"Oh! Based on Voice, Assigned Female at Birth": Transmasculine Voices and Gender Construction

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Abstract

The physical voice is one of the most noticeable gender signifiers utilized in everyday social interaction. For trans people, their voice can be a medium through which to affirm and assert their gender, or a source of dysphoria which regularly 'betrays' their identity to others. Because of the effects of masculinizing hormone replacement therapy (HRT), transmasculine people tend to have an easier time changing their voices to their desired pitch than transfeminine people. However, even when on testosterone, transmasculine people may feel pressure from both inside and outside their own communities to sound a certain way due to transnormative narratives that gain traction in mainstream media and online transmasculine spaces like Tumblr and YouTube. Transmasculine people who are nonbinary face further challenges asserting their identity through their voice due to having to frequently operate within the gender binary when it comes to gender membership. Through qualitative semi-structured interviews, I explore how two transmasculine participants view the relationships between their voice, gender identity, and the social world. I identify that trans people face pressures to sound a certain way from both cis- and transnormative lenses. I find that nonbinary transmasculine people particularly struggle with these pressures as having too high of a voice results in constant misgendering, and fears around both safety and keeping community arise with the threat of the "T-voice."

Keywords: Transgender, transmasculine, nonbinary, voice, transnormativity, gender

Résumé

La voix physique est l'un des signifiants de genre les plus visibles utilisés dans les interactions sociales quotidiennes. Pour les personnes transgenres, la voix peut être un moyen d'affirmer et de revendiquer leur genre, ou une source de dysphorie qui "trahit" régulièrement leur identité aux yeux des autres. En raison des effets du traitement hormonal substitutif masculinisant (THS), les personnes transmasculines ont tendance à avoir plus de facilité à modifier leur voix pour atteindre la hauteur souhaitée que les personnes transféminines. Cependant, même sous testostérone, les personnes transmasculines peuvent ressentir une pression, tant à l'intérieur qu'à l'extérieur de leur propre communauté, pour s'exprimer d'une certaine manière, en raison des récits transnormatifs qui gagnent du terrain dans les médias grand public et les espaces transmasculins en ligne tels que Tumblr et YouTube. Les personnes transmasculines non binaires sont confrontées à d'autres difficultés pour affirmer leur identité à travers leur voix, car elles doivent souvent opérer dans le cadre du binaire de genre lorsqu'il s'agit de l'appartenance à un genre. Grâce à des entretiens qualitatifs semi-structurés, j'explore la manière dont deux participants transmasculins perçoivent les relations entre leur voix, leur identité de genre et le monde social. Je constate que les personnes transgenres subissent des pressions pour s'exprimer d'une certaine manière, tant de la part des cis que des transnormatifs. Je constate que les personnes transmasculines non binaires sont particulièrement confrontées à ces pressions, car le fait d'avoir une voix trop aiguë entraîne des erreurs de genre constantes, et la menace de la "voix T" suscite des craintes quant à la sécurité et au maintien de la communauté.

Mots-clés : Transgenre, transmasculin, nonbinaire, voix, transnormativité, genre

1.0 Introduction

A person's voice is a deeply intimate, embodied aspect of how they express their identity and connect with others as part of the social world. Researchers have underscored how speakers and listeners use vocal cues to construct and challenge ideas about masculinity, femininity, and sexuality (Gaudio, 1994; Meyerhoff & Ehrlich, 2019; Munson et al., 2006; Woolley, 2016). Listeners commonly assign an assumed binary gender to a speaker through the sound of their voice: for example, deciding what honorific to use with a stranger on a phone call through vocal cues alone. Although the sound of one's voice is typically significant for transgender (trans) people, little social science research has focused on the relationship between voice and trans identities (Hazenburg, 2016). Meanwhile, linguistic studies have widely considered gender as a binary social category (Hazenburg, 2016). Trans people tend to be more aware of at-times subtle gender signifiers than cis people, with voice being a great source of either dysphoria or euphoria for many trans people. The pitch of one's voice has the potential to either affirm or 'betray' their gender, as deep voices are attributed to masculinity and high voices are assigned femininity.

Because vocal communication is an important form of everyday interaction, a trans person's voice has the potential to instill social anxiety or confidence. Transmasculine and transfeminine people have differing relationships with their voices, with transmasculine people finding it at least somewhat easier to change theirs via the use of masculinizing hormone replacement therapy (HRT), testosterone (Hodges-Simeon et al., 2021). This is contrasted with transfeminine people needing to go through voice training or surgery as feminizing HRT does not affect the vocal cords (Cavalot & Cossu, 2015). The voice's importance is further emphasized by conversations among trans people in trans spaces, with frustrations such as "people think I am a [man/woman/an unidentifiable gender] until I speak" being commonplace.

Within the limited literature focusing on trans voices, transfeminine physical voices tend to be foregrounded within academic discussions. This disparity has prompted me, a trans man (first author), to look towards my own community. In this paper, I investigate how transmasculine people perceive the relationship between their physical voices and their gender identity within the social world. Additionally, I pursue the sub-questions of how transmasculine people perceive the pressures from both inside and outside the transmasculine community to change their voice.

2.0 Literature Review

2.1 Social Constructionist Theory of Gender

This research employs a social constructionist theory of gender, where gender is not a fixed, natural, or biological trait, but a construction that is actively maintained and performed in everyday life (Butler, 1999; West & Zimmerman, 1987). Individuals "do" gender through interactions with the self and others: social actors use a variety of gendered signifiers, such as behaviours and physical traits, to express and reflect gender, while legitimizing or policing the gender performances of others (Schilt & Westbrook, 2009; West & Zimmerman, 1987). As Butler (1999) writes, "the action of gender requires a performance that is *repeated*. This repetition is at once a reenactment and reexperiencing of a set of meaning already socially established; and it is the mundane and ritualized form of their legitimation" (pp. 178). The criteria for successfully performing gender varies across historical and cultural arenas: though the gendered landscape is changing due to trans activism and visibility, the West inherently links 'correct' gender performance to female/male genitalia and heterosexuality, a conception also known as the cisheteronormative (Schilt & Westbrook, 2009; Westbrook & Schilt, 2014; Butler 1999). Ironically, in everyday interactions, gender is rarely attributed to someone because of genitalia, but rather by the assumption of a certain set of genitalia spurred by culturally agreed-upon

visual cues and behaviours (West & Zimmerman, 1987; Westbrook & Schilt, 2014). As a result, trans people frequently bump up against biology-based criteria of doing gender, especially if they do not 'pass' as cis (Westbrook & Schilt, 2014). This biology-based criteria heavily influences gender perception and attribution in cisheteronormative arenas, where trans people have to negotiate their gender expression to both elicit correct or close-enough gender attribution from others, while keeping true to their personal tastes and desires (Schilt & Westbrook, 2009; Westbrook & Schilt, 2014; Azul, 2016).

2.2 Transmasculine Voices

While linguists emphasize the importance of expressing masculinity through voice quality and phonetic cues, limited research exists on the voices of transmasculine individuals. There is even less literature available on nonbinary transmasculine people: those who (usually) were assigned female at birth (AFAB), but do not identify as either a man or a woman (the binary genders). Instead, nonbinary transmasculine identities can include genders such as agender, nonbinary, genderfluid, genderqueer, demiboy, and various others (LGBTQ Nation, 2022). Within the limited existing literature, researchers have underscored the strong connection between the perceived masculinity of binary trans men's physical voices and their satisfaction with themselves and their identity. In a quantitative study which utilized both self-reporting of perceived vocal masculinity and a set of "raters" who blindly judged the vocal masculinity of various trans men, trans men whose voices were perceived as masculine by both themselves and others reported higher self-esteem, life satisfaction, and quality of life, while also reporting lower levels of anxiety and depression (Watt et al., 2018). Another study tracking voice self-perception over the course of hormone replacement therapy (HRT) treatments found that trans men's scores in the categories "anxiety and avoidance" and "gender identity" improved over

the course of taking testosterone, which commonly masculinizes the voice during treatment (Bultynck et al., 2017). Neither study addresses whether additional conscious effort by the participants was put into changing inflections or ways of speaking to masculinize their voices. Given the limited focus of these studies on binary transmasculine men, it is unclear whether these findings are applicable to nonbinary transmasculine people on testosterone.

Recent literature on gender and voice has begun to examine trans people outside of the binary. Zimman (2017) focused on the variability of sibilant consonants (sounds largely associated with the perceived gender of a voice) across various transmasculine participants. Zimman hints that different combinations of gender identity, expression, and sexual orientation influence how a transmasculine individual uses their voice and that the development of voice is an intersectional process rather than biologically determined. For example, the participants who identified as straight men and who were white, middle-age, and working- or middle-class all fell within the norm of typical American-English masculine voices, where genderqueer participants who actively distanced themselves from hegemonic masculinity had a significantly higher center of gravity to their voices.

For many trans people, the voice is a gatekeeper to correct gender membership. Transmasculine people's satisfaction with their voices is largely based on whether others correctly attribute their gender, or whether this attribution is 'close enough' (Azul, 2016). This satisfaction depends on the person's gender identity, which may or may not match the gender assigned by others. Azul (2016) asserts that voice literature must account for the variety of transmasculine identities, how they formulate their desired voice, and how they interact with their current voice. Following Azul's (2016) constructionist perspective, a person's gender membership is dependent on two concepts: gender presentation and gender attribution. Gender presentation is concerned with how the person self-represents

their gender, such as through clothing, physical features, and behaviours, while gender attribution refers to the gender assigned to a person by other people using pre-conceived ideas of what certain genders look or sound like (Azul, 2016). Specifically in terms of voice, Azul (2016) argues that both speaker and listener contribute to the construction of vocal gender. With this process of gender construction, trans people who 'fail' to attain conventional norms for gender presentation both physically and vocally are denied gender membership by others.

While testosterone can help many transmasculine individuals with finding a sense of satisfaction in their voices, some transmasculine people encounter gender-related issues with their voices even if they are on testosterone. For example, some trans people using testosterone may desire a lower-pitched voice. In addition, trans people during an early period of vocal changes associated with the first year of testosterone usage may be less satisfied with how their voice and gender are perceived (Azul et al., 2018). Relationships to voice may be more complicated in the wider transmasculine community than identified with exclusively binary trans men, especially for transmasculine people who wish to be perceived as other than male in a binarized society.

Correct (or close enough) gender attribution can also be a matter of safety. Trans populations face disproportionally higher rates of physical, verbal, institutional, and sexual violence than cis people, both from individuals and the state (Stotzer, 2009; Wirtz et al., 2020; Lombardi et al., 2002; Johns et al., 2019).In the United States, trans people experienced 86.2 victimizations per 1000 persons compared to the cis population, which experienced 21.7 per 1000 persons (Flores et al., 2021). Trans people also experience high rates of explicitly gender-based violence, with perpetrators of violence towards trans individuals often targeting gender nonconformity, perceived sexuality, and gender expression or identity (Wirtz et al., 2020). Being identifiable as trans or gender-

nonconforming in some way can expose a trans person to gender-based violence.

2.3 Transnormativity and Transmedicalism

Transnormative and transmedicalist narratives have been salient in shaping cultural expectations about trans people's voices. As a hegemonic ideology, transnormativity polices the trans experience to the "born in the wrong body" discourse, determining that transition is to go from one binary gender to another via the use of medical means such as HRT and surgery (Johnson, 2016; Bradford & Syed, 2019). Johnson (2016) defines transnormativity as "the specific ideological accountability structure to which transgender people's presentations and experiences of gender are held accountable" (pp. 465-466), where mainstream narratives of gender transition are commonly rooted in medical models of transness. Bradford & Syed (2019) conceptualize transnormativity as an alternative hegemonic narrative that resists the master narrative of cisheteronormativity, but consequently, this alternative narrative positions cis identity to be 'normal' while transness exists as a deviation. Furthermore, in the mid-2010s, transmedicalism— an ideological positionality which dictates that a person is only trans if they suffer from gender dysphoria and have the intent to medically transition—gained a strong foothold on Tumblr, a social media website which has historically housed many queer communities (Jacobsen et al., 2022).

Transmedicalism and transnormativity have been pervasive in online transmasculine spaces, shaping the expectation and desire in these communities to try as hard as possible to present as a typical cis man, including when speaking. The 'T-voice' phenomenon (which I have shortened to eliminate the transantagonistic slur), credited to prominent trans YouTuber Kalvin Garrah, shames transmasculine voices that have lowered due to testosterone but do not sound like a cis man's voice (sick-thing, 2022). This result was supposed to be avoided, as 'looking trans' or 'sounding trans' was looked down upon in transmasculine communities

that were largely transmedicalist. The reason for this rejection of visibly trans physical traits was the notion that one was not trying hard enough to 'successfully' transition (ergo, pass perfectly as a cis man), and was as a result embarrassing the community by not conforming to cisnormative standards of gender presentation. The "T-voice" is not as much of an anxiety anymore, and the YouTuber who popularized it has lost discursive power in the community after a wave of resistance by nonbinary and non-transnormative trans masculine people (Terillion, 2021; Koch, 2021; Kisner, 2019). However, another prong of anxiety around having a "T-voice" was not instilled by transmedicalists, but by transphobic cis people. If one 'sounded trans,' they may be more susceptible to being identified as such. Being 'clocked' (trans jargon referring to this kind of identification) would leave a transmasculine person vulnerable to trans-antagonistic violence.

As exemplified by the example of the "T-voice," the problem with transnormativity is that a large portion of the spectrum of trans experience is made invisible and marginalized in favour of the experiences that do not threaten cisheteronormative concepts of gender as much, sacrificing nonbinary experiences of gender to legitimize binary transness (Johnson, 2016). Some nonbinary and genderqueer participants in Bradford & Syed's (2019) focus groups brought up experiences of intra-community rejection, where they were not congruent enough with transnormative expectations of transition and gender identity to be considered as trans by other trans people. In their critical discourse analysis of transmedicalist and anti-transmedicalist Tumblr posts, Jacobsen et al. (2022) illustrate internal community tensions where the validity of nonbinary and non-normative trans identity was aggressively debated on the grounds of protecting 'real' trans people from those who were perceived to be claiming trans identity as a 'trend. In short, the transmission of transnormative and transmedicalist discourses through traditional media and social media helped to significantly shape constructions of trans identity both online

and offline (Bradford & Syed, 2019; Johnson, 2016; Jones, 2019; Jacobsen et al., 2021).

The existing literature on gender and voice—heavily concentrated in linguistics—largely focuses on participant self-perception and satisfaction with their voice, with nonbinary transmasculine people having a more complex experience with their voice than binary trans men. Additionally, the history of transmedicalism and transnormativity within trans communities suggest that these discourses further complicate transmasculine people's relationships with their physical voices, along with concerns about trans-antagonistic violence. My research contributes rich insights into how trans participants make sense of this complexity through their relationships to their own embodied, gendered voices, and through their interactions with others. This bears relevance to health care and other service providers who wish to better understand how to uphold trans people's well-being. Beyond addressing a gap in scholarly knowledge, this research seeks to document and validate the experiences of nonbinary transmasculine people.

3.0 Methodology

I have defined transmasculine as a term that encompasses identities that fall under the trans umbrella and identify with masculinity in some form. My definition includes binary trans men, nonbinary trans men, and nonbinary people who use any set of pronouns. This term is largely reliant on self-identification and typically is used by trans people who were thought to have been a girl before transitioning, yet this is not always the case. Because of this, in my recruitment call, I specifically asked for participants who identify as transmasculine so not to mislabel them.

When recruiting participants, I decided to use purposive sampling so that I could select participants with the common characteristic of being transmasculine. This sampling method allows me to explore how various transmasculine identities respond to my questions and interact with their own voices, as transmasculinity allows

for a lot of diversity (Ritchie et al., 2013). This research was conducted as part of an undergraduate qualitative research methods class, which received University of Victoria research ethics course approval (approval # 20-0397) along with additional project-specific approval by the instructor. Research ethics approval limited the number of allowable interview participants to only 2-3. Although the small sample size is a limitation of the study because qualitative data saturation was not feasible (Ritchie et al., 2013), this project nonetheless provides valuable in-depth empirical and conceptual insights into an under-studied area of research. Qualitative research rigour was also established through reflexivity and an audit trail (Johnson & Waterfield, 2004). I collected data from two transmasculine people recruited from my friend group via a general recruitment call in our Discord server, where interested parties were invited to private message me. Both participants identified as transmasculine and nonbinary, were from the same geographical region of Victoria, BC, and were white. They were both of the same generation, with one participant being 19 years old and the other being 20 at the time of the interviews. I had known one for at least a year, while the other was a more recent friend. One participant was on testosterone while the other was not. Both participants met the minimal risk requirements as they were both at least 19 years old and capable of voluntary informed consent. I am of the same community (that being the transmasculine community) as the participants as I am a trans man.

I gave the option of either an in-person interview or an interview over Zoom, given that the Covid-19 pandemic is ongoing. Both participants requested in-person interviews. These interviews were hosted in my living room when my roommate was not home to protect participant confidentiality. The interviews followed the University of Victoria's Communicable Disease Plan (2021) for both my and the participants' safety: the participant and I wore masks, the balcony door was open for adequate ventilation, and neither I nor the participants were showing signs of communicable illness on the days of the interviews. Both interviews were a little over half an hour, semi-structured, and recorded on my password-protected phone with ongoing consent from the participants. Participants were instructed on how to pause or turn off the recording at any time if needed, but neither opted to do so.

The participants' confidentiality was protected by storing all data on my password-protected computer. Consent forms were stored in a secure location. Audio and transcription files were named so that there were no connections to the identity of the participants. After transcription, all audio files were deleted. In this paper, all possibly identifying information has been omitted and I refer to the participants to using pseudonyms. Recruitment was private via the use of private messaging, ensuring participant anonymity even amongst my friend group. All data reviewed in this paper were gathered solely from the interviews and no other forms of communication. Anything that may have been mentioned to me as a friend but was not brought up in the interview has not been discussed or analyzed. Possible information that my other friends could use to identify the participants was omitted.

Transcription was done manually in Microsoft Word. Data analysis was conducted using inductive coding through Word comments. Echoing other researchers, inductive coding was the preferred method since my dimension of interest in this area of study has limited literature and theory (Chandra & Shang, 2019). I read through each interview transcript once, then started to assign level 1 codes on my subsequent readthroughs. Codes were created every time text within the transcripts triggered a thought related to the research question (Hahn, 2008a). These codes were loose and linked to their respective quotes or phrases that inspired them through the Microsoft Word comment function. Using the Word add-on DocTools ExtractData, I extracted each level 1 code and its respective highlighted quote to a table in another Word document for level 2 coding. Level 2 codes were categories that contained multiple level 1 codes that formed a pattern (Hahn, 2008b). From there, level 2 codes were grouped to

create level 3 codes: themes. These themes were refined and revised multiple times until they were clear, few, and specific.

Six key themes revealed themselves during analysis: that voice is critical in communicating gender to others, either betraying or affirming the speaker; others tend to assign gender based on the binary, causing nonbinary transmasculine people to settle for a "good enough" misgendering; a non-affirming voice causes a disconnect between the speaker and their voice, causing the feeling that their voice is not theirs; transmedicalist discourse in online trans communities caused anxiety around identity and the sound of one's voice; an affirming voice that elicits correct gender attributions supplies transmasculine people the freedom to be more gender-nonconforming; and achieving an affirming voice is a site of gender euphoria that can reconcile the speaker/voice disconnect.

I endeavoured to represent participants' experiences as nonbinary people accurately, despite not being nonbinary myself. My positionality during this research reflects Collins' (1986) concept of the 'outsider within,' where I share the positionality and experiences of being transmasculine with my participants but cannot fully relate to the wide range of nonbinary experiences as a binary trans man. The participants being my friends yielded the risk of what McConnell-Henry et al. (2010) call "role conflict," where the line between my role as a friend and my role as a researcher can be blurred. However, to mitigate this, it was made clear to participants that this was research that could be published and not a private conversation as friends. What aided in this distinction was the fact that we met in person, since I usually would talk to them in a friend context over text. Additionally, participants volunteered on their own merit, and I did not ask anyone to volunteer as a favour to avoid coercion. I did not discuss seeking participants outside of the formal call for participants so that I would not accidentally encourage my friends to participate just to help me out. My transmasculine identity and my positionality as the participants' friend helped to quickly establish rapport and comfort, as the familiarity with me was already there and it was understood that I had more than surface-level knowledge of transness (McConnell-Henry et al., 2010). There is the possibility that my positionality as a binary trans man and not a nonbinary transmasculine person caused me to miss certain nuances or significant sentiments through the ways I drafted my questions and interacted with participants (Adeagbo, 2021).

My conclusions drawn reflect that the experiences of transmasculinity represented here are not universal, especially for people of colour as both the participants and I are white. Additionally, the participants and I were all very young: either late teens or early 20s. It is likely that there may be a generational difference in how transmasculine people conceptualize their relationship to their physical voice, and I heard the younger perspective. My experience as a trans man on testosterone who came out as a young teenager in the mid-2010s encouraged me to explore this topic. Experiencing my voice's immense influence in others' perceptions of my gender before and after HRT, as well as being active in online transmasculine spaces during the height of transmedicalist standards of transition, helped formulate these research questions. I wondered if other transmasculine people had similar experiences to mine, and if those experiences changed with HRT or occupying a nonbinary positionality. I have a lot of privilege in being able to access gender-affirming care, having a binary identity that is not as threatening to cisnormative structures of gender, and generally fitting cisnormative standards of masculinity so that I 'pass' easily. I live in a relatively trans-friendly area with a completely supportive family. The same cannot be said for many, many trans people. The fact that I am even able to undertake this research with the support of my institution and community helps illustrate that privilege. The second author is cis and white. She provided a minor role in supporting the writing of the paper, along with supervision and mentorship throughout the entire research process.

4.0 Findings and Discussion

Transmasculine people, especially nonbinary transmasculine people, have complex relationships with their voices as they try to navigate a binary, cisnormative social world. The participants, Asher, a nonbinary transmasculine person who is not on testosterone, and Denny, a nonbinary transmasculine person who has been on testosterone for just over a year at the time of interviewing, echoed this sentiment. Asher found their voice, commonly attributed as feminine, to be the reason that they are frequently misgendered. Asher—wanting to be perceived as genderless—identified difficulties operating within the gender binary, citing that they would rather be misidentified as a man or assigned male at birth than a woman or assigned female at birth. Denny found his voice to be more of an ally to his identity, as it enables him to dress femininely without sacrificing being gendered correctly. Denny found comfort in his voice's flexibility, noting that changing his voice could be instrumental in avoiding trans-antagonistic violence. However, Denny also explained how when he was younger, the pressures of transnormativity and transmedicalism in online transmasculine spaces made him anxious about how testosterone would affect his voice. Because being nonbinary was looked down upon by transmedicalists, and failing to have a cis man's voice even after taking testosterone elicited shame from the community, Denny worried that testosterone would give him a non-normative, 'trans-sounding' voice. Both cited feeling like their pre-T voices, were not theirs. However, Denny was able to reconcile this disconnect after masculinizing his voice through testosterone, while Asher hopes to do the same.

4.1 Affirmation or Betrayal

Alongside physical gender presentation such as clothing, hair, and a masculine form such as a flat chest and broad shoulders, both participants identified their voices as an important signifier in communicating their gender identity.

This significance can be either detrimental or beneficial depending on what gender attribution listeners assign to their voices. For Asher, their voice is a common instrument in getting misgendered, even if everything else about their presentation is masculine:

> Voice is a big one [in being perceived correctly], because my voice right now is higher and…obviously it comes off as like, female or feminine. And so people will, even if they see me and they're like "oh yeah, that's y'know…not, not a woman," I'll talk and then they'll be like "oh! Now- that- mmm! Woman!"

This 'betrayal' by their voice exhibits how listeners prioritize voice in assigning gender to the speaker. Because of others' perceptions of their voice and the incorrect gender attribution assigned to them as a result, Asher is denied gender membership by other people (Azul, 2016). As Watt et al. (2018) show in their research, people can assign someone a gender based on voice alone. Even when Asher is binding (wearing a type of compression vest used to flatten a person's chest) and has a heavily masculine gender presentation, their voice still overrides all other signifiers:

> I was binding at work which I don't often do because long shifts…and someone, like, [an] old guy, like talked to his kid…and—we have to wear hats, so my hair was hidden—and was like "oh, get this young man [to help you]." And I was like [in a higher pitch] "hey, how's it going!" and he was like "oh, y'know, good, how are you doing young lady" or whatever. Like he switched it [snaps fingers] after he heard me talk.

This 'switch' highlights the powerful role of voice in gender attribution. Incongruent with cisheteronormative ideas of a masculine voice, Asher's voice is gendered as feminine, therefore gendering them as female in the eyes of others because of how physical traits are seen as indicative of biological sex (Schilt & Westbrook,

2009; Westbrook & Schilt, 2014; Azul, 2016). Additionally, they state that when they start speaking, they feel that their more feminine features are "emphasized," such as their chest if they are not binding:

> Because it's like, oh, y'know, if I'm not wearing like a binder or anything, everything else is like, y'know, seems relatively masculine so to speak…and then I speak, and then [the person] is like "oh yeah! That's a woman! Y'know, she's got like a, like a chest! Like of course! Why would we think anything different?" just based on…y'know, assuming that they don't know me or like anything like that.

When posed with possibly contradictory 'evidence' to the speaker's perceived gender in the form of a higher voice, the listener looks for other signifiers, usually visual, to confirm their assumption. Asher hints here that the construction of the speaker's gender begins (and most likely ends) with the voice, which the listener uses as a lens—either a masculine or feminine one, since gender attribution is still heavily binarized—to look at other visual signifiers of gender through. If the listener hears a 'feminine' voice, they will code other parts of Asher as feminine too, such as their chest, since the voice is considered through biology-based criteria of 'correct' gender performance to be sufficient evidence of someone's gender (Watt et al., 2018; Westbrook & Schilt, 2014).

Denny had the same experience before going on testosterone, citing that he was never mistaken or assumed to have been a male pre-T. Even after going on T, it took a few months for his voice to masculinize enough to illicit correct gender attributions from others, echoed by participants who were under a year on T in Azul's (2018) work. However, once his voice masculinized, it became one of the main factors in how others gendered him:

> If I had my previous voice I probably wouldn't feel comfortable enough to dress the way I do now because, I would feel like the way I dress is my signifier for my gender, so, I would probably try to dress way more masculine and not have anything feminine about me because I'm like, if that's how people are gonna tell…if I'm dressing feminine they're gonna assume I'm a female so I better not. Whereas now, I can just like, put that aside and no matter how feminine I dress, if I'm speaking some, then, at least people will be either confused by me or assume me to be male and that's good enough for me, y'know. [he giggles]

After testosterone, Denny's main way of communicating his gender to others shifted from clothing to his voice. His voice, now satisfying cultural standards on how men's voices are supposed to sound, successfully reflects his gender in everyday interactions to the point that he will still garner correct gender attributions from others while dressing femininely (Westbrook & Schilt, 2014; Azul, 2016). Having an affirming voice is not just beneficial for a transmasculine person's mental health and wellbeing (Watt et al., 2018; Bultynck et al., 2017), but also serves to prevent misgendering in cisnormative social spaces.

4.2 'Close Enough' Gender Attribution

Echoing the sentiments of some participants in Azul et al.'s (2018) research, Asher also struggles with being perceived correctly in a heavily binarized world as they wish to be read as having no gender. To reconcile this, they say that they would rather be perceived as male because they describe a part of their gender identity to be "sort of veering away from what it initially was in terms of femininity." They express that they feel "having the traditionally feminine voice automatically makes people, especially people from older generations, assume the binary," but also state that young people are not much better:

> I think that…with the younger generations I'm more likely to be…yeah, perceived as

queer but definitely still perceived as like, assigned female at birth. […] And I think they think like they're more [accepting] of like, being outside the binary with younger generations, so they'll be like "oh! Based on voice, assigned female at birth."

Younger, more accepting generations may recognize that someone is outside of the binary, but still may assign incorrect gender attributions through perceiving one's assigned gender at birth. This perception makes Asher uncomfortable, to where they "would rather be perceived as assigned male at birth rather than assigned female." The relatively new focus on labelling trans people via their gender assigned at birth has—in Asher's experience—only recreated the antiquated gender binary but in a subtler way, glaringly identifiable for those who fall outside of it.

Having to operate within the binary frequently denies Asher gender membership through always being perceived incorrectly in one way or another, to where they would prefer at least being incorrectly assumed to be male (Azul, 2016):

But I don't know. I feel like if, I were to…be perceived incorrectly, I would much rather be perceived as a male than as a female? Ideally obviously none of the above, because that is, that is me. But I feel like by starting in one place [femininity], trying to get closer to the other end [masculinity], will make people…confused enough that they place me as none of the above, or both. Which like…better than like, the polar opposites, I guess.

Existing in cisnormative social spaces that heavily rely on the gender binary for gendering others makes being misgendered almost impossible for Asher. Additionally, correcting strangers on their pronouns, which usually comes with having to explain their gender to them, is exhausting and not worth it:

I don't want to have to give an explanation—I don't want to have to explain my identity to every single person

who walks in those doors [at work] and converses with me and assumes I'm female, 'cause that's a lot of energy and a lot of time, so I just sort of brush it off and ignore [being misgendered] because I'm never gonna see them again. Versus like, if it's a friend or someone new that I meet [who I want to be friends with], I will correct them or I will introduce myself from the get-go with pronouns.

If the person is a stranger or a customer they will never see again, having to repeatedly explain the nuances of their identity to be gendered correctly becomes intolerable. Therefore, they are willing to settle for an incorrect assumption that is anything but female, which is the gender attribution that causes the most dysphoria for them. A motivator for their plans to go on testosterone is the way it lowers the voice. One of the reasons Asher desires this is to prompt more incorrect gender attributions of being male to offset being misgendered as female, or even better, to confuse people on their gender, hopefully inviting no binary gender attribution at all.

4.3 Disconnection

Both participants brought up feeling disconnected from their own voice, either currently or in the past. Usually, one hears their own voice by speaking, which sounds slightly different in their head than how it sounds to others. However, recordings and videos give the opportunity to hear a person's voice as it sounds to everyone around them. Asher said they felt "neutral" about their head voice, while Denny did not mention any feelings towards it pre-T, but both cited their hatred of recordings that featured their pre-T voices. Denny's pre-T voice on recordings would worsen his dysphoria and make him "cringe," while also feeling like the voice others heard was not actually his:

Knowing and hearing how I am being heard and knowing that these people connected this voice to me when they think

of me…I don't like it. 'Cause it's like, that didn't feel like…the voice that I should have and the voice that I would connect to myself.

Denny's voice at the time was not an accurate reflection of himself, and therefore, there was a disconnection between his sense of self and what others heard. Asher shared this sentiment of disconnection, commenting that the voice they heard on recordings "[did] not sound like me, [and] I don't associate it with me." They go on to say:

> It's [their head voice] what I've been thinking that I sound like for like, all my life, and I've always thought "damn I sound so masculine!" y'know? Like, in- in my head when I'm talking. And like hearing recordings it's like- [strained] "mm! Nope! That's not what it sounds like!" So, I don't know, just to…close that disconnect would be…ideal.

Asher's head voice, which sounds deeper to them, is quite different than the voice they hear on recordings. In recordings, it is the voice of a "stranger," while their head voice is closer to themselves. They state that this disconnect is another motivator for pursuing HRT, so that they can try to close the gap and identify their voice on recordings as their own.

4.4 The "T-voice"

Denny discussed the "T-voice" phenomenon in online transmasculine circles in the mid-2010s, where transphobic narratives of being "stuck with the T-voice" (where one would sound obviously transgender if they did not adjust their voice properly while on testosterone) instilled fear in young and newly-out transmasculine people who wanted to start testosterone:

> I was a little worried because I don't want to sound high-pitched and be recognized as trans my whole life…I was a little scared of being stuck in that place that…people would know I was trans, people would

know I was…some weird gender-variant but I wouldn't be able to pass as a man, so people would constantly know and I would be in an unsafe situation.

The "T-voice" age of the internet gave rise to a new anxiety around their voices for some transmasculine people: that they wouldn't pass as cis and would be visibly trans when they went on testosterone. Though the gender attribution of 'transmasculine person' would not be technically incorrect, it has the potential of putting the speaker in danger of violence since perpetrators of trans-antagonistic violence commonly target perceived gender-nonconformity and visible transness (Wirtz et al., 2020). Denny shared that one of his friends felt this kind of anxiety as well:

> A friend of mine that I have from high school [was] kind of worried with T, because it's like… "what if I go on T and my voice is never able to pass as a cis man, like, what…what danger am I putting myself in to be constantly recognized as trans by everyone I'm interacting with, like, it would be dangerous" y'know?

Thus, having a voice that 'passes' as a cis man's is desirable not just for gender affirmation reasons, but also for ensuring one's safety.

Furthermore, not sounding like a cis man betrayed early transnormative and transmedicalist ideals in the online (and mainly white) transmasculine community of what it meant to be trans: the desire to present as a cis man as much as possible. Denny reflected on how he and others experienced transmedicalist discourses:

> Well, 'cause I feel like, this is a generalization, but I feel like a very great deal of transmasculine people who are our age right now were seeing [transmedicalist/transnormative narratives] on the internet and were watching and being engaged by those videos…it definitely was a different time back then when nonbinary people were seen as…like,

not good and dreaded, whereas, you had to be a regular man to be trans, y'know.

As Johnson (2016) states, this transnormative discourse was an attempt to legitimize transness by adhering as much as possible to cisnormative ideals of gender, expulsing those who had divergent experiences or identities in fear of them discrediting the movement. Thus, transmasculine people were encouraged by both their internal fears of violence, and the possibility of being denied gender membership by the outside cisnormative world and within their own community, to avoid sounding like what was labelled the "T-voice."

Though transmedicalist and transnormative discourses still exist in online trans circles and in the media (Johnson, 2016; Jacobsen et al., 2022), they have been distilled by inclusive trans activism, discourse, and accessible information. Denny commented on how fear around the "T-voice" and other transmedicalist talking points died down as he got older:

Nowadays, I find that people are much less scared of that because the internet has more information on trans people—way more than when I was young. Like, when I was young, there was like…a few influential people that talked about it and there wasn't much else, but now there's like, quite a bit, so you can get more information, you can learn about these things easier and there's less of that fear…of just like, "oh this person said this so that's what's gonna happen, I'm so scared."

The expansion and diversification of online trans communities, as well as wide access to medically accurate and inclusive information on medical transition and gender identity helped to ease the anxieties of many younger trans people, while combatting transnormative and transmedicalist discourses.

4.5 Freedom

Contrary to Asher's experience, Denny mentions how his voice—masculine enough to cause others to perceive him as male—gives him the freedom to express himself physically through clothes and jewelry without the worry of being misgendered even if he dresses quite feminine:

Yeah, [the perceptions of being a man because of voice] kinda feel good because, I dress…not very masculine, so, I feel like if my voice wasn't at the point that it would make people think I was a guy then it would have me get misgendered way more because of the way I dress. So I feel like it gives me more freedom to dress not as masculine if my voice is masculine.

The heavy influence of voice on gender attribution by others works in Denny's favour to give him the power to dress how he wants without sacrificing being gendered correctly. Because of his voice, the rest of his presentation is coded as masculine, and he successfully keeps gender membership (Azul, 2016). Denny goes on to assert that others correctly gendering him despite his appearance must be because of his voice:

When I'm at my job or something, and I'm just talking to someone, even if I'm wearing pretty feminine clothes like a purple shirt or sparkly earrings, and people still call me a boy, or call me sir, or a dude or something like [that]…they must be getting that from my voice then, because I don't think my…clothing appearance is really giving off maleness.

Cisheteronormative conceptions of masculinity in Western social arenas—that a masculine voice is a deep voice, and that masculine voices belong to men guide customers at his workplace to gender him as a man, which affirms Denny's identity. By having a voice that is constructed as masculine, Denny can successfully negotiate his gender expression despite his clothing conflicting with cisheteronormative performances of masculinity, further solidifying the voice's significant role in gender attribution.

Additionally, this freedom comes in the form of ensuring his safety. When asked if Denny

would change his voice magically that instant and how he would change it if given the choice to, he debated it. He said that his desired changes (deeper and more masculine) would make him feel better "dysphoria-wise" and that he would appreciate his voice better. However, he felt conflicted:

> But then again, if I could change my voice magically and it means I would lose the range I have, I might not wanna do it because I kind of, enjoy the ability to make it go really high if I want to, like in certain situations if I want to pass as a woman in any given situation I probably could if I tried, or like for safety reasons...But like, if there was a situation where there was like, a man, and...I felt unsafe as a trans person, I could probably just pretend I was a woman, and that would be helpful to do. And also is helpful, like for people I'm not out to, I don't think I could do it anymore, but like, when I was five or six months on [testosterone], I could still make my voice pretty high if I wanted to and it helps me like, avoid having to come out to people or having to come out to my work and stuff which is kind of helpful?

In interacting with an unsafe world commonly hostile to trans people, gravely illuminated by Wirtz et al. (2020) and Flores et al. (2021), Denny's flexibility and range with his voice serve as possible protections. The ability to pretend to be a woman for safety reasons or to avoid coming out in possibly unsafe situations was highlighted as a very significant feature of his voice for Denny. Further, he worries about aggressive reactions to him looking gender-nonconforming when he dresses femininely:

> [Lowering my voice more] might make it a little more difficult interacting with people because…if people are confused to my gender based on my voice, they might be less likely to be aggressive rather than if they knew like, "Oh that's a man dressing like that, that's a man acting like that."

As Wirtz et al. (2020) highlight, one main reason for trans-antagonistic and gender-based violence is the perception of gender-nonconformity. If Denny is wearing feminine clothes and is read as a man, he risks being attacked on the basis of not fitting cisheteronormative standards of what masculinity should look like, since he violates the expectation that masculine expression is heterosexual by occupying a queerer masculine gender expression (Schilt & Westbrook, 2009; Westbrook & Schilt, 2014). In the case of unsafe situations, Denny almost welcomes incorrect gender attributions and uses the range of his voice to illicit them.

4.6 Euphoria

Exampled by the participants of Watt et al. (2018) and Bultynck et al. (2017)'s work and by Denny in his interview, acquiring an affirming voice can be a significant site of gender euphoria. Describing how he felt about his voice and how it has changed on testosterone at the time of the interview, Denny said it was "very joyful…very unlike feelings I'd ever felt…you can feel happy about something, but it's just like on a separate level." The excitement of his voice changing was also a site of euphoria for Denny, where he would regularly 'test' its limits and possibilities:

> I had an hour drive to work, and so every time I would drive I would like, play around with my voice in the car 'cause I'm not really comfortable doing that at home with like my family there…just going off and like, [he laughs] experimenting with my voice, but I'd do that in the car and it was just…such a fun experience because each week that I went to work, I would just like play around with my voice in the car and see what I could make it sound like, or…y'know…it was just cool to experiment with it and actually like what I was hearing rather than like, my whole life of feeling like I didn't like what I was hearing or that I couldn't make it sound like how I wanted to. It was a very happy, very joyful feeling.

As Denny demonstrates, going on testosterone is not just for a lower voice to be gendered correctly in public with, but for the affirmation of the self. Though medically transitioning is not required to be trans, and some trans people never medically transition for various reasons, for those who want HRT, it can be an extremely rewarding and life-saving experience. An affirming voice also can reconcile the disconnect felt by transmasculine people toward their voice, such as making recordings of themselves easier to listen to. Instead of feeling disgust and recoiling at hearing his voice played back in recordings or videos, Denny now likes hearing himself speak:

> Now I'm like, it just feels normal and I'm able to just enjoy the videos [I'm in] and, laugh at it as well rather than cringing at how I sound or…like, I actually enjoy listening back to myself and I'm interested in how I'm sounding rather than being like, disgusted by how I'm sounding y'know? [he giggles] …Because like, if I just laugh or something and I hear it recorded or something, I'm like "oh, that's my laugh."

Instead of feeling like a stranger is talking when hearing a recording of his voice, Denny now recognizes his voice and laugh as his own. Asher also mentions the disconnect between their voice and themselves, hoping that testosterone will help them identify with their own voice:

> I'm sure that I'll notice the voice in my head change as my outer voice changes. Specifically, just when like, talking, maybe, I don't know yet? But I do think that it'll be more…tolerable to listen to myself because it'll feel like I'm listening to me and not listening to a stranger just talking out of my mouth. [they laugh]

5.0 Limitations

This research was conducted as part of an undergraduate class, which imposed significant time constraints. Pre-established ethics approval for the class allowed for a small sample size of only 2-3 participants. Additionally, though Victoria, BC is the most gender-diverse city in Canada (Coyne, 2022), the community is still quite small in comparison to the general population. Given more time and resources, it is hard to say if I would have gotten more participants by a significant margin. This also resulted in the very likely chance that I was going to interview someone that I knew, since I know a lot of young transmasculine people due to my connections to UVic Pride and my existence in the community. The participants were all nonbinary, meaning that I could not explore whether a trans man participant's experiences lined up with the literature, or how their experiences differed from the nonbinary participants'. The participants were also of the same generation, so I could not investigate generational differences. Furthermore, all the participants were white, limiting and centring my analysis to and around white expressions and conceptions of transmasculinity, restricting the applicability of my findings to the wider population. It is possible that the "T-voice" phenomenon, transnormativity, and transmedicalism in trans spaces took different forms or may not have been significant at all in racialized trans spaces, as trans Tumblr and YouTube were overwhelmingly white.

6.0 Implications

My work addresses the gap in the sociological literature on trans physical voices, especially specifically concerning transmasculine voices. While researchers in linguistics have contributed important findings about trans physical voices, these studies were largely quantitative with little room for examining the individual experiences of transmasculine participants in depth. This research also centres and documents the experiences of nonbinary transmasculine people, who lack representation in the literature.

Subsequently, my research adds to the growing body of literature about transness authored by trans academics. Studying trans identity through a trans lens of lived experiences

reveals many of the nuances and complexities that cis researchers may not identify. This depth benefits the sociological theorization of gender, trans communities through the accurate and sensitive portrayals of transness in research, and those who work with trans communities to deepen their understanding of how trans individuals navigate their gender expression in a cisheteronormative world. These findings are beneficial for those in health and social work sectors who wish to improve their standard of care for trans clients.

Further research should explore the various intersections of transmasculine identities, as I only explored one corner of it. Priority should be given to transmasculine Black, Indigenous, and people of colour, who may face different cultural expectations of masculinity and unique racialized barriers to their social and/or medical transition due to systemic racism, colonialism, and anti-Blackness. I also encourage researchers to explicitly explore disabled and neurodivergent transmasculine experiences, as these intersections (especially if racialized as well) alter personal perceptions of gender and gender expression, as well as other people's gender attributions. Both groups are likely to experience medical trauma, which I feel would be significant to analysis, especially concerning access to and the desire of HRT. These analyses may offer important considerations for intersectional and trauma-informed trans healthcare. Finally, interactions between voice, identity, masculinity, and the social world should be explored with other nonbinary identities under the transmasculine umbrella to represent the vast diversity of the transmasculine community.

7.0 Conclusion

A person's voice heavily influences gender attribution by others; depending on how the listener interprets one's voice, they may code the speaker's visual appearance through a binary masculine or feminine lens. This is because gender is not an innate, biological trait, but is socially and culturally constructed through everyday interactions and gender performance (Butler, 1999; West & Zimmerman, 1987). I conducted semi-structured qualitative interviews with 2 transmasculine participants to investigate the relationship between their physical voices and their social world, distilling 6 key themes through inductive analysis. The voice's significance can be either negative or positive for the speaker, causing dysphoria and constant misgendering as in Asher's experience, or allowing the freedom to dress more femininely without being misgendered like with Denny. The stress of being outside of the binary while having one's voice interpreted within the binary was emphasized by Asher, who did not want to be perceived as any gender at all. Denny illustrated the struggle between wanting to feel more comfortable about his voice but also desiring to keep the flexibility and range of his current voice for safety reasons. Alongside pressures to exist within a cisnormative binary, Denny highlighted transnormative pressures from within the transmasculine community to sound a certain way. Specifically, he cited feeling anxiety around his voice and the possible trans-signifying vocal effects of having begun taking testosterone when he was younger. Both participants felt disconnect with their pre-T voices, while Denny highlighted how euphoric his voice was for him after testosterone.

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