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Regressing, Progressing, or Transgressing on the Small Screen? Transgender Characters on U.S. Scripted Television Series

Jamie C. Capuzza & Leland G. Spencer 

This study explored representation of lead and supporting transgender characters in nine U. S. scripted television dramas and comedies aired 2008–2014. Employing qualitative content analysis techniques, episodes were coded for casting, visibility, identity, embodiment, and social interaction. Findings suggested that scripted television has begun to evolve in a manner that relies less on a standardized narrative and one-dimensional characterization of transgender people. The formerly ubiquitous “wrong body” discourse seems to have ebbed in favor of more diverse and refined stories about transgender identity and subjectivity. However, increased visibility does not apply across the spectrum of transgender identity and expression. Transgender people as a population and a political community, trans men, and genderqueer characters remain largely invisible.

Keywords: *Television; Transexual/Transgender*

Depictions of transgender lives and issues have been largely absent for most of television history. Typically transgender characters occupied the periphery and appeared episodically. The first regular transgender character on U.S. primetime

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television, Linda Murkland, appeared in the 1977 show *All That Glitters*, which lasted one season. In 2006, Zoe became the first daytime regular television transgender character in the soap opera *All My Children*, though again, she appeared for only a short time. On the rare occasion transgender people made it to the small screen, depictions were more often than not based on negative stereotypes functioning in a way to ridicule this community via humor, disgust, fear, alienation, and anger (Lester, 2015; Miller, 2015; Serano, 2007).

In recent years, however, the media landscape has changed, providing more visibility for transgender characters on television (Keegan, 2014; Steinmeltz, 2014). At this historical juncture, transgender people, allies, and activists have joined together to challenge transphobia and transmisogyny. An important part of this larger public discourse is the commercial success and critical acclaim of scripted series such as *Orange is the New Black* and *Transparent*, as well as the increase in the number of reality television series such as *I am Cait*, *Becoming Us*, and *I am Jazz*, which have propelled transgender identity and expression into the forefront of U.S. popular culture (see Owen, 2016). Across broadcast, cable, and on-demand platforms, the amount of television programming featuring lead or supporting transgender characters is on the rise across all classifications, including scripted, reality, made-for-television movies, and documentaries. Yet, as Booth (2011) rightly warned about this issue, “As is the case with any marginalized group, however, visibility is a risky prospect...an increase in media representation may be just as likely to further confuse the issue as to clarify it, particularly when the commercial interests controlling those representations are inclined to frame them in sensationalistic terms” (p. 191).

In addition to ridicule and sensationalism, some scholars have argued that increased television representation has resulted in regulation of transgender identities and expression. Siebler (2012) argued that the appearance of transgender characters across a variety of television genres in both episodic as well as in lead and supporting roles largely has resulted in a dominant narrative, one that equates “trans” with “transitioning.” Generally speaking, this dominant narrative causes concern because it functions as a form of gender policing in which transgender characters exist only to support a liberal and often individualistic message about tolerance and inclusion rather than challenging cisnormativity¹ or creating a space for genderqueer expression on television (Joyrich, 2014).

Examining both the quantity and quality of transgender television depictions is important because media construct, reinforce, and challenge existing social definitions of gender. Invisibility, stereotypical representations, and assimilation of transgender people in the media can contribute to the public’s lack of understanding or acceptance of this population, potentially fomenting transphobia and discrimination (Miller, 2015). Additionally, these representations have the potential to influence how transgender people see themselves, which can exacerbate internalized transphobia. Furthermore, scholars and activists have argued that gaining media visibility is an important step in claiming political power (Fejes & Petrich, 1993; Gross, 2001).

Studies of Television's Depiction of Transgender Lives

In response to increased representation of transgender characters on television, scholarship also has increased, with much of it focused on how cisnormativity is challenged or upheld and on the possible impact of television on audiences' acceptance of transgender identity. Additionally, this research has identified a range of discursive and non-discursive practices employed to construct these mediated representations.

On one hand, television can challenge cisnormativity and positively influence social acceptance of minorities. Kerry's (2009) analysis of the *Star Trek* franchise found that the science fiction genre disrupted gender norms by creating space for genderqueer characters such as shape-shifting aliens, multi-gender aliens, and a pregnant male Star Fleet officer, among others. Booth (2011) came to a similar conclusion in a study of the reality television genre's *Queer Eye for the Straight Guy*. The episode under investigation featured a transman and successfully debunked common misconceptions about transgender people, providing an educational opportunity for audience members to learn about trans embodiment and liminality. Additionally, Min (2011) explored the Japanese television show *Last Friends*, determining that this series also questioned cisgender norms and successfully articulated gender diversity for its audiences. This show featured a transgender character, unlike others, who did not transition from a "wrong body" to a right one, and the storyline offered a challenge to the existing dominant discourses that framed transgender identity medically as Gender Identity Disorder (p. 395).

On the other hand, television often has supported the cisgender status quo. Across television genres, a standardized television narrative typically employed a "wrong body discourse" and privileged the traditional notion of "transgender as transition," thus aligning gender with sex and supporting the gender binary. In short, television has normalized and reified as monolithic one particular experience of transgender identity and expression (see Catalano, 2015; Spencer & Capuzza, 2016). While we acknowledge that this visibility makes content more palatable for mainstream audiences, we fear that these representations pander to transphobia and limit the range of transgender subjectivities available to viewing publics.

Scripted dramas such as *The L Word*, *Sex in the City*, *Dirty Sexy Money*, and Japan's *I Can Be Myself* depicted passing, medicalization, and gender confirmation surgeries; featured characters moving from genderqueer to gender stable identities; depoliticized drag culture; and often, cast transgender characters as villains or victims (Escudero-Alias, 2011; Mackie, 2008; Patton & Snyder-Yuly, 2012; Reed, 2009; Siebler, 2012). Unscripted television content followed a similar pattern. Studies of the talk show genre documented stigmatization of transgender embodiment (Gamson, 2001; Riggs, 2014; Serano, 2007). Television documentaries supported rather than challenged sex and gender alignment and stability (Booth, 2015; Hladky, 2013). McIntyre (2011) argued that Australian transsexual cabaret star and television personality Carlotta allowed audiences "to engage safely, but constructively with a transgender person" (p. 30). Finally, Mocarski, Butler, Emmons, and Smallwood's (2013) study of

Chaz Bono on the reality television show *Dancing With the Stars* illustrated how television contributes to transphobia. The researchers offered a critical cultural deconstruction of Bono's appearances, noting that the producers' music choices, interactions with dance partners, judges' comments, and interviews neutered Bono's transgender subjectivity.

Several studies investigated television's depiction of transmasculine people in relation to gay and lesbian people. Gamson (2001) found that television talk shows stigmatized gender nonconformity so as to make gay and lesbian sexualities appear more acceptable in comparison, and Shakerifar (2011) argued that Iranian television depicted transgenderism as a "cure" for homosexuality. Morrison (2010) explored lesbian, gay, and bisexual viewers' reactions to a transitioning lesbian character on the daytime series *All My Children* and found that audience members responded negatively because of the perceived threat to the lesbian character's identity rather than transgender status.

Television calls into question the authenticity and political agency of trans women in particular by depicting them in hyper-feminine and hyper-sexualized ways. Serano (2007) illustrated how trans women typically are shown in the process of feminizing their appearances through dress and make-up and claimed that this "artificial and imitative" representation contributed to the stereotype of transgender women as deceivers (p. 229). Siebler (2012) argued that both reality television shows such as *America's Next Top Model*, *I Want to Work for Diddy*, and *TRANSform Me*, as well as dramas such as *Dirty Sexy Money*, regularly feature "chick with a dick, gay Barbie" personas contributing to the notion that the only power available to transgender women, much the same for cisgender women, is sexual power. In a study of televised documentaries, Booth (2015) found that trans men are depicted with more respect than trans women.

The depiction of transgender identities and expression on television matters for cisgender and transgender people alike. Television has the potential to demystify gender nonconformity, to confront transphobia, and to confirm transgender subjectivities. Perhaps because media visibility has been so limited, past research on transgender representations on television primarily took the form of case studies of individual episodes or programs. Moreover, claims regarding this content often rely on overgeneralizations across television genres. Findings about reality television may not necessarily hold as true for comedies, and what we know about talk shows may not necessarily hold true for dramas. Additionally, some of the existing research has failed to consider that there may be important distinctions in characterizations of transgender people depending on the type of characters such as lead, supporting, recurring, or extra. Finally, though Siebler (2012) claimed that both episodic and regular transgender characters support the dominant narrative of transgender as "transitioning," the increase in representation since the time of her research necessitates an updated study. For these reasons, this project builds on the previous work in transgender studies and media studies to investigate a wider sample of recent television series to determine if the general claim that television purports one dominant narrative about transgender lives holds true. In so doing,

we heed the call of Booth (2015) for communication scholars to consider fictional representations of transgender lives with particular emphasis on the diversity and agency of transgender subjects, especially in programming that offers alternative transgender subjectivities rather than relying on the monolithic narrative of transitioning.

Method

To that end, data collection for this project took the form of a qualitative content analysis. Hsieh and Shannon (2005) defined qualitative content analysis as “a research method for the subjectivist interpretation of text and data through the systematic classification process of coding and identifying themes or patterns” (p. 12). The goals of qualitative content analysis include describing the characteristics of message content and providing a rich description of the social reality created by those themes and categories (Cassell & Symon, 1994). Qualitative content analysis aims not to demonstrate statistical significance but qualitative significance. As Manning and Kunkel (2014, p. 39) explained, “the type of generalizing found in qualitative studies is *analytic* and not statistical,” so qualitative research yields results that can be extended or transferred to other contexts as theory develops. Qualitative content analysis involves multiple passes through the texts, first identifying tentative themes and then, through subsequent readings, more firmly identifying coding categories. This approach also allows researchers greater latitude to consider contextual cues within each scene. The process emphasizes discovery and description rather than establishing numerical relationships between two or more variables (Altheide, 1996). Two research assistants who had completed two research methods courses received further individualized training in the practice of qualitative content analysis by one of the authors of this article. With this foundation in place, the constant comparative method was used over a period of several months to refine coding schemes and rules, and to check coding consistency.

The sample included scripted primetime television produced in the United States that featured a lead or supporting transgender character dating from the 2008 season through the 2014 season, when data collection ended. As Ulaby (2014) emphasized, “Scripted drama is also a way to look at how trans people are being written into the narrative of American culture, not as marginal outsiders or issue-related guest stars, but as valued and beloved central players” (p. 1). The focus of this study on scripted television programming complements existing studies of reality television addressed earlier, and this time frame reflects the fact those studies point to transitional momentum in transgender representations. The 2007–2008 seasons marked the beginning of increased visibility for transgender individuals on U.S. television with Candis Cayne starring as the first transgender woman in a primetime drama and Isis King appearing in the reality program *America’s Next Top Model*. News media also began to pay more attention to issues related to transgender lives in 2008 with the first conviction of a hate crime for violence against a transgender person, teen Angie Zapata.

Series were drawn from broadcast and cable as well as on-demand content providers such as Netflix and Amazon. Series were identified using GLAAD's *Where We Are on TV* annual reports. Animated programming was excluded. The final sample included three broadcast, four cable, and two on-demand series, including four dramas and five comedies: *Transparent* (10 episodes in 2014); *Glee* (20 episodes in 2014); *House of Lies* (12 episodes in 2014); *Orange is the New Black* (13 episodes in 2014); *The Fosters* (21 episodes in 2013); *Nip/Tuck* (19 episodes in 2010); *Dirty Sexy Money* (13 episodes in 2009); *The L Word* (eight episodes in 2009); and *Ugly Betty* (18 episodes in 2008). The size of the sample suggested a qualitative rather than quantitative content analysis, but if the number of television series continues to increase, future research would warrant statistical analysis.

In all but two cases, the most recently aired season in which the transgender character appeared was coded (in the two exceptions, the character was written off the show and thus would have provided too few data). Each series was nominated for or won awards including Golden Globes, Prime Time Emmys, Teen Choice Awards, GLAAD Media awards, and Gay and Lesbian Entertainment Critics Association awards, among others. The coding unit was the episode. The basic rules of qualitative content analysis were followed. Based upon the literature review and multiple passes through the data, coding categories were identified as follows: casting, visibility, identity, embodiment, and social interaction.

Casting included the number of transgender characters played by cisgender actors and transgender actors. *Visibility* was coded as number of episodes in which the transgender character appeared that season, amount of screen time per episode, and number of episodes in which transgender identity was discussed by both that character and cisgender characters. *Identity* was coded for gender identity (transman, transwoman, or genderqueer), race/ethnicity, sexuality, age (adult or adolescent), whether transgender identity was openly expressed/closeted, number of scenes in which language misgendered the transgender character (wrong name/pronoun, dehumanizing language such as "tranny"), episodes in which transgender identity was a source of narrative conflict, and episodes in which the transgender character was depicted as mentally ill. *Embodiment* included episodes in which the transgender character or a cisgender character engaged in "wrong body discourse," episodes in which the transgender character or a cisgender character discussed genitals of transgender bodies, visual depiction of medical transitioning, and discussion of physical attractiveness of transgender bodies. *Social Interaction* was coded as with whom the transgender character was depicted, episodes in which the transgender character was socially rejected, episodes in which the transgender character was depicted in a romantic or sexual relationship, and episodes in which the transgender character was a victim of physical or psychological violence or portrayed as a villain.

Results

Casting Transgender Characters

Casting cisgender actors to play transgender characters is a contentious point within the transgender community (Ulaby, 2014) and one specifically identified as an area in

need of continued research on the part of communication scholars (Booth, 2015). We determined cisgender or transgender status of the actors by self-disclosures documented in popular media interviews. In this study, transgender actors play four of the nine regularly appearing characters. Candis Cayne made history as the first transgender actress to play a transgender character in primetime as Carmelita in *Dirty Sexy Money*. Characterized as a hyper-feminine “other woman,” Carmelita appeared in the first episode of Season 1 engaged in an extra marital affair with the series’ lead actor. She meets her demise at the end of Season 2 when she is accidentally shot to death.

Another transgender actor in this sample, Tom Phelan, played transgender teen Cole in *The Fosters*. Cole appeared in Episode 12 of the first season, living in a group home for girls, which he resented, and the character continued to appear throughout the data collection process. He was placed in the home due to his history of theft and prostitution. This character speaks realistically to the fact that many transgender teens experience homelessness and live without family support.

Next, transgender actor Laverne Cox played transgender inmate Sophia in *Orange is the New Black*. Sophia appeared in the first episode of Season 1 and continued to do so throughout the data collection process. Sophia stole credit cards to pay for her gender confirmation surgeries, was turned in to police by her son who did not accept the transition, and now imprisoned, she endures the transmisogyny of other prison inmates and staff, much the same as actual transgender inmates who are over-represented in the U.S. prison population (see Campbell & Holding, 2015).

Lastly, genderqueer actor Daniela Sea appeared as Max in *The L Word*. Max appeared in the first episode of Season 3 and continued through Season 6, the final season, when in a sensationalistic plot twist, he is impregnated and abandoned by his boyfriend shortly before his scheduled gender confirmation surgery.

Cisgender actors in this sample included Jeffrey Tambor as Maura in *Transparent*, Alex Newell as Unique in *Glee*, Donis Leonard, Jr. as Roscoe in *House of Lies*, Rebecca Romijn as Alexis on *Ugly Betty*, and Famke Janssen as Ava in *Nip/Tuck*. *Glee*’s Unique appeared in the 16th episode of Season 3 through to the series finale in Season 6, facing typical teen coming-of-age struggles as well as those unique to trans teens, including which bathroom to use at school.

In *House of Lies*, Roscoe appeared in the first episode of Season 1 and continued to do so throughout the data collection process, regularly engaging in teen behaviors such as resisting his father’s authority and experimenting with marijuana, but also regularly and boldly wearing make-up and clothing associated with both masculinity and femininity.

Ugly Betty’s Alexis Meade appeared in Episode 13 of Season 1, regularly through Season 2, and only occasionally in Season 3 because the actor was unhappy with the direction the character was taking. Alex pretended that he died in a ski accident but later appeared as the “masked lady” after gender confirmation surgery and became known as Alexis. The character faced transphobia in both work and social contexts such as losing business accounts and being confronted in bars.

Transparent’s Maura Pfefferman appeared in the first episode of Season 1 and continued to do so throughout the data collection process. Maura transitioned after

her divorce, maintained close relationships with her children (one of whom dates a transman), had a transgender friend, and attended transgender support group meetings. Maura is the only character in the sample who interacts within a transgender community. The complexity of this community is captured when cross-dressers he previously interacted with rejected him for his decision to begin medical transitioning. It is worth noting that even though *Transparent's* main character is not portrayed by a transgender actor, the show does cast other transgender actors in minor roles such as Ian Harvie as Dale.

Nip/Tuck's Ava Moore first appeared at the beginning of Season 2 as a life coach who had an extra marital affair with her client's husband. Ava used to identify as a gay man who worked as a professional escort for older women and fell in love with the show's lead actor, a heterosexual plastic surgeon. Determined to have a relationship with the surgeon, Ava convinced him to perform gender confirmation surgery so they can be together. She struggled with the fact she cannot bare children, even going to the extreme of kidnapping a baby.

The television industry is casting more transgender actors in U.S. scripted series that regularly feature transgender characters. Transgender actors' first-hand experiences may bring more sensitivity and authenticity to these performances, but much depends on the way the roles are written. Furthermore, casting agents, actors, television critics, and others emphasize that cisgender actors can also fulfill these roles successfully and that transgender actors should not be typecast or hired only for transgender roles.

Visibility of Transgender Characters

While more television series feature transgender characters than ever before, the visibility of these characters remains limited. This analysis examined 134 television episodes, 82 of which included appearances by the transgender character. These episodes totaled 107 hours and 41 minutes of programming. Screen time for transgender characters totaled 8 hours and 15 minutes or just 7.6% of total screen time. Comedies were more likely to depict regularly appearing transgender characters (82% of episodes) than dramas (33% of episodes).

Identity and Transgender Characters

Consistent with previous research, trans women were scripted as the lead or supporting roles more often than trans men (six programs and two programs, respectively). The invisibility of transmasculine characters continued, as did the lack of opportunity for trans men to see themselves on television and to identify with such characters. This finding comports with Keegan's (2014) observation that, "The increased visibility for trans women has not necessarily meant increased visibility for transgender men. Trans men of color fare even worse: Representations of their lives in scripted media are nonexistent" (para. 3). The lack of genderqueer representations was even more pronounced with only one character coded as such.

Adults were depicted more often than children. Teen roles were more varied than those of adults including one trans-identified girl, one trans-identified boy, and one genderqueer child. The presence of trans teens in these series is important because they provide role models and an opportunity for television to play a part in creating family conversations and potentially safe spaces for gender non-conforming children and adolescents.

The visibility of transgender people of color in regularly appearing roles was strong in relation to the number of Caucasians. Specifically, the presence of three African American transgender people in this sample of nine characters is an important step forward. Previously, the lack of diversity limited opportunities for television viewers to explore important intersections between race and gender identity (see Yep, Russo, & Allen, 2015).

Transgender characters in this sample reflected a range of human sexualities. *The L Word's* Max identified as bisexual. *Glee's* Unique had a crush on a young, heterosexual man, but she felt too afraid to initiate a relationship in person so she created a fake online profile to do so. *Dirty Sexy Money's* Carmelita had a sexual relationship with a heterosexual man, as did *Nip/Tuck's* Ava. *Transparent's* Maura was married to a woman, divorced, and dated women before transitioning. The sexuality of *Orange Is the New Black's* Sophia, *Ugly Betty's* Alexis, *The Foster's* Cole, and *House of Lies's* Roscoe was not established in the coded seasons. In different seasons, the respective shows revealed that Cole had an ex-girlfriend, Alexis unknowingly fathered a son, Sophia married a woman and fathered a son, and Roscoe kissed another genderqueer teen who had also been designated male at birth. Similar to gay and lesbian characters who often were depicted asexually as their visibility on television began to increase (Dow, 2001), transgender characters seldom appear with sexual partners. Only three series, all dramas, presented characters in a sexual manner, one bisexual and two hyper-sexualized and hyper-feminized heterosexual trans women. Failing to present transgender characters across the full spectrum of human sexualities exacerbates the conflation of gender identity and sexuality.

None of the characters closeted their transgender identities except for the aforementioned *Glee* storyline. Transgender identity was not discussed directly very often in these television programs; when it was, it was almost twice as likely to be discussed by the transgender character than by cisgender characters. Transgender characters are out of the closet and more often serve as the voice of authority about their own identities—important expressions of agency.

Though much of gender expression is visual, television dialogue can play an important part in educating viewers about transgender identities and how to have productive conversations about them. Cisgender characters used the wrong pronouns or names to refer to transgender characters in 36 episodes and dehumanizing language was used in 12 episodes. In this manner, this sample of television programs reflects the linguistic misgendering of transgender people still prevalent in U.S. culture.

Transgender identity and expression emerged as the primary source of narrative conflict in 11 episodes. For example, a company decided to pull advertising from the

magazine Alexis managed because it did not want to be associated with a transgender person. As another example, Cole and his roommate argued when she walked in while Cole unbound his breasts in the bathroom. The limited number of episodes in which transgender identity functioned as the primary source of narrative conflict may be due to the fact that several characters had already transitioned before the coded seasons started or because many of the series have large ensemble casts which provide other sources of narrative conflict. Only two episodes depicted transgender characters with mental illness, though Ava suffered from depression in a previous season. Transgender characters in this sample faced a variety of challenges, their gender identity being one. Such a depiction provides more opportunities to show complex, multi-dimensional characters.

Embodiment and Transgender Characters

Six programs discussed medical transitioning and did so in the voices of transgender and cisgender characters alike. Most of the content that focused on medicalized understandings of transgender identity generated from the series *Nip/Tuck*, a program about plastic surgeons. Of the nine transgender lead or supporting characters coded in this sample, five had completed or were in the process of surgically transitioning. The three transgender teens and Maura had not surgically transitioned nor did they reveal they planned to do so. Though rarely discussed, transgender and cisgender characters engaged in “wrong body” discourse in comparatively equal measure. In contrast, cisgender characters were twice as likely to discuss genitals and to discuss physical attractiveness of transgender characters than transgender characters, though these topics seldom came up in this sample. Transgender characters rarely were shown visually modifying their appearance to reflect social expectations for masculinity or femininity (e.g., breast binding, crotch or bra stuffing).

Taken as a whole, these findings contradict previous research (Serano, 2007; Siebler, 2012) in encouraging ways. Unlike other forms of television such as documentaries, talk shows, and reality programs, scripted series were less likely to reduce transgender expression to the idea of being “born in the wrong body,” pathologize transgender bodies, or obsess about genitals and attractiveness. This finding may be due to the fact that half of the adult characters had medically transitioned in previous seasons or when the character first appeared. It is noteworthy, and perhaps less worth celebrating, that transgender bodies seem to be talked about rather than directly discussed by transgender characters themselves.

Social Interaction of Transgender Characters

Transgender characters were rarely shown in social isolation or socially rejected by others. Transgender characters engaged in a romantic or sexual relationship in the same measure. Transgender characters were depicted more often with friends (39 episodes) and family (21 episodes) than with strangers, coworkers, or with medical professionals. The remainder of the depictions included characters coded as “others” such as prison guards, group home residents, teachers, and family members of romantic partners.

Unlike other media depictions that historically presented transgender characters as alienated and alone, U.S. scripted television series in this sample regularly explored relationships between transgender and cisgender characters. However, relationships among transgender characters, other than in the series *Transparent*, sorely lacked representation and even in this series, the primary focus is the family, not the transgender community. *Nip/Tuck* briefly depicted a second transgender character, Alexis Stone, but never in the same episode as the more regularly featured Ava Moore. Notably, a later season of *Glee* depicted Coach Beiste coming out as a transgender person and receiving support from Unique. Overall, the transgender community, *qua* community, still largely remains invisible in modern television. This finding is consistent with depictions of the lesbian and gay community. With rare exceptions such as *Queer as Folk* and *The L Word*, lesbian, gay, and bisexual characters are overwhelmingly embedded in straight contexts much the same way as we see transgender characters in this sample.

Transgender characters often appeared with lesbian, gay, and bisexual characters. As Gamson (2001) argued, the television industry previously increased representation of gay and lesbian characters strategically to increase viewership, and this industry has had to find new means of increasing draw including scripts that both sensationalize transgender characters and those that ask viewers to sympathize with them. Industry leaders may also assume, rightly or wrongly, that audiences drawn to series with lead characters who are gay, lesbian, and bisexual may be more likely to watch programming with transgender characters.

Transgender characters experienced psychological violence in two episodes and physical violence in three episodes, and they were depicted as villains in three episodes. Thus, this sample included far fewer stereotyped victim/villain representations than previous research suggests typifies small screen transgender representations. However, it is important to note that many of these characters were depicted stereotypically in other seasons. For example, Max and Ava had affairs and Sophia stole credit cards; Ava suffered from clinical depression; Alexis was harassed; and Carmelita was abducted and murdered.

Discussion and Conclusion

Television's scripted narratives and characterizations of lead or supporting transgender characters in some ways analogizes to and in other ways differs from depictions documented in previous literature. Much the same as other minority groups, transgender people have experienced symbolic annihilation (Gerbner & Gross, 1976; Gross, 2001), a systematic absence whereby media contribute to social inequality by underrepresenting, trivializing, or condemning non-normative social identities. Even in programs that are celebrated for being about and featuring transgender characters, including those with main and supporting characters, transgender people get an average of 7% of the screen time. Furthermore, while the primary narrator of transgender stories is less likely to be a cisgender person, the voice remains that primarily of trans women, thus silencing trans men and non-binary subjectivities. Siebler (2012) claimed, "We see this in transfeminine

representations where legs, cleavage, youth and the Barbie aesthetic are primarily portrayed. There are no other sorts of representations to counter this hyper-sexualized, hyper-feminine ideal that pivots on capitalist models of gender facilitated by product consumption” (p. 9). In this sample, clearly Carmelita, Ava, and Alexis represent the Barbie aesthetic, but important alternatives to this characterization have begun to make their way into this type of television program.

Second, genderqueer characters continue to be largely invisible. The depictions in this sample still fail to challenge directly certain social and cultural assumptions about gender. Except for Roscoe, all the lead and supporting transgender characters reinforced the gender binary and gender stability, identifying consistently with either masculinity or femininity.

Third, transgender people as a political community also remain invisible. The lack of interaction between transgender characters and the failure to acknowledge the existence of a transgender social movement depoliticizes and disempowers this form of activism. As Dow (2001) observed about the politics of lesbian visibility on the comedy series *Ellen*, visibility that individualizes problems rather than addressing social ills as structural and systemic actually reifies hegemonic heteronormativity. At present, while we celebrate increased visibility of transgender lives on television, we echo Dow’s observation about the politics of visibility. By depoliticizing transgender subjectivities, these series continue to function within and further hegemonic cishnormativity.

As with other marginalized and maligned communities, television depiction of transgender people is both an issue of quantity and quality. Representing the full range of diverse transgender identities and a community of transgender people could play an important role in challenging stereotypes, increasing social acceptance and personal safety, and providing resilient role models for transgender youth and adults. Such programming could also signal to television producers that there are audiences ready for a new transgender narrative and provide cisgender audiences in particular with rich opportunities to question deeply embedded social assumptions about the gender binary and gender stability. Recurring lead and supporting characters allow audiences to develop parasocial relationships with them as the television narrative unfolds over time. Featuring transgender characters in such roles could play an important part in demystifying transgender identity for cisgender audiences and allowing them to relate to such characters on a deeper level.

There are reasons to feel encouraged about the findings of this examination of U.S. scripted television episodes. These series on the whole represent progress by some measures with respect to representation of transgender characters. Most notably, these narratives are more varied and nuanced, offering alternatives to the once dominant narrative of transgender as “transitioning.”

The number of transgender characters has increased, and they are out of the closet. This visibility most noticeably has come from cable and on-demand services. One important evolutionary step is more diversity in terms of class, race, and sexual identity. Given the importance of intersectionality, we continue to hope that more working class transgender characters and those of all races, not only Caucasian and

African American, might emerge as main characters in scripted television. Other important evolutionary steps include the fact that shows cast transgender actors in roles more often and that transgender teens continue to gain representation. As Meyer (2003) noted, adolescents often look to television for information about their own identities and relationships; as such, we especially feel enthusiastic about teenage transgender characters.

We celebrate that these series eschewed prolonged discussions about genitals and gender confirmation surgery. The formerly ubiquitous “wrong body” discourse seems to have ebbed in favor of more diverse and refined stories about transgender identity and subjectivity. Transgender status is seldom the primary source of narrative conflict. We also celebrate the fact that many long-standing stereotypes of transgender people appear less often in this sample. As documented in the literature review, transgender characters were often depicted as mentally ill or as victims or villains; however, that was not the case in this sample. The limited amount of trans ridicule and violence represents an important step forward, and those instances that are depicted more often invited viewers to sympathize with and respect the resiliency of transgender characters.

These representations may, in part, reflect the fact that these were lead and supporting characters as compared to episodic characters. The GLAAD (2012) reported, “Victims or Villains: Examining 10 Years of Transgender Images on Television,” catalogued 102 non-recurring and episodic transgender characters and documented that over the 10-year span, these characters were cast in the victim role 40% of the time and as villains 21% of the time. Our findings about lead and supporting characters differ markedly.

We acknowledge that pursuing a goal of multidimensional characterization necessarily means that not every image should be affirming. The struggle to move television away from objectification, fetishism, and ridicule of transgender people must continue unabated. Naturally there exists in the transgender community and among its supporters a desire to see characters that affirm these identities. Ideally, representations of transgender people will continue, proliferate, and include images of transgender people struggling, behaving poorly, acting heroic, and doing nothing extraordinary.

The final observation in our results section, for instance, points out that transphobic hate crimes remain a problem, but the series analyzed herein failed to address the problem. We acknowledge reflexively that we have painted ourselves into a corner with this claim, as an episode about hate crimes would contribute to the victimhood narrative we otherwise decry as overdone and stereotypical. What, then, represents a more excellent way? How do we extricate ourselves from such a paradox? If trans characters appeared in a greater number and variety of programs and with a wider range of diversity in personality and storyline, the occasional storyline about victimization would not stick out as unusual. A hypothetical example to illustrate what we might consider ideal: a police procedural where a transgender detective works the case when his precinct receives a call about a transphobic hate crime. Rather than an episode where cisgender characters make jokes throughout the hour at the expense of the trans victim (*CSI*'s horrifying episodes with transgender victims come to mind), in

a show like the one we imagine, the transgender detective uses hir own expertise as a detective and a human subject with a positionality at a particular social location to solve the crime with the right mix of professionalism, toughness, and contextualized compassion.

Certainly some series are more problematic than others, and individual episodes may contribute to transphobia, yet taken as a whole, this sample represents a new direction in television's representations of transgender lives, one that gives rise to cautious optimism. While problematic representations are quite likely to persist into the future, the fact that viewers have the opportunity to see alternatives is important. These alternatives, though hardly a serious threat to cisnormativity, can function in a way that invites viewers to contrast more authentic depictions with others and, in that comparison, make more critical interpretations of gender diversity.

With respect to methodology, this study heeds Manning and Kunkel's (2014) call to explore social scientific phenomena from an unabashedly qualitative perspective, embracing a commitment to qualitative significance. In this case, general trends from qualitative content analysis, warranted by specific examples from across the series analyzed, supported our claims about the potential and the limitations of recent representations of transgender lives on U.S. scripted television.

Limitations of this study include the relatively small proportion of the episodes of most series included in the study that actually focused on the transgender characters. As we noted above, many of these series feature large ensemble casts, sometimes with a dozen or more main characters. As such, even regular characters do not appear in every episode and no one regular character occupies most episodes' central story lines. A study like this about lesbian and gay characters could focus on *Queer as Folk*, *Will and Grace*, *The L Word*, *Noah's Ark*, and a number of other series and find lesbian and gay characters at the center of storylines on every episode. We remain far from a reality where this is true for transgender characters. Furthermore, while we gain much from the qualitative look across many series, we lose the rich detail of critical studies that center on individual shows, characters, or relationships. Finally, this study focused exclusively on U.S. television series.

Future research should continue to explore representations of transgender lives on television. As more television series tell the stories of trans lives, scholars of television will have more material for comparison and analysis. We urge continued attention to representations that subvert or move beyond standard tropes and archetypes. Furthermore, scholars with expertise in international media systems and intercultural communication stand particularly equipped to consider transgender representations on television around the globe. Studies that consider reception of these programs—in the United States and in the globalized economy—also promise revelatory conclusions. Finally, we hope researchers interested in gender identity and human sexuality will continue to explore media representations of persons from identities beyond the common “LGBTQ” acronym. As more and more people identify publicly with other identities, we expect television and other media will begin telling their stories. We hope television scholars will, in Spencer's (2014, p. 125) language, “[keep] the range of possibilities perpetually unlocked” in exploring representations of multiple gender identities and sexual orientations.

Note

- [1] Throughout this article, following Spencer (2015), Miller (2015), and others, we invoke the term *cisnormativity*, “analogous with respect to gender identity to the relationship between heteronormativity and sexual orientation” (Spencer, 2015, p. xix).

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