore require their trans identities to be explained; giving an account of their identity comes secondary to palatably defining their identity. As stated by Riely in their video uploaded to FTMtranstastic’s channel during “media” week, “if there ever is an actual transgender person [in the media], they’re being asked questions by someone who is not a transperson, and is a lot of times worded in very ignorant language that is a lot of times very offensive” (Riely vlog, November 10 2010). The rarity of even this type of trans exposure in the media leaves unformed viewers unaware of the depth of trans experiences, and allows the perpetuation of incorrect, ignorant vernacular. While this problem has certainly decreased as transpeople have very recently begun to have more space in the media (largely due to the rise in popularity surrounding Laverne Cox and Janet Mock, as well as Caitlyn Jenner’s unavoidably public transition and produced shows such as *I am Cait*, *Transparent*, and *Orange is the New Black*), media representations of transpeople center on an explanation of identity, rather than the exploration of the people themselves. While explanations of identity are present on YouTube, perhaps even more than in mass media, a critical difference is the outlet through which their explanations are filtered.

While conducting my online fieldwork, I spent some time dipping into the mass media that has found its way onto YouTube. This was namely through *EllenTube*, a YouTube channel owned and operated by *The Ellen Show*, that posts excerpts of the televised show. *The Ellen Show*, which is perceived by many to be socially progressive particularly due to Ellen’s history as a prominently ‘out’ lesbian, perpetuates outdated, insensitive vernacular surrounding transpeople and dilutes trans experiences.

I was particularly interested to see how this was exemplified through the interview of a trans vlogger, Aydian Dowling, who recently gained mass media attention after he posted a
photo of himself recreating a photo of singer Adam Levine (See Figure 8 below). I had been watching Aydian’s vlogs for several years, seeing him gain confidence in himself and his online presence, and I was excited to see how he would vlog about his recent involvement with mass media sources such as *The Ellen Degeneres Show*, BuzzFeed, and Men’s Health Magazine. His visit on Ellen’s show, which was uploaded to Ellen’s YouTube channel, followed suit with media treatment of transpeople:

Ellen: “…Obviously Bruce Jenner opened this whole world up to a lot of people, and we’re all just learning about what that means and…So, explain transgender to everyone.”

Aydian: “So a really basic understanding of transgender would just be - you're born, your biological gender is one, and you identify as the other. So, for example, I was born biologically a female, yet I identify--my soul identifies as a male.

(TheEllenShow, May 26 2015)

He followed up his visit to the show with vlogs about his time going to Ellen’s show and talking about trans media. In a video titled “Trans* in the media,” Aydian sits in the front seat of his car and speaks to a camera about trans representation in the media and his recent involvement with mass media sources. He expresses optimistic frustration about how the structure of the media didn’t allow him to speak about what he wanted to share, though he feels grateful to be able to educate his interviewers; “even when I have spoken on [opinions, politics, etc], I get cut off. … I haven’t really gotten a platform to really speak out yet, and I’m hoping that I’ll be given more of those opportunities when people know my story a little more” (Aydian Vlog, May 20 2015). Interestingly, he claims to not have “gotten a platform to really speak out yet” in a video that received 4,150 views on his channel that is subscribed to by 31,000 users, where many of his videos surpass over 50,000 views. Aydian seems to take on a view that his platform on YouTube is less valuable than a platform on more traditional mass media, as his outreach is significantly less due to the nature of mass media versus User-Generated Internet content.
Figure 8. Aydian Dowling (left) recreates photo of singer Adam Levine (right), earning him mass media attention. This can be seen as an example of both cisnormativization and heteronormativization of transpeople in self-representation and mass media. 

Very recently, however, parts of YouTube have entered the realm of mass media. With Google’s purchase of the website in 2006 and the rapid expansion of partnered/sponsored ‘content’ production, the site has become subject to a much more capitalistic structure (focused on revenue and rapid production) than the nearly utopian framework the site was created to be. While YouTube’s original slogan was “Broadcast Yourself,” describing a platform that allowed user-generated content to be publically available, YouTube’s Partner Program and monetization opportunities “imitates not only broadcasting with its method of televising content, but also broadcasting as an institution that monetizes through advertisements. … What the media industry wants for YouTube is to change into a more PGC-oriented source: an ad-friendly media environment that link content and advertisement smoothly.” (Kim 2010, 79, 99). In many ways, the media industry has achieved its desires; as of January 2016, several prominent YouTubers have opened a discussion about the descent of YouTube’s culture into a severely capitalistic framework. One (cisgender) YouTuber in particular, who began his YouTube career by happenstance (before the Partner Program was established) after using the site to communicate
with his brother on a channel called “vlogbrothers,” spoke about the current state of the site in a video entitled “Honest YouTube Talk Time” on February 5, 2016:

“Now, nobody really knows what YouTube is, but I think that the best analogy, at least for the creative personality driven parts, is the music industry. You're going to have at the top, like, a rotating cast of really well known people and a few different really big genres. They're going to make great content, it's going to be polished and appealing and lots of people are going to love it, but it's going to be, maybe, a tiny bit bland. And then there will be cascading levels down of people who have smaller but more dedicated audiences who perform in sub-genres or genres you might have never heard of just outside of any genre. And they'll be doing the really creative, weird interesting stuff that will sometimes, I'm sure, bubble up to the top and affect everything.”

(Hank Vlog, February 5, 2016, emphasis my own).

This analogy of YouTube being like a music industry with several genres and a rotating cast is an appropriate explanation of the state of the site as of 2016, a state that is radically different in aesthetic, communication, and format than the first several years of YouTube’s existence. However, throughout the many capitalistic changes that have occurred on the site at the hands of Google and Google’s partners, trans vloggers have continued to make vlogs consistently. Some, like Chase, have modified their aesthetics to adhere more closely to the high-quality production value that is now expected by many mainstream viewers, but the confessional-type videos are being produced by more vloggers than ever before. A stark difference between the mass media forms that have infiltrated YouTube, from the vlogs that are studied in this thesis is the potential for monetization. Few trans vloggers are sponsored to make their videos, and therefore they cannot rely on their video creation to be their full-time jobs, as many of the aforementioned “top rotating cast members” can. This allows these vloggers to inhabit a space on YouTube that many success-driven content creators have left behind – the space of an authentic participatory culture and community. This is not to say, however, that sponsored videos are inauthentic, but is rather a commentary on the motivation for content
This is also not to say, however, that trans vloggers have universally avoided the branding, commercialization, and serialization that have come with the new YouTube regime. Nearly endless “genres,” which can be perceived as brands, can exist on YouTube – vlogging itself can be seen as a genre on YouTube, as can “Transgender,” “FtM,” “Queer,” “Non-Binary,” and so on. When speaking with Charles via Skype, I discussed the capitalistic form that I had observed growing on YouTube in the recent past. I was particularly curious to hear Charles’ view on how YouTube’s changes have impacted vlogging communities as his YouTube presence predates the existence of even the YouTube Partner Program. While Charles is overwhelmingly appreciative of YouTube’s growth and the “flood” of vloggers, he intriguingly stated that “Being trans is almost a brand now - I don't know how I feel about that” (Charles, March 1, 2016). Several dozen trans vlogging channels are now monetized, meaning that the content creators receive ad revenue for views, comments, ‘likes,’ and subscriptions.

As such, some trans YouTubers certainly have made visible strides to use their identity and self-representation as a mode of gaining popularity and sustaining income. In other words, and in the words of Banet-Weiser, some vlogging channels include the “self-as-product” in a form of self-branding that “…does not merely involve self-presentation, but is a layered process of judging, assessment, and valuation taking place in a media economy of recognition, such as YouTube, where everyone has their “own” channel” (Banet-Weiser 2011). This layered process manifests in more edited, consistent, high-quality video content that often includes the vloggers reminding their viewers to ‘like,’ comment, and subscribe to boost their numbers and audiences exposure. Chase has recently followed suit with more mass viewer-pleasing videos, namely by posting a video using a click-bait-esque title, “FTM TRANSGENDER REACTS TO OLD
VIDEOS.” (March 19, 2016). This title is different from his usual titles, which in the past were lower-case, non-sensationalized, and more topical. This video title, in the discussion of branding, reads that “FTM TRANSGENDER” is a brand that deserves a view. Furthermore, in branding himself, he is objectifying *himself*, which is reminiscent of mass media objectification. However, many trans vloggers adhere to more low-fi, traditional-style vlogs.

**Cyborg Anthropology**

Regardless of their monetization and aesthetic choices, video-makers have spread their existence between the realms of offline and online, harking back to a mode of thinking that was discussed by Donna Haraway in her 1985 seminal cyberfeminist text. “The Cyborg Manifesto” represents the joining of the biological and technological at a time far before Internet communities were even a remote possibility (as World Wide Web was still five years from its release at the time of her writing). Haraway recognized and discussed a future for her that has become our present, as exemplified by FTM vlogging communities; a time during which we interact through technology – with technology. Haraway further has a post-binary vision of the incorporation of humanity with technology, and her vision includes the melding of the many binaries that are perpetuated online and offline. These binaries extend beyond male/female, and include human/animal, organism/machine, and physical/non-physical (Haraway 1985). Haraway names the creature resulting from her “melding of dualisms” (Billman 2010, 28) a ‘Cyborg.’ As Haraway defined ‘Cyborg’ to represent “lived social and bodily realities in which people are not afraid of their join kinship with animals and machines, not afraid of permanently partial identities and contradictory standpoints” (1991, 154), it is clear that FTM vloggers embody a form of Haraway’s vision. Both in their blending of gender identifiers and in their blending of
personhood with technology, these vloggers, and their audiences too, are cyborg beings. Further, YouTube itself is a space that melds what is often divided in offline spaces – “the technological, the textual, the bodied, and the embodied,” (Billman 2010, 27) and increasingly the private and public spheres.

As stated by Cyborg Anthropologist and Digital Philosopher Amber Case, “The most successful technology gets out of the way and helps us live our lives. And really, it ends up being more human than technology because we’re co-creating each other all the time. It’s still human connection, its just done in a different way; we’re just increasing our humanness and our ability to connect with each other regardless of geography” (TED 2015). It has been through connections with the digitized forms of trans vloggers that I, countless viewers, and thousands of vloggers have been able to realize and explore their identities. It is the non-traditional human connection offered on YouTube that has allowed us to explore our non-traditional gendered humanness as transpeople. This humanness is then able to exist offline, too, in forms that have been enriched by our cyborg selves; “When you know somebody online, and then you meet them, its like -- its like you already know them if you’ve talked to them before” (Chase, March 6, 2016). The significance of these online interactions, their ramifications in offline life, and the atypical framework of these interactions beg to be studied. Fieldsites overflowing with data to be studied by anthropologists now stretch beyond the physical globe and into the realm of online experience.

The existence and attempted persistence of the online/offline binary is understandable, however, as “the fear of the collapse of social life in the physical world coupled with the hope of a rise of a new social life in the virtual world helped lead to a tendency for the discourse to draw a pretty sharp binary between online and offline” (Shumar and Madison 2013, 259), similarly to
how a sharp gender binary has been drawn in the vast majority of cultures. What is particularly
notable in the context FTM YouTubers is that they are simultaneously deconstructing several
binaries that have been coded and reinforced overtime. And, just as the gender binary has
recently been more loudly questioned in mainstream media, so too have technological binaries;
as the rate of technology expansion, development, and cultural incorporation increases, the
perceived binary of ‘offline’/‘online,’ and therefore several other binaries, is forced to be
deconstructed and blurred, harking back to a society suggested by Haraway.

Conclusion

The exploration of trans vloggers on YouTube offers a rich, multifaceted, multisited
anthropological perspective of a group of people who are often silenced and/or exploited. The
agency that the site gives its contributors is unprecedented, and the ways in which these vloggers
use their platform to cultivate community and test the elasticity of the gender spectrum
challenges the structures and binaries believed to be most fundamental to society – that of
male/female, private/public, offline/online, and mind/body. Accessible digital media,
exemplified on YouTube, legitimizes and humanizes trans bodies and identities, therefore
connecting transgender individuals in virtual communities, legitimizing marginalized identities,
and enlightening viewers. These Fourth Wave vloggers have not only created accessible
communities wherein they are able to represent themselves and legitimize identities that are
otherwise delegitimized, but they have also greatly expanded the vernacular of gender expression
and narrative.

These narratives, which are most often muted by the white, cisgender patriarchical able-
bodied dominant culture, through the accessible platform of the Internet and YouTube, can
finally be more commonly heard without the opaque filter of mass media. This lack of filter allows self-representation to surpass the standard objectification of trans individuals. The video interface of YouTube allows bodies to be seen with as much or as little detail as the content creator desires; their bodies, though still subject to a myriad of exploitative gazes, are empowered as they are made visible only by their own hands (and internet connections). The inherent cataloguing capability of YouTube complicates these gazes, allowing them to be both more punctual and more personally reflexive. The living interactive autobiographies of these vloggers also allow for non-invasive cyberenthographic studies of embodied, gendered, and marginalized experiences.

These studies, however, sit at not just the cutting edge, but at the bleeding edge of a fast-paced, constantly evolving medium. In the final weeks of writing this thesis, it became increasingly clear exactly how quickly the YouTube medium and its content are being produced and changed. New vlogs, as well as evolved aesthetic techniques, expanding vernacular, and new vloggers/channels, continue to be uploaded, enriching arguments throughout this thesis. These autobiographical vlog archives will continue to grow, change, and be challenged as the bleeding edge of technology continues to sharpen. Their power, however, will remain present, if not become strengthened by the seemingly limitless additions of new vloggers, mediums, and identities; “Following Foucault, Sekula notes: ‘clearly archives are not neutral; they embody the power inherent in accumulation, collection, and hoardings as well as the power inherent in the command of the lexicon and rules of language’ (2004: 185, my emphasis)” (Gehl 2009, 49). This research should therefore should be viewed punctual, not temporally flexible, as the command of the lexicon/vernacular, rules of language, and archival methodology are constantly evolving. For
example, much of Gehl’s 2009 article on YouTube as an archive (cursorily referenced throughout this thesis), is already outdated.

Despite the punctuality and startlingly fast evolution of this ethnographic data, the data itself serves to illustrate several notable insights about omnipresent politics of power. These insights include deeper understandings of how the self-documenting, self-representing components of YouTube enhance feelings of identity legitimization and narrative development. This self-representation can be empowering, community-forming, and self-legitimizing, and leads to more diverse understandings of trans experiences and embodiment. The self-representations, conversations, and interactions that coexist on YouTube’s platform complicate and heterogenize transgender narratives that are homogenized and de-humanized by mass media. The (rapid) evolution of these conversations and representations can be re-contextualized through understandings of gender, (cyber-)community, self-archival, and forms of identity/narrative development.

As exemplified by my experience within and outside of this thesis, as well as through my ethnographic examples from vlogs and interviews, it is clear that online interactions have significant consequences for offline life, particularly for transpeople attempting feel legitimized, understood, and part of a constantly evolving self-reflective community. This thesis has allowed me to connect with several peers, mentors, and academics, and has shown me other aspects of the power of online community. After spending many years lurking on the periphery of many YouTube trans communities, as I told Chase, “it feels like, for me, my entry into the community has been through this Anthropology thesis – it’s forcing me to do participant ethnography, and to be a participant in a more classical way … I had to stop lurking and actually put my hands on the
keyboard and message people. So, good to be here!” (Harlow in Chase’s Interview, March 6 2016). “You’re in!,” Chase responded (Chase March 6, 2016).
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1 See Rybas and Gajjala 2007; Baym 2010, Hallett and Barber 2013; Shumar, Wesley and Madison 2013; and Bengston 2013.
2 A thumbnail photo is often a still-frame from the video being represented. Recently, video thumbnails on more professional YouTube channels are edited in Photoshop to include words, symbols, or visually stimulating colors.
3 See glossary, “FTM.”
4 The Fourth Wave of feminism follows three notable waves: the first wave was perceived to take place in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, focusing on socialism and industrialization. The second wave began in the 1960s and lasted through the 90s, during which anti-war movements, sex/reproductive rights, social equality, and minority politics were heavily debated. The third wave began in the mid 1990s, informed by post-colonial
and post-modern ideologies, de-stabilizing the heteropatriarchy and enforcing ideas of empowerment and reappropriation (Rampton 2015).

5 FTMtranstastic, a collaboration channel that is discussed in depth in section __, recently created a variety of shirts available for purchase as part of a fundraiser. One of these shirt designs shows two triangles, pink and blue, overlaid with the letters “FTX.” This is referred to as their “non-binary” design, and is one of the five shirts for sale (Indiegogo.com, April 7, 2016).


7 This TED talk was viewed originally on YouTube.com, after coming up in my recommended videos section. In other words, I did not actively research to find this video – YouTube suggested that I watch it, which led to more focused research on Cyborg Anthropology. This is just one example of how the algorithmic happenstance of YouTube can lead to discovery.

8 Bleeding Edge refers to “the most advanced stage of a technology, art, etc., usually experimental and risky” (Dictionary.com, March 2016).