Online Communities and Identity Exploration:
Insights From Gender-Diverse Youth in Canada

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Abstract

Social media platforms and online communities serve as valuable resources for gender-diverse youth (i.e., transgender, non-binary, and gender-questioning youth, hereafter, *TGDY*) to explore different identities and connect with supportive networks. Experimenting with various gender identities and expressions anonymously online can offer these youth a sense of safety, which is crucial for identity development and may encourage later disclosure to family and peers. However, online spaces also carry risks, such as cyberbullying, exposure to misinformation, and the potential for youth to be outed before they are ready. This study builds on existing research by exploring how TGDY navigate online gender experimentation and offline coming-out processes. As part of a larger project on factors influencing disclosure decisions, over 400 qualitative reports from TGDY attending a gender health clinic in British Columbia were reviewed, from which 25 were selected for in-depth analysis. Thematic analysis was conducted using a three-dimensional framework of function, intention, and intensity. Five key themes emerged: discovery, identity exploration, emotional refuges, rehearsal spaces, and mentorship and contribution. The findings reflect the advantages and challenges of online gender exploration previously identified in the literature. They offer insight into how social media platforms and online communities can both support and complicate identity development and coming-out experiences for TGDY youth in Canada. Conclusions emphasize the need for safe, supportive online spaces and stress the importance of online literacy education for both youth and their support networks.

Keywords: transgender youth, gender-diverse youth, gender identity, online identity exploration, social media, coming out

Introduction

Gender-diverse youth, including transgender, non-binary, and gender-questioning adolescents (hereafter, TGDY), face unique challenges in exploring and affirming their identities. These challenges include bullying, social exclusion, and a lack of institutional and familial support, all of which contribute to significant mental health disparities (e.g., Veale et al., 2017; Wittlin et al., 2023). In recent years, research on how TGDY use online spaces has expanded considerably. Much of this work highlights the role of the internet and social media in shaping gender identity development, and well as the benefits and risks associated with online gender exploration (e.g., Austin et al., 2020; Bates et al., 2020; Berger et al., 2022; Cipolletta et al., 2017; Craig et al., 2015, 2021; Herrmann, Bindt, et al., 2024; McInroy et al., 2019; McInroy & Craig, 2015; Selkie et al., 2020).

Online social media platforms such as Instagram, Tumblr, Facebook, Twitter, TikTok, and Discord can provide TGDY with opportunities to explore gender expression, access information about gender identity and transition, and connect with supportive peers regardless of geographic location (Berger et al., 2022; Craig et al., 2021; McInroy et al., 2019). TGDY report experimenting with different names, pronouns, and digital representations online as they come to understand their gender identity (e.g., Bates et al., 2020; Fox & Ralston, 2016; Herrmann, Bindt, et al., 2024). The relative anonymity and customizable privacy settings of online spaces allow youth strategically manage disclosure of their identities (Fox & Ralston, 2016; McConnell et al., 2017), and offer a buffer from rejection, bullying, and other risks tied to being visibly gender-diverse offline (Berger et al., 2022; McInroy & Craig, 2015). Online spaces can also facilitate offline coming out processes and social transitions for TGDY, with many reporting coming out online prior to coming out in everyday life (Herrmann, Bindt, et al., 2024). The ability to explore and connect with peers online has been linked to improved mental health outcomes for TGDY and is especially valuable for youth who do not feel safe or affirmed in their offline environments (Austin et al., 2020; McInroy, 2020; McInroy et al., 2019).

Despite these benefits, social media use also poses risks. For adolescents in general, research has found a complex relationship between social media use and mental health outcomes, with population-based studies and meta-analyses (e.g., Sala et al., 2024; Statistics Canada, 2023) reporting both positive effects (e.g., increased social connection, access to identity-affirming communities) and negative outcomes (e.g., heightened anxiety, depressive symptoms, and disrupted sleep). For TGDY, additional risks include transphobic cyberbullying, exposure to misinformation about gender identity, and the potential for unintended disclosure or "outing" before an individual is prepared to come out offline (Berger et al., 2022; Hanckel et al., 2019; Herrmann, Barkmann, et al., 2024; Selkie et al., 2020). Thus, it is important that educators, clinicians, and caregivers working with TGDY are prepared to engage in informed, supportive conversations about online identity exploration and digital safety.

While existing research has documented preferences and patterns of online platform use among broader sexual and gender minority youth populations (e.g., Berger et al., 2022; McInroy et al., 2019), relatively few have focused specifically on how TGDY use different platforms for identity exploration and how this may facilitate offline coming-out processes. Moreover, most of this research has been conducted with U.S.-based samples, with more recent contributions emerging from European contexts (e.g., Herrmann, Barkmann, et al., 2024; Hermann, Bindt, 2024). Studies which included Canadian participants were often part of broader U.S.-Canada-based research and did not focus specifically on the experiences of

TGDY (e.g., Craig et al., 2021; McInroy et al., 2019). As such, there remains scope for qualitative research that more directly attends to the online experiences of TGDY situated within the Canadian context.

This study aimed to address this gap by analyzing the qualitative accounts from TGDY between the ages of 10 to 23 who attended a gender health clinic in British Columbia, Canada. By examining how these youth use social media platforms and online communities, this research offers insight into online identity exploration within the Canadian context.

Methods

The present study was derived from a broader research project that involved the review of de-identified diagnostic assessment reports, which included in-depth interviews with youth and their guardians as part of the Gender Health Assessment (GHA) services for TGDY provided at an outpatient mental health clinic in Metro Vancouver, British Columbia. Assessments conducted between 2014 and 2024 (n = 400) were reviewed by three research assistants to identify cases meeting the inclusion criteria: reported use of online or digital platforms as part of gender exploration. The 2014-2024 timeframe was chosen to capture cases assessed under the updated Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-5) criteria for Gender Dysphoria and to reflect contemporary clinical practices. A consistent pattern of digital engagement emerged within a subset of these data which became the focus of the present study. Data analysis continued until thematic saturation was reached, resulting in a final dataset of 25 cases. Clients ranged in age from 10 to 23 years (M = 15.8, Mdn = 16.0) and identified as 16 female-to-male (FTM), 7 male-to-female (MTF), and 2 non-binary (NB).

This study used deductive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) within a qualitative framework to guide the interpretation of the 25 transcripts. This approach facilitated exploration of themes related to delayed disclosure of gender incongruence and the role of online communities in gender exploration. The analysis followed Braun and Clarke's (2020) six-phase process: data familiarization, systematic coding, generating initial themes, developing and reviewing themes, refining and naming themes, and final write-up. Semantic coding was used to capture rich descriptions of client experiences (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

The collaborative coding process, supported by a codebook and memo writing, allowed for the identification of overarching themes and subthemes, as well as determining data saturation (Saunders et al., 2023) within the sample. Broader themes were contextualized by these subthemes and further refined through iterative review. This iterative review process contributed to the trustworthiness and rigour (Guba & Lincoln, 1989) of the study by ensuring comprehensive and consistent interpretation of the data that reflected the lived experiences of clients.

Results

The initial round of coding produced three broad descriptive themes. These included the platforms used (e.g., TikTok, Tumblr, Instagram, Discord, Reddit), motivations for online engagement (such as identity exploration, seeking representation, or preparing to come out), and the role of online spaces as safe havens or sources of peer support. Other salient subthemes captured challenges such as gatekeeping, misinformation, and transphobia, as well as the emotional intensity of online participation, particularly for those without affirming offline support.

Through iterative analysis, these themes were synthesized through three overarching dimensions of digital engagement: function, intention, and intensity. Function referred to the role online spaces serve in a youth's life, such as providing anonymity, connection, information, emotional support, or a platform for advocacy. Intention captured the motivations behind digital engagement, including identity exploration, preparation for disclosure, or supporting others. Intensity reflected the depth, frequency, and emotional investment in online interactions, which was found to fluctuate in relation to offline support and developmental readiness. Function served as an umbrella dimension under which five central themes were produced: (a) *discovery* (b) *identity exploration*, (c) *emotional refuge*, (d) *rehearsal spaces*, and (e) *mentorship and contribution*. These functions were then shaped by the youth's underlying intentions and marked by variations in emotional and behavioural intensity.

Discovery

A foundational function of online spaces in this study was their role in introducing TGDY to language, narratives, and identities that reflected their lived experiences. Participants described moments of gender identity recognition that were precipitated or clarified through exposure to gender-fluid and diverse language, personal narratives of other transgender individuals, and representations encountered online. These discoveries were often marked by a shift from vague discomfort to a more articulate sense of self.

Some participants described stumbling across gender-related content that resonated unexpectedly. Client #25 (age 13, FTM) shared that he had come across clips about transgender people online but recalled, "I did not know what it was until later." Similarly, client #9 (age 13, FTM) learned the term "transgender" through online exposure. He remembered being surprised, first to learn that "there was such a thing," and then to realize "there were other people feeling similarly to him and that he was not alone."

Client #19 (age 19, MTF) also encountered transgender-related content by accident around age 12. At first, her reaction was shaped by negative portrayals: "I thought transgender people were weird," she admitted, explaining that early exposure to transphobic comments led her to believe "it must be bad, and I did not think it was me." Despite the negativity, these early, low-intensity encounters laid the groundwork for her later self-recognition.

Others described more intentional exposure to transgender or gender diverse content. Client #2 (age 18, NB) recalled a moment of clarity after learning new terminology: "I learned [through online engagement] what non-binary meant, and I was so relieved because it fit." Client #23 (age 14, FTM) began researching to validate his feelings: "I wanted to see if transgender people were real. I was confused at first, but it started to make sense. It matched how I felt. I was happy because I could put words to how I felt, who I am, but I was very nervous about how other people would treat me."

For Client #19 (age 18, FTM), discovery came through watching creators on platforms like YouTube. He shared, "I wanted to find out why I felt this way, what were the causes, but I could not find an explanation."

Initial Exploration

Online spaces were also found to be environments for experimentation, where TGDY could begin to explore aspects of their identity before contemplating offline disclosure. This function was characterized by low-risk, self-directed exploration, with exposure to peer models, and a growing sense of social safety.

Several participants described starting their exploration through research or personal reflection. Client #1 (age 21, MTF) recalled, "At about 10 years old, I started doing research on gender identity to understand what I was feeling." Similarly, Client #24 (age 19, MTF) said, "I wanted to learn more about transgender people and myself because I wanted to be sure."

For others, experimentation happened more subtly through creative expression. Client #5 (age 15, FTM) described the moment he saw himself in a new light: "My character was a boy for the first time. It just felt more like me." Similarly, Client #18 (age 23, NB) shared: "I changed how I talked a little in voice chats. It wasn't planned, I just felt more comfortable sounding like that there."

Emotional Refuges

Online spaces provided many TGDY with emotional refuges from their offline environments. TGDY experienced affirmation, understanding, and support which was often absent elsewhere in their lives. Moreover, these youth reported feeling seen, heard, and valued during formative stages of their gender identity development.

Client #14 (age 20, MTF) expressed the deep contrast between their online and offline experiences, sharing, "Online is the only place I can be myself. I delete my browser history every time." Another, client #21 (age 14, FTM), reflected on the relief and joy he felt in online spaces: "I was very happy being myself online. That's me. I felt relieved because there are people who exist out there like me."

For client #20 (age 16, FTM), discovering others with similar experiences was both surprising and affirming. "I was surprised there were people like me," he said, recalling how that realization helped him understand himself and feel validated. Similarly, client #10 (age 12, MTF) described the emotional impact of connecting with others online: "It felt great. I can relate to the people there and I was not alone. There were people like me out there."

Rehearsal Spaces

Online spaces also functioned as rehearsal spaces where TGDY could practice expressing their gender identity before disclosing it in offline settings. While similar to identity exploration, this use of digital spaces was marked by a specific intention to disclose and often accompanied by an increase in online activity as well as a strong emotional drive to "get it right" before facing the potential risks of real-world expression.

Many participants described using social media or messaging platforms to try out names, pronouns, and narratives. For instance, client #15 (age 15, FTM) shared that changing his Discord name to his chosen name "helped [him] see if [he] was ready to use it in real life."

Similarly, client #17 (age 20, MTF) explained that she used a different name on Discord before telling anyone offline because "it helped [her] get used to it."

Client #13 (age 17, FTM) described experimenting with different pronouns on a private Tumblr blog "to see what felt right before asking friends to use them." Client #7 (age 15, FTM) recalled reading Reddit posts about how others came out to his parents, noting that it "helped [him] know what to expect."

For some, these online rehearsals led to carefully considered offline disclosures. Client #8 (age 13, FTM) shared that he first came out to his best friend because he knew that friend would understand. "I had already read so many stories like mine online," he said, "and that helped me realize I wasn't alone."

Mentorship and Contribution

As TGDY matured in their identity journeys, many returned to online spaces to guide, mentor, or advocate for others. The function of online spaces became integrative and reciprocal. The intention was no longer self-focused, but community-oriented and driven by a desire to create safer, more inclusive environments for others. The intensity of online engagement was generally lower for this function, as participants no longer relied on these spaces for personal affirmation but engaged more selectively and purposefully.

Client #3 (age 17, MTF) reflected on this evolution: "When I first started questioning, I just lurked on forums. Now, I try to help younger people who are where I was five years ago." Similarly, client #18 (age 23, NB) shared how they use their platform for advocacy: "I use my Instagram to share trans-related news and help others find gender-affirming healthcare."

Others took on more hands-on support roles. Client #4 (age 16, MTF) shared about her online persona, "[she] was really nice. She was there for anyone…helping and supporting. For a long time, she was a huge part of the online trans-community."

Discussion

Our findings largely align with previous research indicating that online spaces play a formative role in supporting the gender identity development of transgender and gender-diverse youth (TGDY). The three-dimensional framework of function, intention, and intensity applied in this study offered a novel perspective for documenting the evolving and dynamic role of online spaces in the lives of TGDY within a qualitative research design.

Consistent with prior studies, participants in this research described their initial encounters with transgender and gender-diverse-related content online as pivotal moments for self-understanding (e.g., Bates et al., 2020; Craig et al., 2015; McInroy et al., 2019). The theme of *discovery* captured how many TGDY stumbled upon representations and language that resonated with their internal experiences, leading to moments of recognition that alleviated feelings of confusion and isolation. This finding supports the body of literature suggesting that access to affirming narratives and terminology can have a transformative effect on youth who may lack representation in offline settings (e.g., Cipolletta et al., 2017; Fox & Ralston, 2016; McInroy, 2020).

The function of *identity exploration* was similarly grounded in the accessibility and relative safety of online spaces. TGDY used platforms like Tumblr, Discord, and Reddit to experiment with names, pronouns, and expressions of gender without the immediate risks often associated with offline disclosure (e.g., Bates et al., 2020; Hanckel et al., 2019).

Online spaces also played a compensatory function as *emotional refuges* for TGDY experiencing familial rejection or social marginalization. These findings echo previous research which has found that online communities often provide important sources of belonging for TGDY (e.g., Austin et al., 2020; Cipolletta et al., 2017; Craig et al., 2017; Herrmann, Bindt, et al., 2024; McInroy, 2020). The emotional intensity attached to these spaces was particularly pronounced for participants lacking affirming offline networks, which suggests that the social-emotional impact of online engagement cannot be separated from the broader ecological context of support or lack thereof (e.g., Katz-Wise et al., 2017).

The theme of *rehearsal spaces* extends previous research on how TGDY used online spaces as preparatory environments to practice coming out, refine their narratives, and gain confidence (e.g., McInroy et al., 2019).

Finally, the theme of *mentorship and contribution* represented a shift in function and intention, from self-focused needs to community-oriented engagement. As youth matured, many returned to online spaces not out of necessity, but with a sense of responsibility to support others. This reflects the potential of online communities to support intergenerational solidarity within marginalized populations (e.g., Craig et al., 2021; Selkie et al., 2020).

This study also demonstrated how the function of online spaces can evolve over time. *Discovery* and *initial exploration* encompassed many early interactions, while later use became more intentional and outward facing, as demonstrated by *rehearsal spaces* and *mentorship and contribution*. There was also a noted shift between passive exposure to active engagement which reflect developmental theories of identity formation that describe movement from internal questioning to external expression (Arnett, 2000; Erikson, 1968). The intention behind engagement also shifted as TGDY aged. Older youth in this study retrospectively described their younger selves as primarily seeking understanding and safety, while describing recent or current use as preparation for real-life transitions and, eventually, to support others (e.g., Craig et al., 2021).

Conclusion

The present study utilized thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) within a qualitative framework to analyze the retrospective accounts of 25 transgender and gender-diverse youth (TGDY) living in Canada who reported engaging in online spaces during critical phases of their gender identity development. Findings were consistent with previous research which has described the central role of online spaces in the identity development of TGDY. This study extended previous research by applying the function, intention, and intensity framework for interpreting its five themes: (a) *discovery* (b) *identity exploration*, (c) *emotional refuge*, (d) *rehearsal spaces*, and (e) *mentorship and contribution*.

While this study provides valuable insights into the online experiences of TGDY in Canada, several limitations should be noted. The sample was drawn from youth receiving care at an outpatient mental health clinic, many of whom reported some degree of familial support. Therefore, findings may not fully capture the experiences of TGDY who are entirely

disconnected from formal systems of care or who face higher levels of familial rejection. Additionally, this study was led by a clinician involved in the participants' care. This dual role may have introduced unintended bias despite preventative efforts. Finally, this study utilized archival and retrospective data, which may have been subject to recall bias and may not fully capture the evolving nature of the TGDY's experiences over time.

Nonetheless, the implications of the themes discussed in this study are significant. Online communities should be recognized as legitimate and meaningful sites for identity development and mental health support for TGDY. Rather than approaching online engagement with suspicion or concern, caregivers, clinicians, and educators can support TGDY in navigating these spaces safely and constructively. Future research should continue to investigate how TGDY engage with online spaces within specific contexts, such as intersecting racial, cultural, or geographic identities.

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