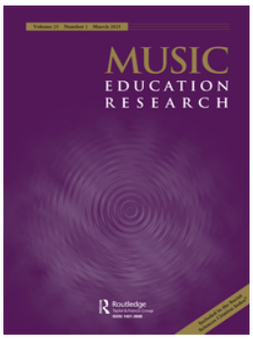

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Becoming a 'Trans Synth Queen': YouTube, electronic music composition, and coming out

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ABSTRACT

Educators can develop musical learning experiences that help trans students explore, develop, and celebrate their genders and identities through music. This case study explored how a well-established YouTube musician, Amie Waters, used social media platforms and her music to express herself as she came out as a trans non-binary femme person to her audiences online. Amie found trans resources and role models on online platforms, which helped her develop her identity as a non-binary person. Through observation of Amie's YouTube videos and the comments left on her channel, conducting semi-structured interviews, and analyzing digital artifacts such as text blogs and screen captures, I found that she used online media, particularly YouTube, to present her self-image while interacting parasocially with others who provided her with emotional, creative, and financial support. Amie's online content creation helped her understand her gender and emotions through music and text. This study might help musicians who are transgender, gender non-conforming, and non-binary as well as their teachers to see how social media and online content creation can lead to developing a support system as they express their genders and emotions through music.

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Trans; transgender; YouTube; composition; electronic music; identity

Issues effecting the transgender community are prevalent in music education discourse as teachers have become increasingly aware of people who are trans[1] in their classrooms, the media, and their communities. Growing visibility of trans people has led to policy reform in education and society at large. Silveira and Goff (2016) found music educators generally have a desire to support *transgender* students, yet many teachers do not feel adequately prepared to teach them. These feelings of inadequacy regarding preparedness for teaching *transgender and gender-nonconforming* youth is a common challenge among educators and school counsellors (Case and Meier 2014). Authors in pedagogical journals have offered suggestions for how to honour trans music students including, but not limited to, representing the diverse population that exists within *trans* communities in music education curricula (Cayari et al. 2021; Sauerland 2022), working with *transgender* students to understand their needs and desires as musicians (Manternach et al. 2017), and being aware of 'rapidly changing terminology' (Clarkson 2017, 238) that is used in the *trans community*.

The growing body of music education research about trans music students and teachers features individuals' experiences navigating music making and learning settings. Examples include studies about Rie/Ryan, a *gender-variant* student whose songwriting helped *him* share *her* experiences and emotions with others (Nichols 2013);[2] JJ, a Black, bisexual, *demiboy* rapper and singer whose music

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gave them voice because 'just existing and persisting and putting out their music was empowering' (Kruse 2016); and Melonie, a *transgender* music educator who *transitioned* while navigating choir, undergraduate dorm living, and student teaching (Bartolome and Stanford 2017). Other researchers have focused on the interactions between teachers and *transgender* students in higher education settings (Manternach 2017; Manternach et al. 2017; Sims 2017). Trans activist and vocal pedagogue Felix A. Graham (2018) insisted, 'One of the primary components of a successful voice studio [or music classroom] is creating a space in which singers [or students] feel safe and comfortable —not just physically, but emotionally and cognitively as well' (88). His approach to working with *transgender* and *nonconforming* singers honoured their identities with music that can develop them holistically, rather than focusing solely on technical and physiological aspects of music making. This was done through exploration of gender and healthy discussion about desires, goals, stigma, discomfort, biases, and assumptions surrounding students' identities and the music they learned. At the *Transgender Singing Voice Conference,* a music education event, I found that two rationales from *trans** + musicians for attending the conference were to learn more about how their voices worked and to seek out supportive communities of other *trans** + individuals and allies (Cayari 2019a).

As a person who identifies as part of the trans community, I suggest that music educators may be able to help trans students grow as musicians by facilitating music making experiences that allow them to explore, develop, and celebrate their genders and identities. Guided by this belief, I explored how a well-established YouTube musician, Amie Waters, used social media platforms and her music to express herself as she came out as trans to her audiences online. Through the study of her YouTube channel, I sought to understand how she used social media sites to find a space for *mediated*—created with the aid of media and technology—music making that helped her express her identity, come out to others, and find empowerment through publishing music online. Amie's experiences and practices could inform how we in music education might encourage trans students to pursue music that expresses their genders and other aspects of their identities as well as represent their communities in positive ways, as their art can empower them as creators, help them thrive as humans, and inspire those who hear their music.

Literature review

For this study, I focused my search of literature on how trans identity was understood, developed, and expressed online. *Trans identity*—the term I use for the way a person understands and expresses their gender, as well as how that relates to the ways they identified throughout their life and the gender they were assigned at birth—is complex and often evolves over time. People can develop trans identities at early ages, which was supported in a study of 121 *transgender* children, during which Kennedy and Hellen (2010)found that many participants were aware of their *gender variance* around age 5 with a mean *age of epiphany* (realizing their gender varied from what was assigned at birth) of 7.9 years old; that study was inspired by Kennedy's (2008) prior analysis of 110 *transgendered* individuals' responses from an online forum about *crossdressing,* in which over 80% of informants realized this identity before leaving primary school, around 11 years old.

Virtual platforms and online content can serve as gathering places for trans people through which they assign symbolic meaning to content. According to Chen (2016), *gender-switching* YouTube creators in Taiwan watched videos on YouTube and used the content to develop concepts of themselves that aligned with the gender they wanted to present; to construct digital selves that affirmed their gender identities, which they presented online through creating videos; and to interact parasocially—mediated exchanges that can be as meaningful as offline relationships; for example, developing a relationship with audiences and fellow creators that exist strictly online—with other YouTube users around topics of gender.

Self-construction of identity through online consumption. Many *young LGBTQ + people* use a combination of mainstream social media sites and *cyber queer spaces* (hosted on platforms like

Tumblr, Reddit, and hook-up apps) to informally learn and interact with others (Robards et al. 2018). *Trans youth* often utilize social media sites to learn about language and terms, and sites like Instagram and YouTube provide accessible platforms on which creators can become role models who show how to 'live a normal life [as a *trans* person]' (Fox and Ralston 2016, 639). Reading and watching the stories of other *trans* people online often help *trans* individuals develop their identities as they see others who they aspire to be like (Raun 2016). O'Neill (2014) discussed how YouTube became a popular platform for *transgender youth* to share narratives about their genders, which led to a cultural presence of *trans youth* that might help consumers and creators develop 'confidence in self-identity' (42). Similarly, Craig and McInroy (2014) found that online media facilitated the opportunity for *LGBTQ youth* to '(1) access resources, (2) explore identity, (3) find likeness, (4) come out digitally, and (5) potentially expand identities formed online into offline life' (100).

Coming out: Self-presentation through online creation. Zimman (2009) argued that *transgender* people come out through either declaration—claiming a *transgender identity*—or disclosure—retelling one's history through or after *transition*. Zimman's analysis of *transgender coming out stories* on YouTube resulted in the identification of a narrative genre in which people from various contexts would tell their story in similar ways; thus, the genre became a rite of passage that can give individual's a sense of solidarity and self within a community. Phelps (2017) identified six themes often discussed in *transgender identity disclosures* on YouTube: 'Identifying as Transgender at a Young Age; Passing; Pronoun Usage; Happiness; Support Systems; and Sharing Journeys' (64). However, the prevalence of parallel narratives led to what Miller (2018) called *transnormativity*, a perception that there are certain ways to be *trans*, which may alienate those who do not fit the mold. Miller argued that this alienation disproportionately affected *nonbinary* people and *trans people of color*. Vlogging on YouTube can involve coming out as well as working through one's gender exploration, and therefore, can help in 'constructing, performing, and expressing trans identity' (Raun 2012, 166). Self-disclosure of one's gender journey on YouTube, according to Raun, results in a Do-It-Yourself (DIY) video archive that can also serve as a resource through which creators could teach others.

Parasocial relationships and online communities. Online communities often develop around social media content, and parasocial relationships can form through interactions on online media platforms. Mayo (2014) claimed, 'Online and other new media spaces provide *LGBT and ally youth* with new tools for voicing their concerns and creating educational and socially supportive expressive community' (italics added, 101). Online interactions with others were as meaningful and sometimes more meaningful than offline interactions for *gender-switching* participants in Chen's (2016) study. Chen's participants mentioned that the support they received from viewers of their YouTube content were often uplifting, deeply personal, and empowering. In contrast, Robards et al. (2018) found in their study of *cyberqueer spaces* (social media, message boards, and dating apps) that 40% of their 1,312 *LGBTQ* + informants experienced 'isolation, exclusion or harassment through [*cyberqueer*] social media' (163) due to racism, infighting within subsections of the *LGBTQ* + community, and trans exclusionary sentiments.

Online music as identity

Creating YouTube videos require *queer influencers* to share their identities with audiences on the internet, and Abidin (2019) argued that coming out narratives serve 'as a biographical device to establish their public personae [or public facing identity] and self-brand, to build solidarity and trust with followers, and to set up a viable narrative canvas' (615). *Gender-switching* participants in Chen's (2016) study used make up, apparel, and physical movements or gestures to express themselves and their genders in lip sync and cover music videos. One participant said, 'Through YouTube [musical] performances, I seem to take on another personality. It breaks me out of the cocoon' (246). Breaking out of a cocoon can serve a metaphor for what Raun (2010) called *screen-birth*, in which a *trans* individual publishes content that shows a transition toward the gender

they want to express; for example, a *trans man* singing a duet with himself in a multitrack recording that used footage of him singing alto prior to taking testosterone and tenor six months after being on hormone replacement therapy (HRT). Raun asserted that the video displayed the informant's vocal range and physical body differences that exemplified his gender through musical performance, as he wore no shirt in the tenor video, baring his chest after surgery—another example of a *trans* rite of passage on YouTube (see Zimman 2009).

Jennex and Murphy (2017) discussed how *trans* musicians explore their gender through publishing YouTube cover song videos. Covers allowed participants to explore both authentic and inauthentic aspects of self-identity, genre, and the original music. Participants also noted how performing songs in their intimate, domestic spaces helped them find meaning in covering and re-purposing their favourite songs. Covers also allowed participants to validate their music making and gave them and their audiences a 'safe haven—a familiar, but fraught, 'home' space [that displayed a process during which] individuals 'undergo the inter- and intrasubjective changes that gender/sex transitions can augur" (316). Through previous autoethnography research, I argued that music rehearsal and performance have potential to help *LGBTQ* + people reflect upon their lived experiences, explore aspects of their identity, better understand their relationships within society, and express themselves through presentation on stage (Cayari 2019b). This research study explores composition, recording, and online publication through creating videos for YouTube, and how these types of activities might help trans individuals find empowerment through their music, and thus, inspire ways for music educators to guide their students to pursue music that nurtures their identities.

Methods

For this study, I asked the following research question: How might a musician use YouTube to perform their trans identity through creating videos and publishing them online? Since there is little research about how trans musicians use the internet to explore and present their identities, I chose to use case study methodology to explore 'the particularity and complexity of a single case' (Stake 1995, xi). While Stake suggested, 'Case study seems a poor basis for generalization' (7), he also argued that a case study might contribute to the collected knowledge within a field by adding to or challenging preconceived notions that refine wide-held generalizations. After all, Barrett (2014) posited, 'Case studies allow us to branch out in exploratory ways to map areas of inquiry that are underdeveloped or unexamined' (130). Thus, this study may inform music educators' approaches for working with trans students by showing how the internet was used by a trans musician as a resource for learning, identity construction, and community building.

YouTube is a widely accessible public website, and thus, researching the creators who use the platform presents potential risks and benefits for participants. For example, discussing one's identity regarding a marginalized status may result in inadvertently outing the participant in ways they had not anticipated. In contrast, research publications may benefit the participant by bringing publicity to their work. Amie Waters, the participant in this study, requested through an informed consent form, that I use her name and cite her work appropriately. The following research protocol was approved by my university's Institutional Review Board.

Introducing Amie Waters

When I embarked on my research project, I sought an extraordinary YouTube creator, as Lange (2008) suggested that studying ordinary—or less popular and experienced—creators might be uneventful. Furthermore, a 'highly atypical case can sometimes contribute to our understanding of other cases' (Stake 1995, 134). To find an extraordinary participant, I sought a trans YouTube creator who had at least 10,000 followers from publishing on the site for at least two years. I found in previous research that creators with those milestones provided robust data for a case

study (Cayari 2011, 2016, 2018). I met Amie when working with her for a previous study about video game music cover artists on YouTube. When writing a manuscript for that study, I saw that Amie changed her Twitter biography to 'Trans Synth Queen.' Thus, I deemed Amie as an appropriate participant for this study because she had more than 25,000 subscribers with 275 videos between 2015 and 2020. She also recently came out as non-binary and trans femmeto her YouTube audience. I knew through following her on Twitter that she used the internet to digitally construct a self-identity by consuming media, used online creation to present herself, and interacted parasocially with others through the internet. I contacted her in February 2020 to ask if she wanted me to change her identifiers in my previous study, at which time she was recruited for the current study.

Data collection and analysis

A case is 'a bounded system' (Stake 1995, 2). Time was bound by the date Amie created her YouTube channel until the day we completed data collection for the study. Also, YouTube's website bound together digital artifacts within Amie's channel URL; both helped me focus on Amie's virtual music performances.

I used the following methods to collect data: observation, interview, and artifact collection. To guide observations of Amie's YouTube channel, I developed a fieldnote template that included 30 categories that were informed by my experiences working with YouTube creators and trans musicians (see Supplementary Material A: Fieldnote Template; which was adapted from Cayari 2011, 2016, 2018; Stake 2006). I trained three undergraduate research assistants on how to use the template over the course of three meetings. We met as a team to observe three of Amie's videos as a group, each jotting down observations and discussing our results so we knew what the others were noting. Then, each assistant and I observed two other videos separately and discussed our notes to help the other see from a different perspective. In our final whole-group discussion, each assistant shared the observations from two more videos with the group. We discussed the lessons we learned from each other's approaches to collecting data. The research assistants helped triangulate data as 'a panel of . . . experts to discuss alternative interpretations [that could] serve to support or undercut [my] interpretation [and] provide additional data for the case study' (Stake 1995, 113) that increased rigour and verification. Our team had three subsequent research meetings to discuss our findings and learn from each other, as every person's experience with each video provided data for us to consider for future observations. First, the four of us all observed one of Amie's vlogs and one of her music videos. Then, each of the assistants were assigned an additional vlog and music video to observe. We met to discuss our findings, and then each assistant was assigned a set of 10 videos to observe. For this study, I observed 10 vlogs and 25 music videos, each of which were also observed by one or more of the assistants.

Observation notes were used to develop four semi-structured interviews, each lasting approximately an hour. The interviews included questions about Amie's experiences regarding gender, coming out on social media, her current perceptions of past videos, and the process of creating music for publication online. The interviews were conducted, transcribed, and submitted to Amie for member checking. She approved all transcripts with no changes other than misspelled names and typographical errors. Finally, artifacts in the form of social media posts created by Amie were included in the data. To find Twitter posts that were pertinent to the study, a Google search was conducted for topics like 'Amie Waters + coming out' and 'Amie Waters non-binary,' which yielded Twitter posts that were incorporated in the data. Amie's 10 personal blog posts, which were hosted on a personal website, were also read, coded, and used to inform the study.

All data were coded in a three-step process (Emerson, Fretz, and Shaw 2011) using a priori and emergent codes. Initial codes were assigned to all data, and then similar codes were grouped and reassessed. This allowed for categories to form, and data within each category were analyzed and used for writing the case report (see Supplementary Material B. Code Structure and Descriptions of Codes). At the end of data collection, Amie was compensated $400 USD, the IRB approved amount for her time and expertise.

Perspectives, fluidity, and identity

A person's gender identity is fluid and may evolve over time. This was true not only for Amie as the participant, but also me as a researcher. Our positionalities influenced this research. Amie, at the time of the study identified as a *trans femme, non-binary person*, and I, at the time of writing this article, identify as a *genderfuck individual who is gender non-conformingly fluid between masculine and non-binary.* Amie and I have a parasocial relationship. We have not met offline, yet we have had interactions within video game music and YouTube creator online communities. Our relationship vacillated between researcher-participant, creator-audience, and fellow members of the video game music community. Prior to this study, I considered myself a fan of Amie, and while I did not support her financially, I commented on her work and sent my support through text comments as she made announcements about her identity and music on social media. Both of us came out as trans/gender non-conforming shortly before this study started. I initially feared misrepresenting Amie's gender in this research, so I wrote using her identifiers during the data collection period for this study and sent her a copy of this research for her to member check. She did not have any adjustments to the following data.

Data: becoming a trans synth queen[3,4]

Growing up: music and religion

Amie grew up in a predominantly White rural town in Northern Illinois. She started piano lessons in second grade and was actively involved in a traditional school music education programme, playing saxophone in jazz, concert, and marching bands; attending guitar classes; and singing in choirs and musicals. She was a leader in her Assemblies of God church youth group, where she played instruments and sang in the worship band. Church provided a space for Amie to bond with her peers as they 'spent much of the time in the building, playing games, building friendships, and playing music.' In contrast, Amie also noticed a pattern in her religious leaders from her young life. They confessed their indiscretions (e.g. sexual encounters, impure thoughts, or viewing pornography) as a way of 'reminding you that these things are shameful; that you should feel shameful, especially if you want to become a [church] leader. They'd say that it is a good thing to believe you're bad,' a sentiment Amie embraced but felt it 'stopped the development of [her] self-identity in its tracks.' Shame was a burden for Amie that she later realized influenced her identity as a bisexual and trans person. Despite this, Amie became involved as a leader and musician in religious settings.

Musical branding and identity

While in high school and college, both in Northern Illinois, Christian music was intertwined in Amie's music making. She wrote and performed music under the name *The Lonely Doodle*, which she identified as 'insufferably preachy. Every song had a very explicit intention that followed strict rules for the kinds of music I wanted to make.' The guidelines, both self-imposed and ones imposed by her church, were juxtaposed by Amie's desire for authenticity, which meant she wanted to express 'her true self' through her music.

Amie changed her musical brand to *A Motive Makes a Man (AMMAM)*, a namesake bore out of problematizing two adages from her religious endeavours: 'The clothing makes a man' and 'The road to hell is paved with good intentions.' Her intentions were, 'I'm going to make what I want to make' by telling musical stories in a variety of genres from 'DIY folk-punk to Prodo.' On January 16, 2013, Amie published her first music video on YouTube, commemorating her move to Portland, Oregon, and inspired by the 'emotional weight of moving across the country,' which was indicative of how she used her music to process events in her life and deal with emotions.

Amie published both original and cover works on her YouTube channel, and video performances varied from single-take videos, in which she played acoustic guitar on her porch, to heavily

edited multitrack recordings with split screen techniques, lighting, and special effects filmed in her attic studio. The presence of her body in videos fell into one of two categories: instrumental videos featuring only her hands playing synthesizers, or videos with lyrics in which she showed her face and body. She usually wore a button-down shirt, glasses, and a 'newsie' cap or headphones while sporting a full beard (see Figure 1. Screen captures of embodiment).

By 2016, Amie amassed over 10,000 subscribers on YouTube by producing covers, predominantly of video game music. In contrast, she described her original works as 'unrestrained and not confined to any single definition of music.' Most of her compositions were 'ambient instrumental' music inspired by storytelling tropes like 'finding the fountain of youth,' 'wishing for death,' and 'exploration' or journeying, as well as autobiographical recollections like the birth of her son and the violent death of her grandfather.

On May 16, 2016, Amie rebranded her music under her given name, *Ace Waters,* the result of wanting to 'start taking music seriously and try to pursue it as a fulltime job.' Amie reflected:

> Using my name is better SEO (search engine optimization). It's a cool name. No one knows what *A Motive Makes a Man* means anyways. I've had a long and complicated relationship with my name, but nowadays, I don't hate my name. I really like telling people the story of the kind man I was named after, my Uncle Ace. It's a beautiful and powerful tribute to a great human.

The connection between music and identity became more apparent in Amie's life as she sought healing from self-loathing and shame through counselling and musical exploration.

Acceptance, sexuality, and gender

Amie explained, 'For most of my teens and 20s, I really only experienced arousal and attraction to females.' Thus, she had a hetero-normative, cisgender disposition, since she used he/him/his pronouns, even though she felt apathetic toward gender and later married in 2004. She and her partner soon had a son. In 2016, Amie had an epiphany at a church retreat called *Beyond the Rainbow.* She attended the event to learn how to be a better ally to the queer community. During a workshop, the

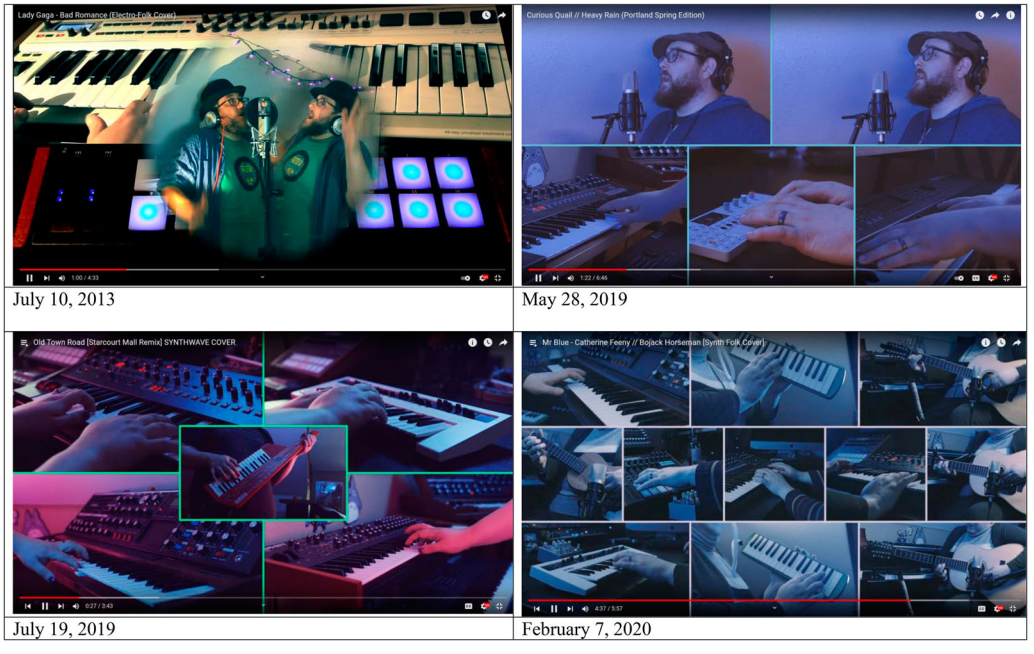

Figure 1. Screenshots of Amie Waters Videos.

speaker asked, 'Who here is part of the LGBTQ + community?' and Amie raised her hand. While she appeared to be in a heterosexual relationship, she also experienced attraction to men and later realized she was attracted 'to all people, all genders, and all identities.' Major contributing factors to these realizations were talking about sexuality with her partner, counselling, educating herself about the LGBTQ + community, and finding ways to deal with the shame that stemmed from the church during her childhood and early adulthood—namely, music. On June 22, 2018, Amie came out on Twitter as bisexual, and on the same date a year later, she released an extended play (EP) called *Bisexual Space Magic* (*BSM*). The press release stated:

> I wanted to make an EP of synth music in celebration of my first Pride being out and proud of who I am. This EP is for all who are searching, questioning, and finding their true selves. Whether you embraced your identity years ago, or are still confused as fuck, this is about celebrating the process of affirming who you really are, who you've always been, and who you hope to become. This music is about the mysteries hidden in the depths of space. The great cosmos of the soul.

Constructing a self-Identity and online resources

During the development of *BSM*, Amie's partner came out as non-binary. Amie wrote in a blog:

> My [partner] has been gently (and not so gently) nudging me to deal with my self-worth. As I watched them come into their own as a non-binary person by experimenting with more masculine affirming expressions, I asked if it was okay for me to try out some Gender Non-Conforming™ things. They said, 'I'm going to buy some different clothes. Is that cool?' I was like, 'Yeah, it's no big deal. And if you want to say no, I don't want to seem like I'm stealing your thing, but like, if you want to pick up some clothes for me too, I'd appreciate it. It's probably just fashion, and it doesn't mean anything to me at all.' Which was a lie. It meant a lot to me.

Amie's partner bought her some feminine clothing and she tried them on in her attic studio.

> My studio was the place that I could be fully me, more so than anywhere else. I remember very distinctly being up here in my studio when it was 100 degrees. I was dressing the way I wanted to dress feeling very validated both in myself and through the music that I was making, and that made *BSM* become about something very, very different.

While the music Amie released on *BSM* was inspired by her coming out as bisexual, replaying that music helped her to tap into new understandings. Alone in her attic studio, she also looked to the internet to learn from others. One forum she discovered was a subreddit called Egg_Irl, which had the description, 'Memes about trans people in denial.' Amie reflected through her blog, 'I would read posts and

> relate completely to them, striking devastating fear into my heart.' She continued, BSM became about a lot more than just celebrating being bi. Because through all the confusion and late nights and deep dysphoria, music gave me comfort. In music I could just be me. I dressed how I wanted to in my studio. I lived my truth in my music. It was in these sessions that the thought emerged, quiet but profound. 'I'm definitely not cis.'

Amie's studio was a solitary musical space, and it also became a place where she explored her gender. 'I didn't feel like anyone would look in, and I was potentially nervous early on, because I didn't feel comfortable going out in public wearing femme clothing.'

Coming out online and offline

Amie's appearance changed as her trans identity formed. She wrote blogs about shaving her body and face as well as trying on feminine clothing. These reflections also manifested in musical reflections. She explained about a track from *BSM:*

> 'Noche Oscura' is the dark night of the soul. This relates to the late nights I had in my studio. Even after I came out, there was a day at 3 in the morning, when I decided to use a razor that hadn't been used in a year and a

> half. It was old and probably not safe to use. But I used it to shave my arms and my chest for the very first time. It was awful, and I hurt myself. But I needed to do this.

Glimpses of Amie's physical transformation appeared on her YouTube videos. Amie's physical appearance changed in 2019 between May 28, when she published a video wearing her 'comfortable clothing,' [5] and July 19, when a video showed her with shaved arms, a t-shirt, and purple nail polish.[6] The physical manifestations of new clothing and body hair removal manifested in her videos, and served as an archive of the way she looked and presented herself (see Figure 1).

Coming out was an iterative process that required Amie to decide who she was ready to tell and when. Amie's partner and son experienced her transition with her as she discovered her trans identity. In early 2019, she shared with close friends at church, in her community, and online friends and fans—those with whom she had trusting relationships and regular contact. To come out online, Amie was inspired by Maddie Thorson, the creator of the independent video game *Celeste*, her favourite video game at the time, who came out on July 14, 2019 through Twitter for International Non-Binary People's Day. She responded to Thorson's Tweet, 'Hey, just wanted to say your tweet was the catalyst that pushed me to come out yesterday, so thank you so much for being brave and sharing who you are with us all. I know I needed to see that.' After expanding her support system in her local community and online with Twitter fans, she told her parents. She, then, began writing blogs, and a declaration came through YouTube on October 27, 2019 in a 16-second video that displayed the graphic, 'Hey, I'm Amie Waters.'[7] In the description box, she wrote:

> Still the same person, still the same analog synth goodness. Just coming to understand myself better. Hi, I'm Amie. You say it the same as Amy (aye-mi). You might have found this channel when I went by Ace. I came out as trans this summer, and today I decided to share my new name with everyone, which means changes for the channel! Stay tuned for more info, more music, and more synths!

She explained, 'I wanted to wait until I had a more concrete thing [like my new name] to come out with on the channel. My channel is my most public facing thing. It is my largest platform. It has the most random people who don't care who I am at all, they just like my music.'

Challenges and triumphs of a musician coming out

When Amie came out, she worried about who would continue to support her as she disclosed her gender and trans identity. She made strategic decisions to come out to those who she felt were most likely to continue supporting her. She explained, 'Twitter is mostly fans. I already came out in my Discord [her member-online social media platform] to my Patreons [people who financially supported her] before coming out on YouTube. They were all very supportive. I was slowly letting my circle grow bigger.' While anxiety about coming out was initially present, these member-only platforms provided a strong support for Amie. She explained:

> Patreon is a great way to build a fan base. What *actually* mattered to me was that they were my support system. My closest fans are my Patreons and those on my Discord. [When I came out] no one left Discord that I knew of. No one was like I can't believe this.

Similarly, in her disclosure vlog on YouTube,[8] she asked people to not be adversarial and, much to her surprise, her audience obliged. There were only a few comments that were transphobic. She noticed a slight decline in subscribers the day after she came out but was heartened when they left quietly without comment. The comments on the video were overwhelmingly positive and uplifting. Visual glimpses of Amie's body on this and other videos elicited supportive comments from fans as they noticed changes in her appearance. For example, one viewer commented, 'HOT GAMER GIRL HANDS!!!! TAKE MY MONEY!! $$' This elicited gender euphoria in Amie, and she felt that comments like this meant that fans were 'seeing me for the woman I really am.'

In contrast, Amie's name and brand change presented challenges regarding music distribution. One challenge was funding new website domains for her blog, landing page, and other platforms. Distribution and streaming platforms had drastically different approaches to changing branding.

For example, YouTube allowed creators to change their display name and cover art on a whim, and algorithms were updated quickly. In contrast, Spotify refused to let her change the artist's name onworks that were already published. Therefore, albums from November 2018 and earlier were branded as *Ace Waters*, while music since 2020 were under *Amie Waters*. This had two major implications: (a) Amie's music was under two names, making it potentially more confusing for audiences to find; and(b) Amie's deadname was prominent on a major media platform, thus serving as a potentially painful reminder of an identity she might want to leave behind.

Exploring the cosmos of the soul

On June 12, 2020, Amie released *Cosmos of the Soul*, a 'synthwave space odyssey,' in the form of 'an instrumental queer space opera' that expanded the music from *BSM*. Amie painted the picture:

> I was tucked away in my attic studio, temperatures breaking into the triple digits from my hot roof and bad ventilation, when I was first able to truly explore and express my identity. Those songs became deeply personal, and the story told between them was so important to me.

Amie used word painting to create ambiance and melodies that told her story. The album contained ominous sounds that depicted the mysteries of space. 'Noche Oscura' represented the 'dark nights that came,' references to the agony of unknowing, feeling out of place, and searching, which led to discovering trans role models online. These tracks helped Amie 'come to terms with myself—it took me a long time to accept that I was a trans woman.' The triumphant tracks, 'Dragons of Ara' and 'Superposition … ended up kind of connecting to the euphoria I was feeling as I was making them.'

After release of the album, the cover videos on her YouTube channel changed. The process of disclosing her gender and trans identity to her listeners had an empowering effect on many facets of her life and music making. Upon reflecting on how the video game music she had been covering for the better part of a decade had a different feel, she said about a cover:

> I sat down and let the music be what it needed to be, and you can just see that. This doesn't feel or seem rushed at all. I remember the process of making this song. This song came together extremely quickly because it just flowed out of me. It just happened. Then you can very much see me becoming more comfortable in myself because I am to understand my gender identity and that being represented in the way I'm playing; it's all there. Every part of it, learning to love myself, learning to respect music learning to trust myself.[9]

Discussion

The development of Amie's trans identity had aspects that confirmed findings in prior research regarding coming out and identity formation. Amie found resources and role models on both mainstream and queer online platforms, which helped her develop her identity as a non-binary person. She then used Twitter, her personal blog, and YouTube to present her self-image while interacting parasocially with others who provided her emotional, creative, and financial support. Amie's YouTube channel included both a declaration video in 'Hey, I'm Amie Waters' and multiple disclosure video in which she explained who she was, her gender, and how her music helped her understand herself and process emotions. Her musical releases on YouTube were used to aide Amie in, as Raun (2012) might suggest, 'constructing, performing, and expressing trans identity' (166). Like those discussed in Raun's research, Amie's DIY music and video recording process bore an archive of self-disclosure that serves as an example of how music can be used understand gender, trans identity, and sexuality, as well as empower people through the creation of music.

This study contributes to the expanding literature in music education about how trans people can find solace, healing, clarity, and empowerment through creating music that represents their marginalities. Amie's schooling years were overshadowed by shame about sex, and that shame contributed to shunning feelings about her queerness, both in her sexuality and gender. However, after understanding how music could help her work through emotions and provide acceptance and

understanding (e.g. exuberant joy about the birth of her son, or excruciating grief regarding the death of her grandfather), she used music composition, recording, and production to explore feelings, identity, and self-expression. In the comfort of her attic studio, she experimented with her physical appearance, explored the internet for resources and inspiration, expressed emotions through musical creation, created media that displayed her and her work, and distributed that work on the internet.

While this study and most trans research in music education is about adult participants, researchers outside of music education suggest that many children have a deep understanding of gender, their alignment with or variances from the gender they were assigned at birth, and how their gender and gender expression affect the way they are perceived and treated by others (see Kennedy and Hellen 2010). Since many music educators have a desire to support their *transgender and gender-nonconforming* students, but do not necessarily feel prepared on how to do so (Case and Meier 2014), I suggest, inspired by my study with Amie, that music educators might support trans communities by providing opportunities for students to experience healthy gender identity representation, exploration, presentation, and interaction. Some suggestions for working with *trans* students in musical settings can be found in Cayari et al. (2021), which include, but are not limited to, learning about the *trans* community, inspecting your language and biases, representing the diversity of *trans* people in your teaching, promoting healthy music-making and identity development, and modelling allyship.

Amie discovered trans musicians on Reddit, Twitter, and YouTube to look up to, and educators could promote diverse gender identity representation by curating a list of trans role models who are performers, composers, producers, and creators. Amie used music to explore her gender by using word painting in electronic compositions. Composition activities that ask students to create melodies, sounds, and ambiance that portray emotions or aspects of character are common tasks promoted through teaching themes, motifs, period music, and song writing. Amie presented her recordings on YouTube and albums online. Teachers could also teach their students how to record their music, use notation as written representations of their products, or cultivate improvisation projects to present music that expresses gender identities. Finally, Amie garnered feedback, support, and interaction with others through parasocial relationships online that were occasionally elicited but often a consequence of publishing on a public site. This could translate to the classroom through peer conversations, while sharing works in a physical space or developing monitored online repositories in which peers, parents, and trusted individuals can leave feedback on musical media. Both online and offline forums provide opportunities to have dialogue between creator and consumer.

This study was on a non-binary, trans femme adult. Case studies about how music helps people understand their gender and trans identities could also expand to honour the diversity of trans communities. Case studies on trans musicians could focus, for example, on people of colour, musicians and learners of various ages, those who are not explicitly out, and persons who have been out for most of their lives. Larger studies that utilize focus groups and surveys that capture multiple people's perspectives could be developed to explore how teachers and leaders support trans musicians within their organizations and ensembles; these types of studies can illuminate the experiences of both trans and cisgender participants to promote understanding of trans allyship. Future research could also explore how children—particularly in school settings—use music to understand, develop, and express their gender identities, and research could focus particularly on trans identity for those whose gender may differ from that which they were assigned at birth. By expanding this research, trends may emerge, and music educators might see similarities and differences across the trans population in how they understand their identities and use music to learn, create, and empower. As society becomes increasingly aware of the prevalence and vastness of trans communities, music educators have an opportunity to expand curricula to include musical activities that help students explore, understand, and express their gender identities.

Notes

1. The etymology of *Trans* is a 'desire for movement: "trans", from the Latin "trāns" meaning "across, over, beyond"' (Jennex and Murphy 2017, 315). I use trans for persons whose gender are a movement away from the sex they were assigned at birth. However, when discussing other people's work and quotes in this article, I use the terms written by their originators, which will be in italics to exemplify how the acceptable language for describing people who are trans shifts. For example, terms like Kennedy's (2008) use of the word *transgendered* are considered offensive at the time of writing this article because the suffix *-ed* infers that transgender is an adverb describing something that happens to a person. Additionally, the term *gender-switching* used by Chen (2016) was acceptable in her research with Taiwanese participants but may be offensive to many in Western cultures.
2. Similar to my decision to italicize the various terms for trans individuals, Nichols alternated Rie's name and pronouns at the suggestion of Rie, effectively 'disorienting the textual flow in such a way as to create a useful tension that kept Rie's transgender status present in the mind of the reader' (Nichols 2016, 447).
3. All quotes may have been edited with permission by Amie for narrative flow. Additionally, all quotes from Amie were from the interviews unless explicitly stated in the text.
4. A video version of this case study (Cayari 2021) is available at https://youtu.be/Dv-oppcz0KI.
5. Video of 'Heavy Rain' was available at https://youtu.be/1KcmCFgUBSs.
6. Video of 'Old Town Road' was available at https://youtu.be/WKxqYeGYG6Y.
7. Video of 'Hey, I'm Amie Waters' was available at https://youtu.be/O4RIWwsu9Jw.
8. Disclosure video was available at https://youtu.be/mkIukKscB64.
9. This quote was a reflection on 'Outset Island' available at https://youtu.be/DMuimj2Q-bY.

Notes on contributor

Christopher Cayari (he/they; Twitter: DrCayari) is an associate professor of music at Purdue University, West Lafayette, Indiana. He holds a Ph.D. in music education from the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. Their main research trajectory focuses on mediated musical performance, YouTube, informal music learning, virtual communities, video game music, and online identity. His secondary research agenda addresses marginalized voices in music education, specifically sexuality- and gender-diverse individuals (queer identities) and racial minorities. They also conduct performative autoethnographic research that explores aspects of their own marginalized identity as they relate to society. His award-winning performance-based research merges musical theatre, poetry, prose, and stage effects with qualitative research and has been performed internationally. Christopher and their research have won awards including the 2021 Outstanding Emerging Researcher Award from the Center of Music Education Research, the 2015 Outstanding Dissertation Award from the Council of Research in Music Education, and the 2017 Outstanding Ally Award from the LGBTQ + Cultural Center at Purdue University. Hisgoal in academia and this article is to give voice to those who are often silenced, muted, or ignored.

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