Review Article

Transgender and gender non-conforming (TGNC) online dating experience

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Abstract

This paper reviews current literature regarding the online-experience of transgender and non-conforming (TGNC) individuals, focusing on the online dating experience. The paper will identify key themes that were developed by reviewing nine peer-reviewed articles. The themes that were identified and outlined in detail in this paper include self-presentation, cultural impacts, the presence of dominating masculinity, sexual health and risky sexual behaviors, trans-misrepresentation and sexualization, and online-based interventions. The paper then utilizes these themes and provides clinical recommendations for clinicians to refer to when working with the TGNC population. Lastly, this paper will identify the limitations of the current paper and address areas of future research.

Introduction

According to recent studies, there are approximately 1.4 million adults in the United States who identify as transgender (Scheuerman et al., 2018). Scheuerman et al. (2018) define the term transgender as *"a person whose gender identity is different from the one they were assigned at birth"* (p. 1). Some transgender individuals choose to socially

transition and/or medically transition to be congruent with their gender identity (Hughto et al., 2015). However, other individuals may choose to have their gender identity "outside of the traditional gender binary", and consider themselves gender non-conforming [GNC] (Hughto et al., 2015). Therefore, the authors will utilize the term transgender and gender non-conforming (TGNC) throughout the article.

Research has stated that individuals belonging to the lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer/questioning, and more (LGBTQ+) community have lower odds of daily activities resulting in social encounters, which raise the importance for the usage of

online dating applications (Choi et al., 2017; Chan, 2016). With the increase in smart phones and technological availability, these dating apps have become a convenient method for sexual and gender minorities to meet and connect (Chan, 2016; Choi et., 2016; Duguay, 2017).

Several gay dating apps were referenced throughout the literature search; however, Grindr was the most mentioned. In 2009, Grindr launched intending to aim their app towards men-who-have-sex-with-men (MSM) by allowing users to access a location-based dating app (Lloyd & Finn, 2017). Duguay (2017) highlighted the success of Grindr, stating that approximately 1.5 million individuals utilize the application daily. Apps, such as Grindr, allow users to view profiles that are made up of chosen photographs, along with other personal information the user chooses to disclose (Chan, 2016). Users are then allowed to exchange messages, photos, and location information through the app (Chan, 2016).

Despite the overwhelming success of Grindr, the app recently underwent controversy due to *"alleged banning, deletion and censoring of trans users' profiles"* (Lloyd & Finn, 2017, p. 160). Due to the backlash, the app then responded by creating the option of 'Trans' that users can select as their self-identity, which has allegedly led to a higher increase of app usage by TGNC individuals (Lloyd & Finn, 2017).

Methods

This article reviewed current research regarding the online experience of TGNC individuals, specifically the online-dating experience, and provide recommendations to guide clinical work.

Authors utilized Google Scholar, APA PsychNet and Pub Medto locate recent articles that were relevant to this topic, while utilizing keywords of transgender, gender non-binary, gender non-conforming, dating apps, LGBTQ+ online experience during the search. After reviewing nine articles, the authors reviewed specific themes, which they felt were important in discussing the current topic. These themes included self-presentation, cultural impacts, the presence of dominating masculinity, sexual health and risky sexual behaviors, trans-mis representation and sexualization, and online-based interventions.

Self-presentation

TGNC individuals have to negotiate ways in which they present themselves daily, which furthers the importance of understanding how this plays out technologically (Rodriguez et al., 2016). Recent studies have begun to consider profiles on dating apps as a form of self-presentation (Chan, 2016). Additionally, research has evaluated the level of self-presentation and the hesitation towards self-presentation of transgender individuals who use dating apps (Chan, 2016; Duguay, 2017; Lloyd & Finn, 2017; Rodriguez et al., 2016). Self-presentation is utilized by app users as a means to create impressions (Chan, 2016).

Several factors have been correlated to levels of self-presentation by app users. For instance, research has found that individuals from large cities are more likely to identify as LGBTQ+ community member or post pictures of their faces than those of smaller cities due to negative consequences that may be faced in small communities (Chan, 2016). Additionally, research has found that younger individuals, individuals with a higher body mass index, or individuals who did not formally state their race were more likely to include pictures that showed their faces on their profiles (Chan, 2016). Reportedly these

factors are all correlated with the level of 'attractiveness' throughout dating platforms (Chan, 2016).

Cultural impacts

In evaluating cultural impacts, Chan (2016) found that cultures play a role in TGNC user experience of dating apps. In comparing Chinese MSM to American MSM, Chan (2016) found that Chinese MSM was less likely to display their faces on dating apps as a means of protection due to the severity of stigma and in some cases illegality. On the other hand, Western culture considers displaying one's face on dating apps as essential as a form of self-identification, self-representation, and a display of honesty and authenticity (Chan, 2016).

In addition to showing their faces on the profiles, research has shown that cultural differences impact communication styles of users (Chan, 2016). With less social norms on individuals in Western culture, American MSM is more likely to be direct and verbalize romantic feelings on dating apps than those of Chinese MSM (Chan, 2016).

Presence of dominating masculinity

Dominating masculinity has appeared to be present in gay dating apps (Rodriguez et al., 2016), which may negatively impact the experience of TGNC users who may or may not present and/or identify with masculinity. Masculinity was displayed by presenting oneself as physically fit through topless photos (Chan, 2016). Rodriguez et al. (2016) inferred that inaccurate media representation of masculinity in the LGBTQ+ community impacts expectations of gender identity, which *"creates a society of over-sharing, superficiality, and instant gratification,"* with the need to constantly 'advertise yourself' (Rodriguez et al., 2016)

Sexual health and risky sexual behaviors

Several research studies have focused on the relationship between dating apps and sexual health and risky sexual behaviors (Choi et al., 2017; Kesten et al., 2019; Patel et al., 2016; Sun et al., 2018). Studies have implied that an increase in unprotected sex, a higher number of sexual partners, substance use before or during sexual intercourse, and both the testing and higher prevalence of sexually transmitted infections (STIs) are all associated with seeking sexual relationships online (Choi et al. 2017; Kesten et al., 2019). Kesten et al. (2019) reported that this correlation may be associated with the fact that the increase in social networks creates for changing partners more quickly and a greater mixing of partners. Additional risky sexual behaviors that have been noted included utilizing social media sites to seek sexual partners in exchange for drugs and clothing (Patel et al., 2016).

Trans-misrepresentation and sexualization

TGNC individuals face misrepresentation, stigma, and violence (Lloyd & Finn, 2017). Additionally, they are subjected to sexualization, which furthers the senses of misrepresentation and discrimination (Lloyd & Finn, 2017). TGNC women experience sexualization through the inaccurate idea of seduction, hypersexuality, and fetishism (Lloyd & Finn, 2017). Trans-misrepresentation can also be demonstrated through the association of trans women with cross-dressers and being displayed as sexually suggestive (Lloyd & Finn, 2017).

Participants in a study conducted by Lloyd & Finn (2017) expressed experiencing misrepresentation through Grindr as Grindr users assume that the app is exclusively for MSM. The false idea of app users adds to the misrepresentation that trans users are gay

men, drag queens, cross-dressers, and/or feminine men (Lloyd & Finn, 2017). Trans women thus felt it essential to display their gender transitions and feminine qualities to be viewed as authentic as a means of acceptance (Lloyd & Finn, 2017).

Participants in Llyod and Finn's (2017) study also verbalized experiencing sexualization during their use of Grindr. Sexualization was experienced through the assumption that trans women on the app were *"kinky, perverted and immoral subjects"* known for bringing 'shame' upon others unless kept secret, which reinforces that idea that their sexuality as a whole must be kept a secret (Lloyd & Finn, 2017).

Online-based interventions

As previously mentioned, studies have implied that there is a higher risk of developing STIs as a result of using online dating apps to seek relationships (Choi et al., 2017; Kesten et al., 2019; Patel et al., 2016; Sun et al., 2018). Yet notably, this population is also less likely to be reached by recent interventions aimed toward prevention (Patel et al., 2016). Online interventions have been considered inexpensive, effective, and easily accessible (Choi et al., 2016; Kesten et al., 2019). While inquiring about the usage of social media and dating apps for providing sexual health information, Kestenet al., (2019) found that using this platform was acceptable and viewed as positive.

In addition to utilizing online-based interventions with sexual health, Lloyd and Finn (2017) have also found benefits in online-interventions that provide a safe space and the ability for the TGNC individuals to have a voice and experience social liberation. According to research, technology has provided the opportunity for trans users to comprehend their identities, create interpersonal relationships, having

emotional support, create a sense of universality, and provide the availability to activism (Lloyd & Finn, 2017).

Clinical usage

The following paragraphs will provide basic clinical guidance for therapists to address the domains identified in the existing literature. All clinical work with TGNC individuals can consider the tenets of affirmative therapy. A comprehensive review of TGNC affirmative therapy exceeds the scope of this article. However, there are resources available to clinicians that would like to review the practice of TGNC affirmative therapy. American Psychological Association (2013) provides a number of resources including fact sheets, a trans resource guide, policies and practices for working with trans individuals, 2015 U.S. Transgender Survey Report, and many other useful resources.

A comprehensive review of TGNC affirmative therapy can be found in a chapter by Singh & Dickey (2017). This chapter is part of a comprehensive text on working with sexual orientation and gender diversity. The authors of this chapter discuss language, theoretical frameworks and competencies, the history of working with TGNC individuals, individual and group counseling, working across the life span, and ethnical and advocacy issues. This text may serve as an introduction to the general counseling skill and information necessary to provide an affirmative practice.

Self-presentation

As previously mentioned, TGNC individuals are negotiating their self-presentation daily, both in real-time and through dating apps (Rodriguez et al., 2016). Clinicians should utilize this idea of self-presentation to engage the client in conversations regarding how they present themselves, along with how

they want to be presented in the world. Further, clinicians can provide psycho-education on authenticity and encourage the individual to reflect on how they are being authentic, both in the world and to themselves. In doing so, clinicians may be able to assist the individual in understanding how the client is managing themselves and coping with this idea of self-presentation. Though these conversations may require confrontation which may be difficult for the individual, they may also assist the client in understanding who they want to be and reaching that level of peace within oneself. Clinicians may want to assess any risks associated with an authentic presentation. This will allow for an informed decision to be made by the client that considers both authenticity and safety.

Cultural impacts

In discussing cultural impacts, there are several considerations that clinicians should have. Clinicians should alter their treatment to meet the client's needs through a culturally relevant approach (Asnaani & Hofmann, 2012). If there is unfamiliarity with the culture, it is the clinician's responsibility to familiarize oneself with that culture both currently and historically to properly assess how this can impact the client (Asnaani & Hofmann, 2012). By having an awareness of the systematic history of the client, the clinician can have a deeper understanding of the events of the client's life (Asnaani & Hofmann, 2012). Clinicians, even those who feel as though they have a deep understanding of multicultural awareness, must treat each client uniquely (Asnaani & Hofmann, 2012), thus avoiding generalizations. In treating clients uniquely, and by inquiring about their culture the clinician may be able to form a stronger therapeutic relationship (Asnaani & Hofmann, 2012). Further, clinicians should

make efforts in increasing their knowledge of TGNC culture proficiency by attending lectures and trainings to further increase the clinician's level of awareness and understanding (Hughto et al., 2015). In doing so, clinicians will lessen the likelihood of TGNC individuals experiencing additional barriers and expand the level of care that is provided to the individual (Hughto et al., 2015).

In discussing the comparison of likelihood to display their faces, Chan (2016) highlighted the significance of safety. TGNC individuals need to feel safe in their homes and communities before properly managing their overall health (Torres et al., 2015). Due to this, clinicians cannot work through the process of gender identification without first recognizing the potential safety barriers (Torres et al., 2015).

Presence of dominating masculinity

Rodriguez et al. (2016) discuss the negative impacts of the presence of masculinity on dating apps. Though this may be the case for some TGNC users, clinicians need to understand that not all TGNC individuals will present or identify with concerns on masculinity. For instance, there are many female-to-male (FTM) individuals who identify as masculine and are comfortable with their masculinity without genital surgery (Mayer et al., 2019). On the other hand, there may be TGNC individuals who identify as neither male nor female and prefer to remain gender fluid (Motmans et al., 2019). In working with TGNC individuals, clinicians should discuss with the individual if they have an identified gender or if they are gender fluid. Through this discussion, clinicians can further assess the potential impact of the presence of masculinity, and what the presence of masculinity on dating apps means to the individual.

Sexual health and risky sexual behaviors

In discussing sexual health and risky sexual behaviors, clinicians should not focus their attention solely on prevention and health concerns due to the possibility of the individual feeling shame for experiencing pleasure through these behaviors (Naisteter & Sitron, 2010). Thus, clinicians may find it beneficial to utilize a harm-reduction approach within psychoeducation. Harm reduction was implemented in the 1980s in response to the spread of HIV and is intended to *"meet people where they are"* (Bayles, 2014). Naisteter and Sitron (2010) contend that by utilizing harm reduction to provide education on sexual health, individuals will be provided the opportunity to mediate between pleasure and safety; which will result in individuals being more likely to make harm-aware decisions.

Trans-misrepresentation and sexualization

Clinicians working with a TGNC individual who is experiencing misrepresentation and sexualization should recall that this level of stigma has the potential to cause both psychological and physical harm (Hughto et al., 2015; Lloyd & Finn, 2017). Research has directed clinicians toward alleviating stress response that is associated with experiencing trans stigma (Hughto et al., 2015). Stigma interventions have been created to assist individuals in changing attitudes, increasing coping mechanisms, and diminish the effects of stigma on an interpersonal-level (Hughto et al., 2015). Clinicians can further familiarize themselves with stigma interventions by referring to Hughto et al.'s (2015) article and Gronholm et al.'s (2017) article.

Previous literature and records of personal accounts have suggested that many TGNC experiences, or have experienced, shame concerning gender identity (Giordano,

2018). Therefore, along with stigma interventions, clinicians should center counseling for transgender individuals in minimizing any shame that they may have regarding their transgender identities (Hughto et al., 2015). Clinicians can utilize tools such as psycho-education on self-esteem and coping tools to assist the client throughout these interventions.

Online based interventions

Kesten et al. (2019) stressed that online-based interventions should be engaging, in a sex-positive tone, and delivered by trusted organizations. Online interventions may not mirror what an in-person clinical intervention would look like, however, it is essential to carry similar qualities of in-person interventions into practice. According to Sadaat (2014), therapeutic relationships and treatment process can be negatively impacted if the clinician is not empathetic, understanding, or have effective communication styles.

Limitations

A major limitation within the existing literature is the fact that much of the research referenced by authors focus on MSM. In doing so, themes of cultural impacts fail to take into account women who have sex with men, and women who have sex with women. Additionally, this limitation may restrict the understanding of the experiences of females transitioning to males (FTM), or individuals who are biologically female but are GNC.

Future research

In addition to the themes noted above, the authors suggest that future research look at the possibility of positive and/or negative effects on psychological well being for dating app users. With the limited amount of research that is available regarding TGNC individuals and dating apps, by assessing

these psychological effects clinicians can further determine what clinical work needs to be done within this population. Additionally, future research may identify further themes that are present in TGNC use of dating apps and technology that were not noted by the authors of this paper.

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