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Journal of Gender Studies

ISSN: (Print) (Online) Journal homepage: www.tandfonline.com/journals/cjgs20

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To cite this article: Robin Todd West (2024) Logging into the rehearsal stage: a study on how young transgender men use Facebook to rehearse masculinity, Journal of Gender Studies, 33:5, 560-571, DOI: 10.1080/09589236.2024.2318744

To link to this article: https://doi.org/10.1080/09589236.2024.2318744

Published online: 18 Feb 2024.

JOURNAL OF GENDER STUDIES
2024, VOL. 33, NO. 5, 560–571
https://doi.org/10.1080/09589236.2024.2318744

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RESEARCH ARTICLE

Logging into the rehearsal stage: a study on how young transgender men use Facebook to rehearse masculinity

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ABSTRACT

With Facebook frequently dismissed by scholars as being insufficient for facilitating trans identity-work, this study set out to uncover the overlooked ways in which young transgender men subvert the platform's enforcement of identity singularity to create a private space segregated from their main following to safely navigate the early stages of their gender transition. Ditchfield's (2020) work on the "rehearsal stage" explores the pre-post realm of digital messaging platforms as a space of in-between public and private where users can construct their presentation of self before publicising it to an audience. Drawing on Ditchfield's theorisation, and using empirical data from a virtual ethnographyand qualitative semi-structured interviews conducted with 11 transgender men, I conceptualise private Facebook groups for transgender men as a type of rehearsal stage, and explore the ways this space has been utilized as a tool for trans men to mould, draft and rehearse (trans)masculinity prior to adopting a male role full-time.

ARTICLE HISTORY
Received 4 November 2022
Accepted 7 February 2024

KEYWORDS
Transgender; masculinity; passing; bodywork; social media; Facebook; Rehearsal Stage

Introduction

Masculinity has been defined as precarious, a status 'hard won, easily lost' (Vandello & Bosson, 2013, p. 101). The precarity of masculinity presents particularly unique challenges for transgender men who, under a taken-for-granted, essentialist view of gender, are considered 'not really men' due to a perceived misalignment between their gender identity and sex assigned at birth (Namaste, 2000; Nash, 2011). Navigating a world of masculinity derived from biological understandings of what it means to be a 'real man', there is arguably an expectation for transgender men to invest a higher degree of emotional- and bodywork into their gender performance for their masculinity status to be taken seriously and to safeguard from the consequences of its loss (D. Schrock & Schwalbe, 2009).

The last few decades have seen a significant rise in academic, political, and public discourse regarding transgender identities, with transgender youth being particularly salient within this conversation (see Choukas-Bradley et al., 2020; Gill-Peterson, 2018; Grossman & D'augelli, 2006). Sociological literature has heavily explored young transgender men's relationship with masculinity performance and bodywork (see Halberstam, 1998; Prosser, 1998; H. Rubin, 2003; Snorton, 2009; Stone, 1991). Alongside the growth in digital media studies, a rich body of literature on the role of SNS for young transgender men in information gathering, identity realization, and community building has also emerged (A. A. Ahmed, 2018; Dame, 2016; Gray, 2009; Haimson, 2018; Renninger, 2014). However, a gap lies at the intersection between the two, in the conceptualization of digital

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media as a space for young transgender men to practice, perfect and rehearse aspects of the emotional and bodywork required for adopting a male role full-time. Building on existent digital concepts in the field of sociological studies, such as Ditchfield's (2020) 'rehearsal stage' and Bullingham and Vasconcelos (2013) 'identity tourism', and drawing on empirical qualitative research, this paper explores the function private Facebook groups have for young transgender men preparing their masculinity performance in its youth, from prior to coming out to working up to the full-time embodiment of a male social role.

Transgender men, masculinity navigation and social media

Gender studies have come to problematize traditional conceptualizations of gender as essential and biologically determined, with key thinkers in feminist and queer theory arguing that we ascribe meaning to gender through social and cultural learning, deciphering what it means to embody gender 'correctly' through interactions with the social world (Butler, 1990; De Beauvoir, 1949; Kessler & McKenna, 1985; Tannen, 1994; West & Zimmerman, 1987). Butler (1990) argues, however, that repetition in the social and discursive production of gender creates the illusion of a natural gendered essence tied to the physical body meaning, despite a social constructionist model of gender being widely accepted within contemporary social research, essentialist rhetoric of gender as naturally derived from sex continues to hold dominance in everyday contexts. The consequent attachment of gendered characteristics, behaviours and expectations to binary 'sexed' bodies presents particular barriers and challenges for transgender individuals, whose very existence complicate these associations.

Pronounced 'male' at birth due to perceived concordance between their sex and gender, cisgender men are moulded by norms and expectations of masculinity from early childhood (Goodwin, 1980; Tannen, 1994). The culture of masculinity into which they are socialized operates hierarchically, where the masculinity performance of men and boys is used to judge the integrity of their manhood and determine their status of belonging within masculinity spheres (Parrott, 2009; Pascoe, 2005; D. Schrock & Schwalbe, 2009). To fall short of the highest ranking, or 'hegemonic' (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005), version of masculinity is to risk emasculation and consequently lose the social capital required to warrant belonging and participation within masculine social settings (Gilmore, 1990; Wellard, 2002). Due to this hierarchical system, Vandello and Bosson (2013) describe masculinity as precarious, identifying a high degree of anxiety and insecurity attached to this social identity, and acknowledge the subsequent investment in *self-masculinization labour* needed to corroborate and preserve masculinity status (Eisler & Skidmore, 1987; Pleck et al., 1994). Strategies of self-masculinization have been identified in twofold: hyper-masculinity and femininity aversion (Bem, 1974; Blazina, 1997; Norton, 1997). In expressing disapproval and hostility towards behaviours that transgress normative gendered expectations, such as through homophobia towards queer men (Clarkson, 2006; Kimmel, 1997; Parrott, 2009; Pascoe, 2005), the adoption of an anti-femininity mandate sees men defining the parameters of expected masculinity and situating failed masculinity outside these bounds. Emphasizing alignment with hegemonic masculinity through hypermasculinisation, such as emphasizing strength and dominance encapsulated in the worked-out male body (Dyer, 1997; Hakim, 2018), men work to reassert their insider status comparative to these 'masculinity failures'. Paramount masculinity is a decidedly exclusive social identity that men are required to negotiate among one another to claim attachment to and successfully participate within cultures of manhood (Wellard, 2002), creating considerable pressure and expectation surrounding the masculinization of self.

With a body (D. Schrock & Schwalbe, 2009, p. 284) and socialization (S. Ahmed, 1999) considered contradictory to dominant discourse on maleness and manhood, transgender men have a unique experience with masculine embodiment (Halberstam, 1998; Namaste, 2000; Nash, 2011) that subject them to higher demands over, not only self-masculinization, but social and physical de-feminization (Butler, 2004; Catalano, 2015; Pugh, 2017; West & Zimmerman, 1987). Research has shown men with subordinate or marginalized masculinities to 'modify' (D. Schrock & Schwalbe, 2009, p. 284) their

performance of manhood to remedy areas of masculinity deficit and access homosocial spaces (Eguchi, 2009, Ravenhill & de Visser, 2018; Sonnekus, 2013; Wellard, 2002). Similarly, expectation lies with transgender men to deploy masculinity aids – such as hypermasculine social behaviours and physical modifications such as chest-binders, hormone therapies and masculinizing surgeries – to compensate for feminine traits that may jeopardize their display of manhood (Halberstam, 1998; B. A. Rogers, 2019; Saeidzadeh, 2019). Scholars have identified such labour as '*passing*' (Prosser, 1998; D. P. Schrock et al., 2009), a phenomenon defined by Garfinkel as 'the work of achieving and making secure one's right to live in the elected sex status, while providing for the possibility of detection and ruin' (Garfinkel, 1967, p. 118). Stone adds to this, suggesting 'passing' denotes 'success' in being accepted as a 'natural member' of one's gender identity (1990:231). Terminology within these definitions, such as 'detection', 'ruin' and 'success', imply a degree of risk whereby passing is done 'wrong' (S. Ahmed, 1999). The perceived social and physical 'discordance' transgender men possess means their performances of masculinity have the potential to be exposed as 'fraudulent' (Sharpe, 2018), leaving transgender individuals vulnerable to distal – external stigmatization and discrimination, for example, physical or sexual assault (Choukas-Bradley et al., 2020) – and proximal – manifestations of external perceptions as internalized stigma resulting in consequent psychological distress and low self-esteem (Abelson, 2016; McNeil et al., 2017) – minority stress (Meyer, 1995). Self-masculinization labour for transgender men can therefore be identified as efforts to conceal one's stigmatized identity (Bockting et al., 2013) and convincingly (Garfinkel, 1967, p. 60) assume one's gender identity to protect oneself from physical and psychological harm (Nicolazzo, 2016; Snorton, 2009).

Considering the physical and bodily challenges transgender men may face in actualizing their authentic selves, research has shown digital environments to be advantageous due to its severance from the constraints of the earthly body (Marwick, 2013, p. 356). In digital space, the capacity to construct distinct yet simultaneous versions of the self (Bullingham & Vasconcelos, 2013; Hogan, 2010), that can be strategically privatized and severed from one another (Marwick & Boyd, 2014; Raynes-Goldie, 2010), equips those with an identity in transition with great agency and fluidity to explore these internalized aspects of themselves (Turkle, 1995). Transgender youth have been shown to take particular advantage of these features of digital technologies, particularly during the period of initial identity exploration (Dame, 2016; Fink & Miller, 2014; Gray, 2009). Youthfulness, both in terms of age and identity actualization, is often associated, in a queer context, with isolation (Beam, 2008) and thus SNS have proven to be a pertinent tool for transcending one's physical reality to privately connect with likeminded others, gather information and resources, and externalize previously suppressed elements of one's identity (Haimson, 2018; McConnell et al., 2015; Selkie et al., 2020).

Attempting to conceptualize this stage of transition work is complex, described by Semaan et al. as a period of 'liminality' (Semaan et al., 2016, p. 2883) in which one's sense of self is intangible and in flux. Goffman (1959) draws distinction between different versions of the self using the metaphor of 'stages', contrasting public 'front stage' interactions from personal and private 'backstage' ones. Ditchfield (2020), developing these Goffmanian notions within a contemporary digital context, offers a way to conceive of this almost intangible state of 'in-betweenness' through her work on the 'rehearsal stage' where, in reference to pre-post realm of digital messaging tools, she describes a space in between the front and backstage in which users 'draft, prepare and practise their performances before sharing them with their audience' (2020:930). This pre-post realm Ditchfield describes bears resemblance to the way in which digital space has been utilized to 'draft', 'prepare' and 'practice' gender among transgender youth. Whilst not in these terms, the conceptualization of digital 'transition spaces' for transgender youth has been heavily researched across sites disconnected from 'real name' associations, such as Tumblr, Twitter (X) and Reddit, due to the perception of a greater capacity for identity separation and fluidity in such spaces (Cho, 2018; Dame, 2016; Haimson, 2018; Renninger, 2014). Comparatively, platforms such as Facebook, whose policies enforce a 'real name self' and thereby seemingly impose identity singularity on its users (Buhr,

2014; Lingel & Gillespie, 2014; MacAulay & Moldes, 2016), have been rendered 'trans (in)competent' (A. A. Ahmed, 2018). With this, the present study aims to broaden Ditchfield's concept of the 'rehearsal stage' through an exploration of private Facebook groups created for and by transgender men, considering this environment as a safe space between public and private in which (trans) masculinity can be prepared and rehearsed before being publicized into a main performance. In unpacking this subversive practice of transmasculine Facebook users, the present research further considers the ways in which expectations of this site have been altered to accommodate transgender users, to highlight the heterogeneity of social networking sites and reimagine Facebook as a site of trans competence.

Method

This paper draws on original mixed-methods research exploring the role Facebook plays in masculine identity rehearsal amongst young transgender men. Ethical approval was granted for this research by the University of Sheffield's Ethics Committee (Approval No. 036689). Data collection was initiated by a preliminary social media observation, or netnography (Lofland & Lofland, 1971; R. Rogers, 2013), of several closed Facebook groups created for transgender men to gain insight into the environment of study, observing behaviour and dialogue unfolding naturally to identify general patterns in how users engaged with this space (Ruiz, 2009). Sites were selected through purposive sampling (Black, 2011), which located eight Facebook groups targeted towards transmasculine individuals. Whilst I aimed to factor diversity into my sample in terms of the target user-base of the groups (e.g. 'FTM Fitness' aimed at transgender men with an interest in health and fitness versus 'FTM Brotherhood' designed as a more generic support page), each forum shared the mutual factor of serving transmasculine Facebook users and were all groups I personally belonged to. Despite my unique opportunity to be a complete-observer and have full interaction with participants due to my existing ties to the group (Gold, 1997), I opted for no interaction, instead adopting a covert-observer role, maintaining passive oversight of activity and offering a non-reactive data source, strengthening ecological validity and minimizing research effect (Boellstorff et al., 2012; Snee et al., 2016). Guided by the literature, as well as insider knowledge from being an active member of these groups, I formulated a list of key search-terms used to navigate the research site and focus my observation (see Table 1). I recorded findings by generating qualitative field notes on activity that reflected these themes (Angrosino, 2007). Informed consent was obtained from forum admins before any observations were conducted and any identifiable data, such as names, images or locations, were omitted from the field notes (British Sociological Association, 2017; Markham & Buchanan, 2012).

The social media observation informed subsequent semi-structured interviews, conducted with transgender men who belonged to these Facebook groups, with the intent of attributing context and personal meaning to behaviour observed (Barbour, 2001; Spradley, 1979; Weiss, 1995). Calls for interviews were advertised within the Facebook groups and invited eligible members – which included participants being over 18 and a member of one of the selected Facebook groups, thus identifying as FTM transgender – to contact me. The openness of the criteria, as well as the geographically-expansive nature of the platform, aimed to attract a diverse participant pool so as not to homogenize transmasculine experiences. The interview call generated a pool of 11 participants ranging from 18–25-years-old, spanning

Table 1. Social media ethnography search terms.

THEME	RELEVANT SEARCH TERMS
Community Support	"Support", "Help", "Advice", "Guidance" "Friends", "Chat"
Securing Masculinity	"Masculin(ity)", "Do I pass?", "passing tips", "how to pass", "feedback", "outfit check", "dysphoria"
Materialising Identity	"Coming out", "outing", "outed", "forced coming out", "stealth", "misgender(ing)"
Emotional self-expression	"Vent", "rant", "angry", "frustrated", "(trans)joy", "euphoria", "celebrate"

several geographical locations including the UK, Ireland, Portugal and the US. Pertaining to the participant pool, the term 'youth' has been acquired in relation to both age and stage of transition, due to an aim to study the period of initial identity exploration and the early stages of identity actualization. Although age and transition stage are not mutually exclusive categories, a focus has been given to 18–25-year-olds due to the active digital presence of this demographic.

Participants were presented with information and consent forms detailing the nature of their involvement in the research and their respective rights. In anticipation of potentially sensitive or distressing interview topics, participants were further signposted to external services specialized in transgender mental wellbeing in an effort to manage and mitigate potential psychological harm (British Sociological Association, 2017). My status as a trusted insider played to my advantage when gathering my sample by mitigating research fatigue that may come with cisgender researchers accessing transgender participants, rather offering a researcher who could be trusted to empathize with and accurately represent the transgender community, nurturing a willingness towards involvement (Clark, 2008; Ross, 2014).

I endorsed a participatory, feminist approach to the interview process which aimed to democratize the interview structure and empower the voices of the research subjects, using my questions and personal experiences as prompts to elicit disclosure from interviewees rather than attempting to dominate or steer discussion (Cook & Fonow, 1986; Grossi, 1981). With the transgender community relatively underrepresented in academic research, such an approach is particularly important for equipping this demographic with the agency to narrate their own stories (Ross, 2014). However, with the exception of Zack, who was Mexican, the voices and perspectives of transgender men of colour were underrepresented within this research. During my recruitment process, I sampled one black transgender man, 23-year-old Ryan from the US. However, Ryan withdrew from the research prior to his interview. Ryan's withdrawal gives insight into a racialized disparity in visibility among the trans and queer community. The intersectionality of blackness, queerness and masculinity has been shown to complicate 'outness' for black transgender men (Abelson, 2016; B. A. Rogers, 2019). The transition to a masculine identity for black transgender men does not equate to the acquisition of privilege in the same way as with white transgender men, with racist stereotypes attached to black masculinity often resulting in greater scrutiny and surveillance and harsher social punishment (Abelson, 2014; Bordo, 2000). Strategies of concealment and assimilation are thus pertinent for lowering the perception of difference and defending one's stigmatized identity (H. Rubin, 2003). Ryan's withdrawal could thus be inferred as a response to the feelings of unsafety that come with black transgender men being visible and have here consequently led to what Plummer refers to as the 'hidden stories' (1990:115) of the queer community remaining untold (Cho, 2018). Research strategy that supports and facilitates participants sharing their experiences where this is often inhabited must thus be endorsed further in future research.

Each interview was recorded and transcribed (and participants were assigned randomized pseudonyms), with ethnographic findings textually presented alongside, and a thematic content analysis was conducted (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Brinkmann & Kvale, 2018). The following themes were identified consistently across the interview data: 'Information Gathering', 'Establishing Community', 'Rehearsing Masculinity & Passing' and 'Gatekeeping Identity & Toxic Masculinity' and were used to manually code the transcripts and compare participant experiences (Mishler, 1986). An interpretive analysis was applied to uncover the primary functions Facebook provided for transmasculine identity rehearsal as detailed by the research participants (Ruiz, 2009). The following section presents a discussion of the key findings.

Findings & discussion

Rehearsing masculinity

Lacking socialization aligned with their gender identity, transgender men face additional challenges in their performance of masculinity (Halberstam, 1998). Like with a performance, participants discussed a need to rehearse their masculinity before and alongside its everyday materialization to secure 'convincing' performances of masculinity (Garfinkel, 1967, p. 60). For many, the Facebook groups provided an ideal platform to 'fill in' social learning gaps where organic socialization had lacked. The findings expand Ditchfield's discussion of the 'rehearsal stage' (Ditchfield, 2020), broadening its definition and identifying different 'phases' within the rehearsal stage that are engaged to explore and embody masculinity by transgender men. I break the rehearsal stage into three phases: (1) revising the 'scripts' of masculinity through observation, (2) textually workshopping masculinity and (3) dress rehearsal, combining script revision and workshopping into bodywork.

Participants reflected on the role of observation during the early stages of their transition involving noticing and internalizing social behaviours associated with masculinity, a practice I have analogized as 'script revision'.

> I would watch out for things online, like how other men pose in pictures and the way they sit, or what men say and how they interact, like calling each other 'mate' and 'bud' and 'pal' instead of, you know, more feminine … I would watch and learn what it meant to be a guy. (Charlie, 21, UK)

Charlie describes his role as a covert-observer in digital space, discerning and clarifying the 'social scripts' of masculinity, which Semaan et al. (2016) suggest is a practice in building identity awareness. The newness of Charlie's identity transition brought an element of hesitation with immediately interacting in society as male, and so this observational work played a crucial preparatory step in allowing him to understand and construct his identity in relation to social norms of masculinity (Plummer, 1995; West & Zimmerman, 1987). Hugo nodded to the way YouTube served a similar function: 'I would watch videos on "How to Pass" that would tell you how to stand and hold yourself, what to wear and how to make your voice deeper'. Whilst socialization has often rendered such social mores taken-for-granted for cis-men, there was a notable need for transgender men to spend time revising these performative elements to equip them with greater 'gendered knowledge' (Gray, 2009, p. 1165) to aid with assuming a male role.

Utilizing knowledge and insight gained from observational work, participants discussed a phase of masculinity rehearsal that I describe as 'textual workshopping', engaging with digital affordances to begin to actualize their authentic selves within a safe environment. This phase parallels existing research on transgender youth indulging digital affordances of anonymity, separation and multiplicity to explore gender identity, however evidences this within the context of Facebook, a platform often overlooked from being able to offer such 'trans competent' features (A. A. Ahmed, 2018; Haimson, 2018). Within the boundaries of the Facebook groups, participants like Elliot were able to begin 'workshopping' their male identities:

> I would go onto the groups and- I don't wanna say make up personas, cus it was always me, but I would try out different names and pronouns to see what felt right. I'd just present myself differently than I could in person. (Elliot, 18, USA)

Where offline he considered his bodily appearance a barrier to his gender presentation and an element that risked undermining his masculinity, online Elliot was able to transcend these physical barriers to project a male version of himself through text. Offline participants' felt their gender presentation was heavily scrutinized, whereas online, individuals could 'choose any profile picture and any name – no questions asked' (Tyler, 24, US), indicating a heightened level of agency. This use of social media to construct an identity that transcends one's earthly body is reminiscent of other theories within digital scholarship, such as Turkle's 'gender switching' (Turkle, 1995, p. 219) and Bullingham and Vasconcelos' 'identity tourism' (Bullingham & Vasconcelos, 2013, p. 103). However, in

the context of gender transition, as captured in Elliot's reluctance to use the label 'persona', such practices go beyond merely frivolous and playful experimentation and rather mark a formative phase in the process of identity actualization, gender role rehearsal, and securing alignment with the self (Bargh et al., 2002).

The final phase of rehearsal can be analogized as a dress rehearsal, combining elements of script revision and workshopping, and culminating in rendition of male bodywork. This was enacted through the taking and sharing of selfies, a tool used by participants to sculpt and craft one's physical masculinity. Jamie, for example, would 'dress in more masculine clothes, tuck [his] long hair under a hat and then take pictures' that 'showed [his] jawline' but 'hid [his] chest' (Jamie, 21, UK). As the subject of the image, participants were able to physicalise a male performance through masculine bodywork, posing in a manner that accentuated masculine features and diminished their femininity. As the photographer, participants could then review the image to discern how this embodiment felt, altering the subject until they were satisfied with the result. This act of self-shooting, reviewing and repeating shows participants drawing an alignment between body and self through visualization (Andal, 2019; Barker & Rodriguez, 2019; Vivienne, 2017) and was seemingly a preliminary measure for translating rehearsal into act, akin to perfecting and fine-tuning a performance during its dress rehearsal.

This individual act of bodywork rehearsal was later made collaborative through users sharing selfies to the Facebook groups and inviting others to comment on the success of their self-masculinization by asking the question: 'do I pass?'. Whilst many participants noted that commenters were mostly polite and encouraging in their responses, Aiden stated that he preferred it when comments were 'brutally honest' so that he knew where he was 'going wrong' and could correct it (Aiden, 25, USA). The desire to 'correct' one's masculinity performance illuminates the rigid and exclusive confines of masculinity as well as the anxiety and concern transgender men are faced with over doing masculinity 'right', particularly during the early stages of transition (S. Ahmed, 1999; Kessler & McKenna, 1985; Meyer, 1995). Navigating society under a newly acquired identity requires a level of emotional labour and preparedness and thus the Facebook groups, as a space populated by others able to relate to this, provide a safe space for transgender men to 'work up' the emotion (Hochschild, 1979; D. P. Schrock et al., 2009) and bolster the confidence required for assuming a male role full-time (Konradi, 1996; Snorton, 2009).

The present study reveals the importance of Facebook groups as a space for aiding participants to draft, practise and refine their masculinity (Ditchfield, 2020), offering a 'rehearsal stage' for transgender men as they prepare for the full-time embodiment of a male social role. Existing scholarship has questioned Facebook's capacity to facilitate identity multiplicity, and thus gender exploration and experimentation among the transgender community, due to the boundness to a 'real name' self (A. A. Ahmed, 2018; MacAulay & Moldes, 2016). However, in engaging the group feature of the site, transgender men have subverted the expectation of identity singularity associated with Facebook and succeeded in creating a queer safe space, 'protected from the gaze of outsiders' (Hartal, 2018, p. 1066) where the pre-public stage of their identity transition can be freely and comfortably explored.

Questioning the safe-space: gatekeeping masculinity

Although the Facebook groups were recognized as facilitating space to develop and trial masculinity, the groups simultaneously worked to reproduce normative hierarchies. As a result, behaviours seen to contradict normative hegemonic masculinity standards consequently became subject to policing from some group members, bringing the 'safety' of these spaces into question.

Some participants noted being critiqued for acting and appearing 'too feminine', which made some users feel obliged to repress aspects of their self-expression associated with femininity (Bem, 1974; Blazina, 1997; Kimmel, 1997; Norton, 1997). Elliot, for example, stopped painting his nails due to comments in the Facebook groups that confronted

whether he was 'really trans' for participating in typically 'female behaviour'. Jamie captured the repercussion of this masculinity policing during the early stages of his transition: 'When you're not passing all the time, you don't want to do anything that could be seen as remotely feminine … you're like a creature without armour … so stereotypical masculinity becomes your defence'. The groups appeared to steer some members towards ascertaining a 'correct' version of masculinity in order to 'qualify' as authentically male and protect themselves from the harm of having their identity delegitimised (D. Schrock & Schwalbe, 2009; Vandello & Bosson, 2013). Others were made to feel entirely unwelcome within the groups when they failed to conform. Zack explained he did not experience dysphoria related to his chest and thus did not wish to pursue top-surgery (a chest-masculinizing procedure) as part of his transition, a choice that was often used to discredit his male identity: 'I have come across groups where discussion has suggested that you have to achieve a certain physical standard to be trans. I feel unwelcome in those spaces so leave immediately and try to avoid them' (Zack, 20, USA). Whilst, for many, the Facebook groups established a trans safe space created for those who subvert cis-normative notions of gender, sex and bodies and to accommodate a vulnerable and liminal stage of identity transition, such findings suggest these spaces cannot be considered immune to rigid essentialist expectations of masculinity. Whilst on the one hand participants revealed the benefits the Facebook groups offered as an environment where transmasculine individuals could integrate themselves into a community, relish in the company of like-minded others, and embark on a journey of discovering and scripting their own masculinity, on the other hand, the groups at times became a microcosm of cis-normative society in which hierarchies of masculinity were reproduced at the expense of some of its members (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005). These spaces, therefore, must be viewed under a lens that acknowledges a privileging versus marginalization of different displays of masculinity and so to define these groups as safe spaces or utopias of trans-masculinity rehearsal without critique would be misguided (Boulila, 2015; Nash, 2011; Stengel & Weems, 2010).

Conclusion

As transgender men navigate the liminality of identity transition and gender re-embodiment, there is a demand for a space in which masculinity can be trialled before being assumed as a full-time social role. The present study reimagines Ditchfield's concept of the 'rehearsal stage' through exploring Facebook groups created for transgender men as a liminal space between public and private. Akin to Ditchfield's description, these spaces were demonstrated as safe environments in which identity could be 'drafted, prepared and practised' (Ditchfield, 2020, p. 930) before being adopted as a full-time public role, revealing them to be 'rehearsal spaces'. Pushing the concept of rehearsal further, the present research divides the rehearsal stage into 'phases' to understand the different practices and behaviours participants undertake as they refine their masculinity performance and work up the required emotional and psychological preparedness to incorporate themselves into society under this new social role (Hochschild, 1979; Semaan et al., 2016). It is made apparent that a significant element of rehearsal work for transgender men is collaborative, with participants evidently drawing upon the advice and support of others as they craft a 'frontstage-ready' version of themselves, pointing to the importance of community in this version of the 'rehearsal stage'. Whilst Facebook, in a scholarly context, has frequently been disregarded as being a 'trans competent' site, particularly when compared to platforms such as Tumblr, Twitter (X) and Reddit that are more well-known for accommodating identity multiplicity (A. A. Ahmed, 2018; Cho, 2018; Dame, 2016; Haimson, 2018; Renninger, 2014), transgender men have evidently subverted these expectations, curating a private, community-filled space for (trans)masculinity rehearsal and demonstrating Facebook as a site with trans competent design (A. A. Ahmed, 2018).

Considering the context offered by existing masculinity scholarship, highlighting its precarity and exclusivity (D. Schrock & Schwalbe, 2009; Vandello & Bosson, 2013; Wellard, 2002), as well as scholarship identifying the social and psychological risk associated with transgender identities (Bockting et al., 2013; McNeil et al., 2017; Snorton, 2009), the thorough level of preparation identified by the present research is unsurprising. However, it is also within this context that we can situate the power imbalances emergent in these spaces and where this transition to a masculine identity has been accompanied by structures of hierarchy that favour and punish different versions of masculinity. These delegated trans 'safe spaces' can thus not be conceived of as free from the pressures and constraints of cis-normative, hegemonic ideals. Although, some participants suggested that, as they matured in their identity and acquired a more coherent sense of self, they developed greater resilience to these pressures and felt more able to reject standards of masculinity that did not align with their own. So, whilst in the 'youth' of their transition, many felt susceptible to rigid and exclusive hegemonic expectations, this lessened over time, which raises interesting directions for future research with transgender men further along in their transition in a 'post-youth' stage.

List of abbreviations

FTM Female-To-Male Transgender
SNS Social Networking Sites

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

Notes on contributor

Robin Todd West is a student in the Department of Sociological Studies at The University of Sheffield. His research interests include trans masculinities and digital technologies. This is his first publication.

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