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# YOUTUBE AS A MEDIA EXPRESSION OF TRANSGENDER WOMEN

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## ABSTRACT

YouTube becomes an alternative media to represent homosexual identity that is not portrayed by in many countries. Dinda Syarief, the transgender woman from Indonesia, uses this platform to express her sexual identity, and her YouTube channel attracts a great number of followers from the worldwide. This research investigates 32 videos which were published between May 2019 and March 2020 uploaded by her YouTube channel. The thematic analysis on these videos has revealed three big themes: basic video characteristics, physical transitions, and transgender issues. The dominant themes of basic video characteristics embrace photoshoot activities, apartment tour, make-up tutorials, and truth and dares of herself regarded as the 3<sup>rd</sup> winner of Miss International Queen. Meanwhile, based on the physical transition, hormones, surgery, voice, and non-surgical procedures become the issues mostly discussed. Meanwhile, based on transgender-specific issues, disclosure

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becomes the issue mostly discussed in reaction after she became a transgender her videos such as the transition from woman. male to female, surgery, and family

## INTRODUCTION

Gender is regarded as an essential element of individual life, social relations and cultures in which we are confronted with difficult practical issues about justice, and even survival. Gender in some contexts also triggers prejudice, myth, and outright falsehood. It is still common to witness the assumption that men and women are physiologically different in the brain (Semaan & Kauffman, 2010). Men are stereotypically associated with brilliance or genius (Brian, Leslie, & Cimpian, 2017).

According to American Psychological Association (2012) gender refers to attitudes, feelings and behaviours that equate a given culture with the biological sex of a person. Behaviours that are consistent with cultural norms are referred to as gender normative and behaviours that are considered inconsistent with these standards are non-compatible with gender.

Transgender is one of the gender issues which is becoming a fascinating and important subject. According to Hilton-Morrow and Battles, the word transgender usually serves as an umbrella term for a variety of identities refusing the connection between biological sex and a collection of socially acceptable gender norms (as cited in Jennings, 2016). Transgender people are often also categorized as Male-to-Female (MTF) or Female-to-Male (FTM) (Garofalo, Robert, Deleon, Joanne, Osmer, Elizabeth, 2006). They experience constant discomfort, frequently causing intense distress, between their biological sex and gender identity. In addition, "trans" is also used as a slang for transgender. Other variants include transperson, transpeople, transwoman, and transman (Mitchell & Howarth, 2009).

In many aspects of their lives transgender population could experience inequality, discrimination, and social exclusion. However, the recognition of this in policy agendas or research was limited until the last decade (Mitchell and Howarth, 2009). The transgender community also would have been misrepresented in the media. Jobe

(2013) notes that this community faces a lot of discrimination in American society, and current transgender representation in the media has the power to reinforce negative stereotypes. In understanding the representation of trans-people and transgender issues, he examined news, television programs, and films from as early as 1975 to as recent as 2013 for their accuracy to fairness. Nearly all samples used derogatory transgender stereotypes.

In Indonesia, media such as *Pos Kota*<sup>1</sup> and other newspapers published in Jakarta depicted transgender and transsexuals as components of transphobia, comprising racism, stereotypes, and hate. This is due to the social structure that separates individuals by sex, such that transgender and transsexual people are viewed as ill people (Yudah, 2017). Instead, social media platforms such as YouTube turned out to be an alternate medium to visualize and address to gender and sexuality. YouTube is used as a tool to reflect homosexual identity which is considered failed to be represented by mass media, with the explanation that homosexual people are those that do not deviate and have the same characteristics (Nabilah, 2015). Social media in some countries empowers individuals to showcase their sexual identity and their life in the societal context starting to be recognized and even accepted.

In Indonesia, the transgender public figure Dinda Syarief would be considered a lucky one as she successfully expresses her sexual identity with the help of continuous online campaign executed by her YouTube channel. She is a transgender model and transgender YouTuber who has been involved as a transgender YouTuber since May 2017. She has 38.4 thousand subscribers and has uploaded 31 videos.

## CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

Sex is mainly determined by biological features, including sex chromosomes, and is measured at birth based on external genital findings (Garofalo, Robert, Deleon, Joanne, Osmer, and Elizabeth, 2006). Gender, however, refers to the characteristics

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<sup>1</sup> Pos Kota is newspaper published by PT Media Antarkota Jaya since April 15, 1970 in Jakarta.

and behaviours socially constructed and associated with one's sex. This includes stereotypes, gender roles, and expressions of masculinity and femininity (Diamond, Lisa M., Pardo, Seth, Butterworth, and Molly, 2011).

Whittle, Turner, Al-Alami, Rundall, and Thom (2007, p. 85) note that transgender is a specific term because it encompasses all kinds of trans persons such as cross dressers, people wearing a mixed clothing, and people with dual or no gender identity. The definition is often used to describe a political and social community that includes transsexual people, transgender persons, cross-dressers (transvestites) and other "gender variant" groups (as stated in Martin and Howarth, 2009). Moreover, Fish (2007b) cites that transsexual is used to describe individuals seeking gender reassignment treatment, which may include gender constructive surgery. Transsexual people generally identify with the opposite sex from a young age (as cited in Martin and Howarth, 2009).

In expressing their gender identity, transgender individuals do not only get discrimination from the society, but also from media, particularly mainstream media. Barker-Plummer (2013) states that mainstream news media have a tradition of marginalising, stereotyping and pathologizing trans people depictions. Ever since the public "transformation" of American trans woman, Christine Jorgensen, in the 1950s was among the first to cause headlines, trans people have often been portrayed in a sensationalistic way by news media (Akerlund, 2019). Likewise, transgender people are sometimes framed as deceptive through use of offensive language (Capuzza, 2016) but also media coverage set out to be inclusive can marginalise and suppress trans people (Riggs, 2014).

Transgender individuals do not only become media audiences and users of technology, but they also become the content creators of the media, particularly in social media. Social media provides opportunities for them to spotlight their thoughts and experiences, allowing them to speak and voice their point of views. It privileges an insider's perspective, seeking to understand transgender individuals and communities on their own terms (Cavalcante, 2018).

Marciano (2014) notes that the use of cyberspace by transgender people is varied. First, they will use the internet as a conceptual sphere where the virtual world will act as an offline world check run. Second, transgender individuals can use cyberspace as a complementary sphere where there is minimal separation between the online world and the offline. Finally, Marciano believes that transgender individuals may turn to the internet for an alternate environment, or a space where they may experience their gender differently than they do offline (as cited in Miller, 2017).

YouTube is one of the online sites that transgender people use. Transgender YouTube videos have been popular in expressing their thoughts as they use systematic techniques to manipulate the platform's penchant for personal and spectacular purposes. Transgender "talking head" videos extend the format of a documentary about feminist awareness-raising to identify transgender youth as experts and build a sense of intimacy between vloggers and viewers. In the process of attracting solidarity from far-flung cultures, transgender youth creatively manipulate the predilections of the forum to claim their bodies and selves (Horak, 2014).

As transgender YouTubers, they use their content to support people within their community through their positive self-representation and facilitate social change (Miller, 2018). The improvement of representation in media shows is indicative of a trend towards more positive representation. The characters are very favourably portrayed. It is notable though that all characters tend to uphold the binary gender. Though the changes do need to be made in equal and nuanced representation. The signal of those characters is taking a step in the right direction (McLaren, 2018)

## METHODOLOGY

This study generated all videos of Dinda Syarief to be analysed since the total of YouTube video is less than 100 (Arikunto, 2012). There are 31 videos uploaded on

her YouTube channel from May 5, 2017 to March 13, 2020 and those videos represent how Dinda Syarief express her gender identity as a transgender woman.

### **Coder Training**

Two graduate students were chosen as coders to examine the YouTube videos of Dinda Syarief. Both coders were cisgender (male and female). Cisgender individuals are those for whom the sex assigned at birth matches both their outward bodily representation and their internal gender identity (Kozee, Tylka, and Bauerband, 2012). Moreover, both coders had been training for approximately four weeks before coding the final sample. The training was about terminology commonly encountered in trans specific videos, for instance bathroom, passing, dilation, tucking, and packing).

### **Unit of Analysis and Operationalization Variables**

The unit analysis of this study was the YouTube videos. Before coding and judging the videos, every video should be entirely watched by the coders. They then grouped the videos into three major themes borrowed from the study of Miller (2017). They are basic video characteristics, physical transitions, and transgender issues.

#### **Basic Video Characteristics**

The coders identified the transgender YouTuber in the videos. The assessment was based upon self-identified labels as a transgender woman (Miller, 2017). Coders also evaluated the main theme of each video.

#### **Physical Transition Elements**

The coders observed the discussion on physical transition in each video. Physical transition issues included hormones, surgery, hair growth, binding, voice, non-surgical procedures, packing, hair removal dilation, tucking, skin (Miller, 2017).

#### **Trans-specific Issues**

The coders observed the transgender specific issues included male/female stereotype, family, passing, bullying, dating, disclosure, religion, terminology/pronouns, names/name changes, mental health, sex, bathrooms, LGBT campaign (Miller, 2017).

## FINDINGS & DISCUSSION

### Themes in Trans Created YouTube Videos

From 32 YouTube videos, there are 9 videos (28%) that were not trans-specific issues and not related to beauty, make-up, or shopping. The theme about beauty, make-up, or shopping was mentioned in 9 videos (28%). Meanwhile, the topic about fashion had been discussed in 5 videos (16%). 3 videos (9%) communicated multiple-trans related topic or trans related topic not otherwise listed and 3 videos (9%) described surgery or post ups updates. The topic of realizing one is transgender had been once discussed (3%). However, the theme about hormones or hormones related changes, dating or sex, bullying or harassment, and passing or people do to pass were not mentioned in the videos.

Table 1. Themes in Trans Created YouTube Videos

| Category  | Freq      | Percentage  |
|---|-----------|-------------|
| No trans/Beauty/Make-up/Shopping themes                                     | 9         | 28%         |
| Beauty/Make up/Shopping   | 9         | 28%         |
| Multiple trans-related topics or a trans related topic not otherwise listed | 3         | 9%          |
| Hormones or hormones related changes  | 0         | 0%          |
| Dating or sex   | 0         | 0%          |
| Surgery or posts-ups updates  | 3         | 9%          |
| Transition timeline or chronological comparison                             | 1         | 3%          |
| Bullying or harassment  | 0         | 0%          |
| Passing or people do to pass  | 0         | 0%          |
| Realizing one is transgender  | 2         | 6%          |
| Fashion   | 5         | 16%         |
| <b>Total</b>  | <b>32</b> | <b>100%</b> |

Among other themes, the topic that are not trans-specific issues and not related to beauty, make-up, or shopping and the topic of beauty, make-up, or shopping had been the most frequent topics discussed in her videos. This indicates that the YouTube videos of Dinda Syarief were communicating that sexual orientation is different from physical activities. It can be seen from her videos talking about any

interesting topics, not only about trans-specific issues, beauty, make-up, and shopping. In her videos, she talked about her daily activities and achievement such as photoshoot activity, Miss International Queen in Thailand (Bangkok), apartment room tour, truth or dare about Dinda Syarif. Meanwhile, to engage with her audiences/subscribers and communicate her identity, Dinda Syarif's YouTube videos were talking about make-up tutorial.

### Trans-specific Issues

Based on trans-specific issues, the issues on disclosure became the most popular issue discussed in the YouTube videos of Dinda Syarif. It was discussed in 11 videos (26%). Meanwhile, the issues on family, bullying, and dating, had been discussed in 5 videos (12%) for each issue. Male/female stereotypes had been discussed in 4 videos (10%) and issues on mental health, sex, and LGBT campaign have been mentioned in 3 videos (7%) for each issue. Passing, religion, and bathroom had been once mentioned in the video for each issue (2%). However, the issues on terminology/pronouns and names/name changes had not been discussed in the video.

Table 2. Trans Specific Issues

| Category                | Freq      | Percentage  |
|-------------------------|-----------|-------------|
| Male/female stereotypes | 4         | 10%         |
| Family                  | 5         | 12%         |
| Passing                 | 1         | 2%          |
| Bullying                | 5         | 12%         |
| Dating                  | 5         | 12%         |
| Disclosure              | 11        | 26%         |
| Religion                | 1         | 2%          |
| Terminology/pronouns    | 0         | 0%          |
| Names/name changes      | 0         | 0%          |
| Mental health           | 3         | 7%          |
| Sex                     | 3         | 7%          |
| Bathroom                | 1         | 2%          |
| LGBT Campaign           | 3         | 7%          |
| <b>Total</b>            | <b>42</b> | <b>100%</b> |



The result reveals that the issues on disclosure had become the most essential topic to be discussed in the YouTube videos of Dinda Syarief. She wants to communicate her identity about who she is, how she transformed to be a transgender woman, how she did surgery, and how family support supported her.

### Physical Transitions

Based on the physical transition issues, hormones became the most essential issue discussed in the YouTube videos of Dinda Syarief. This issue had been talked in 3 videos (23%). The issues on surgery, voice, and non-surgical procedures had been discussed in 2 videos (15%) of each issue. Meanwhile, the issues on hair growth, hair removal, dilation, and skin had been once communicated (8%) of each issue. However, she did not make videos about binding, packing, and tucking.

Table 3. Physical Transitions

| Category                | Freq      | Percentage  |
|-------------------------|-----------|-------------|
| Hormones                | 3         | 23%         |
| Surgery                 | 2         | 15%         |
| Hair growth             | 1         | 8%          |
| Binding                 | 0         | 0%          |
| Voice                   | 2         | 15%         |
| Non-surgical procedures | 2         | 15%         |
| Packing                 | 0         | 0%          |
| Hair removal            | 1         | 8%          |
| Dilation                | 1         | 8%          |
| Tucking                 | 0         | 0%          |
| Skin                    | 1         | 8%          |
| <b>Total</b>            | <b>13</b> | <b>100%</b> |

The result reveals that the issue on hormones had been intensively talked in YouTube videos of Dinda Syarief. She communicated her emotional and physical changing before and after hormone dilation. It aimed to reduce her anxiety and depression in order to improve her quality of life and self-esteem.

The frame analysis on her published videos indicates that Dinda Syarief is very open as a transgender woman. It can be seen from the way she uses social media platforms. This shows that she is not hesitate, afraid, or even embarrassed in publicizing who she is to others. This result supports the study of Sequeira, Ray, Miller, and Coulter (2020) revealing that mostly the transgender voluntary disclosure their gender identity to publics.

The use of social media, particularly YouTube, is aimed to demolish the negative stereotypes of transgender women that have been strongly constructed by the society. This platform becomes an effective tool to disseminate the message that Dinda Syarief wants to communicate to the society since it has been used by million people.

This study emphasizes the study of Selkie, Adikins, Masters, Bajpai, and Shumer (2020) explaining that social media become the most effective tools transgender adolescents since most of them have the access to online information and socialization. Since Dinda Syarief has the access to this platform, she uses this tool to voice out her thoughts and express her feeling in order to change the negative paradigm of transgender women.

YouTube empowers individuals to communicate their identities and voice out their rights of human beings since they are at risk of abuse and violence from heterosexual people and have higher risk for negative mental health outcomes. Selkie, Adikins, Masters, Bajpai, and Shumer (2020) reveal that transgender have bigger opportunities to get depression, anxiety, and suicidality comparing with heterosexual people. Therefore, self-disclosure through social media, for instance YouTube becomes normal in the digital era nowadays.

Self-disclosure using YouTube is considered as a method to actualize themselves without having a direct confrontation with others. It implies to many people to do so in cyberspace. It very different from the decades before digital era emerged. Self-disclosure concerning LGBT is a disgrace and is considered as a taboo subject.

Moreover, YouTube enhances the representation of transgender population and provides a platform to address to the issue of equality in society where multiple forms of discrimination towards transgender population still exist.

Transgender women's voice in YouTube can influence mainstream media on how to coverage the transgender women in positive sides. They are not marginal people. They have the same rights with others. Capuzza (2016) argues that media practices have accommodated the gender identity and expression of transgender women although they have to need efforts multi-dimensional coverage of this community. Therefore, this study could become an opportunity for mainstream media to have more attention to transgender people based on their achievement not only from their physical changing.

## CONCLUSION

The characteristic of openness of YouTube has permitted various forms of discussion and communication on the identity of transgender. This platform provides opportunities to transgender women to actualize who they are. It then encourages their self-esteem in the society and can improve the quality of their life although in the transformation process of being transgender women, they may get experience shame for reasons related to their gender identity.

YouTube has played the key factor since this platform provides the opportunity for transgender women to hegemonize their identity by continuing producing content on transgender women's life and to engage with virtual society.

However, based on the result, it indicates that transgender women are confined in the classical paradigm that the concept of being transgender women should be like heterosexual women in which they should be beautiful by doing and communicating how to make-up and participating in the beauty pageant.

## LIMITATION AND STUDY FORWARD

This study only discussed about how YouTube is used by transgender women to represent and communicate their gender identity. This research only analyses the video contents of a transgender woman by using content analysis without elaborating with in-depth interview in order to deeply understand gender identity of transgender women. Moreover, for the future research, it can also investigate how transgender people engage with their audiences by analysing the comments on the YouTube videos.

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