

Medical Information Provided by Transgender and Gender Diverse Content Creators on YouTube: Qualitative Analysis

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Medical Information Provided by Transgender and Gender Diverse Content Creators on YouTube: Qualitative Analysis

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Abstract

Background: Transgender and gender diverse (TGD) individuals often turn to online platforms for information about gender-affirming healthcare. YouTube, a widely used video-sharing platform, hosts content from popular TGD creators that may serve as an educational resource.

Objective: This study aims to describe the health-related content posted by popular TGD content creators on YouTube.

Methods: A qualitative content analysis was performed on 2,485 videos produced by 42 self-identified TGD YouTube content creators from January 2023 to February 2024. Videos were systematically evaluated for mentions of gender-affirming care and other health-related topics. We also examined how creators framed medical information and characterized their medical experiences.

Results: Most videos (n = 1,724) created by TGD content creators did not include discussions related to gender identity or transitioning. However, among the videos that did address gender identity (n = 761), mentions of medical topics were prevalent (n = 554). Hormone replacement therapy (n = 356) and surgeries (n = 307) were the most frequently discussed topics. Videos covering medical topics primarily centered on personal experiences (n = 411), with content creators often characterizing these experiences positively (n = 224).

Conclusions: This study provides insights into the medical information shared by TGD content creators on YouTube, highlighting the types of content that TGD individuals may encounter on the platform. These findings can help clinicians better understand the sources of information their TGD clients are likely to be using, fostering more informed and supportive conversations about gender-affirming care.

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Original Manuscript

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Abstract

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Conclusions: This study provides insights into the medical information shared by TGD content creators on YouTube, highlighting the types of content that TGD individuals may encounter on the platform. These findings can help clinicians better understand the sources of information their TGD clients are likely to be using, fostering more informed and supportive conversations about gender-affirming care.

Keywords: Transgender; transgender youth; gender-affirming care; YouTube; social media; content creators; influencers; social media health information

Introduction

Transgender and gender diverse (TGD) individuals have been known to use social media to fulfill a variety of social, emotional, and informational needs. TGD individuals use social media as a vital space for seeking support, connecting with others, and developing their identity, often curating their online environments for these purposes [1-6]. These behaviors are especially significant for TGD youth, who use the internet and social media more than their cisgender peers, particularly as a resource for exploring their gender identity [7-10]. Importantly, online spaces improve information accessibility, enabling individuals to seek advice about gender identity that may be difficult to obtain through traditional means or uncomfortable to discuss with offline support networks [11,12].

Given the significant barriers TGD individuals often encounter in accessing medical care, social media plays a critical role in providing a place to address health-related questions, specifically about gender-affirming care [10]. Seeking health information online has become a preferred method for many TGD individuals due to its accessibility, convenience, affordability, and the option for anonymity [12-14]. Social media provides safe spaces for community members to share information while offering diverse formats for consuming it, such as real-time answers in online forums or archived content on platforms like YouTube [13]. Furthermore, TGD individuals have highlighted the value of social media for providing firsthand accounts of those who have undergone gender-affirming treatments [13].

Seeking health-related information online is particularly common among TGD youth. Herrmann, Bindt, Hohmann and Becker-Hebly ⁴ found that all TGD adolescent participants used

social media or the internet to seek information on transgender-related topics, most commonly gender-affirming medical interventions. Selkie, Adkins, Masters, Bajpai and Shumer¹⁵ reported similar findings, with TGD adolescents identifying informational support as a helpful aspect of social media, specifically for topics like gender-affirming care. Importantly, in both studies, YouTube was identified as the most common online platform for TGD adolescents to seek transgender-specific content [4,15].

YouTube, a global video-sharing platform, is the most commonly used social media platform among Americans, used by 83% of adults and 93% of teens [16,17]. As the second-most visited site in the world (behind only Google), YouTube has proven to be a dominant and enduring platform in the social media landscape [18]. Compared to other social media platforms, YouTube is uniquely suited to serve as an educational resource. YouTube videos tend to be significantly longer than videos shared on other platforms and can range from five minutes to over an hour. These long-form videos allow for the sharing of more detailed and in-depth videos where creators can share their experiences, opinions, and knowledge through a variety of genres, including video blogs, story times, and commentary. This extended format supports the sharing of health-related content through a variety of informative styles, often aimed at sharing personal experiences [19].

Much of the popular content available on YouTube is made by those who have gained a substantial online following. In this paper, they are referred to as "content creators" or simply "creators," although they are also commonly known as "YouTubers" or "influencers." Content creators build a following through their self-branded content and are important figures online: they are drivers of internet discourse, create spaces for like-minded viewers, and disseminate content that is seen as relatable to their audience. As such, content creators are known to cultivate strong fan communities, frequently made up of younger viewers [20].

A content creator's ability to remain both authentic and personable, while simultaneously maintaining the reputation of that of a celebrity figure, serves to amplify their influence among their audience [21]. Familiar content creators have been shown to be perceived as more trustworthy and similar to oneself than traditional celebrities, showing that they may be particularly able to influence behaviors among audiences seeking validation and guidance [22]. Most importantly, these creators are often seen as important role models to their viewers, and are therefore uniquely positioned to serve as impactful educators [23].

TGD content creators have a considerable presence on YouTube and are known to make content about gender-affirming care. A popular format for sharing this information are transition vlogs—video blogs where creators document their physical and emotional changes resulting from gender-affirming care interventions such as hormone replacement therapy or surgery [24]. This content has been shown to be valuable to TGD viewers, who watch these transition vlogs to learn about transition processes and experiences [25].

A number of scholars have examined TGD content and experiences on YouTube, but to date, only one study systematically analyzed the content made by popular TGD content creators [26-37]. In an analysis of the content made by eight TGD creators, Miller found that 53.5% of their videos provided educational insights on transgender topics, with 34.2% of videos discussing elements of physical transition, most commonly hormones or surgery [37]. However, the breadth and frequency of medical topics covered by TGD content creators remains unexplored at a large scale. Further research is needed to assess the health-related information shared by these creators, given the diversity of TGD contributors and the platform's vast range of content.

Although online content is recognized as an important resource for TGD individuals, limited research examines the actual content provided. Studies often rely on viewers' recollections rather than direct analysis of the content itself. Given YouTube's popularity and the influence of its creators, understanding the platform's medical content is essential. This study aims to describe the health-related content shared by popular TGD content creators on YouTube.

Methods

Study Design

A descriptive qualitative study was conducted between June 2021 and October 2024. This analysis was part of a larger study evaluating the videos posted by TGD content creators discussing gender identity and transitioning. The present analysis focused specifically on videos discussing medical topics. This research was deemed exempt from review by the IRB.

Content Creator Identification

Recommendations for TGD content creators were requested from a large convenience sample of TGD young people, researchers, and health professionals serving TGD individuals in June 2021. Recommended content creators were individually evaluated for their internet presence and following across YouTube, Instagram, Twitter (now X), and/or TikTok. Accounts on each platform were evaluated against four criteria: content in English, identification as TGD by the creator, at least 10,000 followers, and a minimum of 10 posts within the two years prior to data collection. Content creators with a YouTube channel and at least one social media account on any platform that met all four criteria were selected for further investigation. By including creators with large followings on other social media platforms, this analysis limits the exclusion of popular creators from across the internet while preserving the analysis of long-form video content.

The research team was comprised of academic researchers and gender-affirming care clinicians representing diverse gender identities, including lived TGD experience. The team met regularly to evaluate the initial group of YouTube accounts meeting the inclusion criteria. The accounts were reviewed for post history, content type, and the overarching narrative of the channel. The research team reviewed each account to reach consensus on whether to include or exclude the creator from the final analysis. Since our objective was to examine content specific to gender identity and transitioning, creators were determined as fit for inclusion if they posted regularly about these topics. Excluded creators focused on other topics within the LGBTQ+ community (such as advocacy), posted about other topics entirely (such as music), or posted minimally in recent years. This process yielded a total of 42 eligible YouTube content creators (Figure 1).

Development

An iterative approach was used to develop a structured codebook for content analysis, consistent with prior content analyses [38-40]. As to not interfere with the coding of chosen accounts, a sample of videos were pulled from the channels of creators that were not selected for final analysis, but whose content closely resembled the content made by the included creators. The core research team evaluated these posts to identify variables related to gender identity development and transitioning in both medical and non-medical contexts. Once the preliminary codebook was created, members of the research team independently applied the codebook to an additional set of non-study posts. The research team regularly convened to review coding agreements and disagreements, refining the codebook with emergent themes and clarifying existing codes until reaching consensus.

Coder Training

Five coders were trained by evaluating 20 non-study posts and compared their coding to that of a lead researcher [38]. Coding of study data began after 80% agreement with the standardized coding was achieved. During active periods of study coding, weekly team meetings were conducted to periodically assess interrater agreement and resolve questionable codes by consensus. Any necessary refinements to the codebook were discussed and implemented.

Content Coding

Coding of YouTube videos was performed from January 2023 to February 2024. Coders reviewed one channel at a time from the 42 YouTube content creators selected for analysis. Each channel was reviewed by one coder which allowed for continuity and context in coding this large dataset. Videos from each channel were reviewed in order of popularity, using YouTube's sorting feature to organize the videos by view count. To ensure theoretical saturation, coders reviewed every video on the account until 20 videos that met inclusion criteria were coded. To meet inclusion criteria, a video had to explicitly mention topics related to gender identity or the medical, social, or legal aspects of transitioning. The number of likes and views were collected for videos meeting inclusion criteria. The number of subscribers of each channel was recorded after the content coding of all channels was complete.

Videos were analyzed based on the creators' personal mentions of their gender identity, the medical topics that they addressed, the frameworks used to discuss medical topics, and the valence of their medical experiences. Coders used a Qualtrics survey to record their evaluations of each video. Coders selected the applicable codes and explained their decisions in a corresponding text box.

Medical Topics

Discussions of medical topics were categorized into subtopics: puberty and androgen blockers, hormone replacement therapy, menstruation, surgery, mental health, sexual health, fertility and family planning, treatment regrets, and general mentions of medical topics (Table 1). Medical topics were coded if they were discussed in the video at least once.

Table 1. Codebook of medical topics.

Code	Subcodes/Definition
Puberty and Androgen Blockers	Medications to delay puberty or block androgens.
Hormone Replacement Therapy	Estrogen
	Testosterone
	Not specified
Surgery	Top Surgery
	Bottom Surgery
	Facial Feminization Surgery
	Brazilian Butt Lift
	General Mentions
	Other
Mental Health	Medication, Treatment, and Therapy
	Therapists/Psychologists
	Reparative/Conversion Therapy
	Suicidality
	Eating Disorders
	Substance Use Disorder/Addiction
	Post Traumatic Stress Disorder
	Other Diagnoses
	General Mentions
Menstruation	Discussions about the management of periods and symptoms associated with menstruation.
Sexual Health	Discussions about safe sex practices, sexual boundaries, sexual function, sexually transmitted infections (STIs), and consent.
Fertility and Family Planning	Discussions about the ability to conceive or have biological children or alternative plans for creating a family, such as adoption or surrogacy.

Treatment Regrets	Expressing regret about undergoing a certain treatment or regretting a certain aspect of that treatment (e.g., the technique used, age in which they were treated, etc.)
General Mentions	General mentions of medically transitioning and gender affirming healthcare, without naming a specific treatment.

Medical Discussion Frameworks

All discussions about medical topics were categorized by framework. Discussions were categorized as “personal” when the creator’s statements were self-referential, usually by sharing personal experiences, feelings, and opinions. Discussions that presented facts, advice, or explanations were categorized as “informational”. Discussions that could not be categorized as personal or informational were categorized as “other”.

Valence of Medical Experiences

Valence was assigned to creators’ personal discussions of surgical and pharmacological interventions directly related to gender-affirming care. Valence refers to the creators’ characterization of their medical experiences, with positive indicating desirable or affirming experiences, and negative indicating undesirable or disaffirming experiences. Experiences were categorized as being positive, negative, or neutral/not applicable.

Results

Creator Gender and Channel Engagement

Gender Identity

Gender identity labels that creators used to describe themselves in more than one video were used in analysis. Gender identities reported are not mutually exclusive to reflect creators who had multiple gender identifications. Creators described their personal gender identities as 45.2% transgender male ($n = 19$), 21.4% transgender female ($n = 9$), 23.8% transgender ($n = 10$), 21.4% non-binary ($n = 9$), 7.1% gender queer ($n = 3$), and 9.5% additional gender identities ($n = 4$). 9.5% of creators did not specify their gender identities more than once ($n = 4$).

Subscribers

The number of subscribers to the creators’ YouTube channels varied widely, ranging from 160 to 3,410,000. Given the non-normal distribution of the data, the mean and standard deviation (SD), as well as the median and interquartile range (IQR), are both reported for interpretability. The mean number of subscribers was 492,976 ($SD = 799,317$), while the median was 117,000 ($IQR = 618,800$).

Channel Engagement

The average number of likes and views for all videos in the sample ($n = 761$) was 24,997 ($SD = 42,192$) and 702,961 ($SD = 2,303,544$), respectively. Comparatively, the average number of likes and views specifically for videos including discussions of medical topics ($n = 554$) was 25,176 ($SD = 45,518$) and 756,377 ($SD = 2,655,731$), respectively.

Medical Topics

Of the videos analyzed ($N = 2,485$), 30.6% ($n = 761$) of videos included discussions directly related to gender identity or transitioning. Of these videos, 72.8% ($n = 554$) discussed medical topics at least once. Videos that did not discuss medical topics discussed other topics related to gender identity and the transition process, including non-medical affirming activities (e.g., clothing, makeup), social experiences, and legal sex and name changes. Further analysis included videos that discussed a

medical topic at least once.

The most frequently discussed medical topics were surgery ($n = 356$, 64.3%) and hormone replacement therapy ($n = 307$, 55.4%) (Table 2). Testosterone was the most frequently discussed type of hormone replacement therapy ($n = 205$, 37%), while chest masculinization surgery was the most frequently discussed type of surgical intervention ($n = 193$, 34.8%), consistent with transgender men being the most prevalent gender identity in the dataset. Other commonly discussed medical topics include mental health ($n = 131$, 23.6%) and sexual health ($n = 96$, 17.3%).

Table 2. Frequency of videos discussing medical topics.

Code	Subcode	Number of videos ^a	Percent of videos ^b
		<i>n</i>	%
Puberty and Androgen Blockers		48	8.7
Hormone Replacement Therapy		307	55.4
	Estrogen	31	5.6
	Testosterone	205	37.0
	Not specified	92	16.6
Menstruation		24	4.3
Surgery		356	64.3
	Top Surgery	193	34.8
	Bottom Surgery	111	20.0
	Facial Feminization Surgery	34	6.1
	Brazilian Butt Lift	7	1.3
	General Mentions	116	20.9
	Other	13	2.3
Mental Health		131	23.6
	Medication, Treatment, and Therapy	36	6.5
	Therapists/Psychologists	5	0.9
	Reparative/Conversion Therapy	10	1.8
	Suicidality	29	5.2
	Eating Disorders	3	0.5
	Substance Use Disorder/Addiction	5	0.9
	Depression	40	7.2
	Anxiety	21	3.8
	Other Diagnoses	5	0.9
	General Mentions	33	6.0
Sexual Health		96	17.3
Fertility and Family Planning		36	6.5
Treatment Regrets		9	1.6
General Mentions		69	12.5

^aMedical topics are not mutually exclusive. Videos discussing more than one topic are included in

each relevant category. Videos that discussed a medical topic at least once were counted.

^bCompared to all videos discussing medical topics ($n = 554$)

Medical Discussion Frameworks

Of all videos where creators discussed their personal experiences with gender-affirming care, 73.2% of videos ($n = 224$) discussed positive experiences, 33.7% ($n = 103$) discussed negative experiences, and 61.1% ($n = 187$) discussed experiences that were neutral or not applicable. Medical frameworks were not mutually exclusive. Medical frameworks were not mutually exclusive. Videos using more than one framework were included in each relevant category.

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Discussion

Relevance

Given the unique health needs and challenges faced by TGD individuals, access to health information is essential to support their well-being and empower them to make informed decisions about their care. However, TGD individuals experience significant barriers to accessing health services, and are less likely to utilize both primary and specialty care services compared to cisgender individuals [41-43]. These challenges are even greater for the estimated 113,900 transgender youth (over a third of transgender youth in the U.S.) who live in a state that has enacted a ban on gender-affirming care [44]. Additionally, an executive order issued by the Trump administration, which aims to end federal funding for healthcare organizations providing gender-affirming care, reflects a broader effort to restrict access to such care for transgender youth in the United States [45]. Without accessible systems in place, TGD individuals may turn to alternative sources for health information, such as social media. It is therefore important to understand the medical content available on social media.

Principal Results

The present study described the health-related content made by TGD content creators on YouTube. This study found that most content created by transgender creators did not center on transgender-specific topics. Instead, these creators showcased multiple aspects of their lives beyond their gender identity across their videos. This variety of content may allow TGD followers to connect with creators over additional shared interests, fostering a stronger sense of kinship with the creator, enhancing their relatability and influence.

When TGD content creators discussed their gender identity, medical topics frequently emerged. These findings indicate that creators commonly highlight the role of medical care in affirming their gender identity. This suggests that TGD individuals engaging with such content, particularly for gender identity development purposes, are likely to encounter information about gender-affirming care.

Surgery and hormone replacement therapy were common topics, with testosterone and chest masculinization surgery discussed most frequently. Both treatments are typically considered to be masculinizing, suggesting a possible overrepresentation of transmasculine identities on YouTube,

consistent with previous literature [10,37]. Other commonly discussed medical topics included mental health and sexual health. This range of topics highlights a holistic perspective of gender-affirming care, with discussions extending beyond physical interventions to include broader aspects of health.

Most videos discussing medical topics focused on personal experiences, aligning with previous research that highlights social media's role in sharing first-hand medical narratives [13,19]. Such videos offer insights grounded in lived experience, providing information from those who have undergone gender-affirming treatments, which may be especially helpful for informing viewers' medical decisions. Notably, the content often reflected positive experiences, suggesting that content creators tend to report or emphasize favorable outcomes from gender-affirming care.

Implications

These findings may be especially insightful for clinicians working with TGD individuals. Clinicians are likely aware that their clients are viewing online videos related to their experiences. Providers may find it useful to ask clients about specific stories they may have seen on social media and use client responses to build a discussion about individual goals and expectations for treatment. By understanding the types of narratives their clients are exposed to, clinicians can better contextualize their clients' perspectives and tailor their guidance accordingly.

Limitations

The large number of YouTube videos included in this study enhances its generalizability and depth of findings across a diverse range of content creators. However, while the study expands on our understanding of creators on YouTube, this focus also excludes insights from emerging creators present on other platforms like Instagram and TikTok. Furthermore, this study did not include short-form content (i.e., YouTube Shorts), which has risen to popularity in recent years. Possible differences between long-form and short-form health content across social media platforms should be examined in subsequent studies. This study also did not grade the creators' health information statements for accuracy. Assessing the accuracy of health information shared by TGD content creators is a vital area for future study given broader concerns about medical misinformation online.

Conclusions

This study offers insights into the health-related information shared by TGD content creators on YouTube, emphasizing the range of topics covered and the approaches used to share medical information. Although most videos by TGD content creators are unrelated to gender identity, videos that do address this topic frequently mention gender-affirming medical care. Our findings underscore the potential of social media as a vital resource for TGD individuals seeking accessible and relatable health information, particularly in the face of systemic barriers to accessing inclusive healthcare.

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ES supervised the project and secured funding. ES and OH conceptualized the study and ES and LB developed study methodology. LB managed project administration, led data collection efforts, and designed the data collection instruments. IC was a major contributor to data collection. LB prepared data for analysis and QZ conducted the formal analysis. LB and IC wrote the manuscript. All authors reviewed, edited, and approved of the manuscript.

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Conflicts of Interest

Ellen Selkie is on a scientific advisory board for Google. Google did not fund this research, nor were any data from the study shared with Google.

Abbreviations

TGD: transgender and gender diverse

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Content creator selection process.

