

# Canvassing the Filipino Trans Man's Story: A Narrative Analysis of Transgender Men's Youtube Video Blogs

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This exploratory study strives to understand the stories of Filipino transgender men through the lens of narrative psychology. By listening to the narratives of trans men, I explored how their gender and male identity is reconstructed and negotiated within Filipino society. The Youtube video blogs of five Filipino trans men were analyzed using narrative analysis. Nine key events were found and organized under the pre-transition, the transition, and the post-transition timeline. The nine events revolved around the following themes: (1) realization of identity, (2) coping with gender dysphoria, (3) coming out, (4) decision to transition, (5) undergoing hormone therapy, (6) engaging with the trans community, (7) facing social/institutional challenges, (8) balancing between stealth or coming out, and (9) finding the road to advocacy and resolution. Overall, the findings specified social and psychological challenges that compel trans men to create their own gendered narratives.

*Keywords:* transgender men, narrative analysis, video blogs, gender identity, gender transitioning

In a world that sees only the biological man and the biological woman, the narratives of transgender people are not often heard or taken into account. Gender identity, an internal sense of being male or female (American Psychological Association, 2008), provides a more inclusive way of seeing gender. Considering a person's gender identity

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can remind us that not all men and women live or identify themselves according to the gender they were assigned at birth. As such, a small look into the worlds outside these binaries can reveal a diversity where some pockets of experiences are not yet fully explored or given much depth.

*Transgender* is an umbrella term for people whose gender identity do not match their biological sex. Many pre-transition trans individuals—particularly trans men and trans women—have said that they have lived their entire lives in the wrong body. Being a “girl in a boy’s body” or a “boy in a girl’s body” is a feeling often described by many transgender people. The field of psychology attempts to understand this unique experience: How are transgender lives lived? How do they navigate life in a world where the gender binary and biological determinism are often perpetuated?

Although psychological research on transgender people has grown in the 21st century, the current literature does not offer a complete picture of transgender people as more focus is given to trans women’s stories over trans men’s, even with studies from the Philippines (Winter, Rogando-Sasot, & King, 2007). Moreover, majority of the research is viewed under psychiatric lenses (Bilodeau & Renn, 2005). This study is thus an endeavor to explore the Filipino transgender man’s narrative from the position of narrative psychology.

### **The Transgender Identity**

Several models have provided an explanation on the emergence of the transgender self. Pinto and Moleiro’s (2015) model lists stages in which transsexual people develop and come to accept their gender identity. This includes going through feelings of gender difference, finding labels or explanations for their identity, embracing their identity and undergoing body modifications, and finally undergoing an identity consolidation and invisibility. In this model, the process of becoming includes identity formation and transitioning. Other research that focused on male-to-female (MTF) and female-to-male (FTM) trans identity also uncovered similar frameworks, usually starting with a growing sense of gender and ending in social adjustment and resolution of identity (Gagne, Tewksbury, & McGaughey, 1997; Pollock

& Eyre, 2012). Others categorize pre-transition and post-transition stages as two sides of a transsexual person's life (Budge et al., 2013 ). Identity, transitioning, and integration to the newly gendered self are overarching themes among these models.

### **Gender Dysphoria**

Previous models have emphasized the links between trans identity and the physical presentation of gender (Feusner et al., 2015; Langer, 2014). Clinical psychologists and psychiatrists have tended to emphasize the incongruity between the two, placing this at the forefront of the transgender experience (Benson, 2013; Budge, Adelson, & Howard, 2013; McCann & Sharek, 2015 ). The body is an important part of self that is commonly understood to be aligned with gender identity. A mismatch between their psychological gender and their biological gender is felt as wrong or uncomfortable for the transgender person, and the need to change their biological presentation is often very crucial in their lives (Greaves & Reicherter, 2015).

Greaves and Reicherter (2015) describe gender dysphoria as the “pervasive, subjective experience of an individual for whom the gender assigned at birth is felt to be wrong, mistaken, or not reflective of the person's inner conviction or truth that he or she is actually of another gender” (p. 317). This experience is psychologically significant and can severely impact one's mental health (Budge et al., 2013; Turan, Poyraz, Bas, Kani, & Duran, 2015). The American Psychiatric Association (2013), while delisting Gender Identity Disorder as a pathological condition in the DSM-5, reclassified the diagnosis as gender dysphoria (GD), which is defined as a state of distress for the transgender individual. Having a GD diagnosis includes having a feeling of discomfort with the gender assigned at birth and a strong identification with another gender.

Despite being categorized as a mental disorder, some trans people have made use of GD as a means to explain their unique feelings of personal dissonance (Carmel, Hopwood, & Dickey, 2014). Hence, the term is dissociated from its pathological connotation by simply referring to it as a period of incongruence. For example, gender dysphoria, in reference to the body, is described sometimes by trans

men and women as “the loss of what one never had” (Langer, 2014, p. 68). This leads to the thought that medically transitioning their body from female-to-male or male-to-female is then highly desirable and for some people, the only way to reduce their suffering.

### **Transitioning**

Austin and Craig (2015) postulate that transitioning is divided into three types: social transitioning, medical transitioning and legal transitioning. Social transitioning involves coming out to the family and their peers and sometimes shifting pronouns from “she” to “he.” Medical transitioning involves hormone replacement therapy or other treatments to alter the female body into the male body. Legal transition involves official changes in name and sex written in official documents (Austin & Craig, 2015 ). As such, the transitioning process is different for every person. The process ultimately helps the transgender person reduce or rid themselves of gender dysphoria derived from the perceived mismatch.

Medical transitioning for female-to-male (FTMs) trans people can involve different procedures such as testosterone therapy, chest reconstruction surgery (top surgery), and hysterectomy or genital reconstruction surgery (bottom surgery) (Hudson’s FTM Resource Guide, 2004). These procedures are done for them to fully and physically present themselves as male. Testosterone therapy enables trans men to adopt male secondary sex traits like rougher skin, increase in sex drive, facial hair growth, voice lowering, receding hairlines, new musculature, and fat leveling throughout the body (Hudson’s FTM Resource Guide, 2004). Transgender men can opt for one or all of these procedures, with testosterone therapy being the most common.

The transitioning process, overall, is not only a process of legitimizing an identity, but is also a way of achieving congruence with the sense of self. In fact, it was found that the trans person who transitions surgically or socially experiences a significant boost in their mental well-being (Karpel et al., 2015). It is in this scenario where psychologists can investigate the interesting shift between pre- and post-transition. However, some transgender people might decide not to undergo medical transitioning for personal or financial reasons.

For this study, I focus on transitioning since it is a recurring and significant theme in the participants' narratives and the experiences shared by participants of other studies. Trans people who choose not to transition, and even those who identify as non-binary, can be a topic for future research to fully uncover the range of trans people's experiences.

### **Transgender People in Filipino Society**

In the Philippines, the tendency of the cisgender (non-transgender people) meta-narrative to dominate mainstream discourse can negatively affect trans people's daily life. From simple activities like entering bathrooms to the lack of protection from transgender-specific hate crimes, the national or institutional considerations towards better and less limiting transgender narratives are nearly non-existent. For example, the topic of gender identity has sparked dialogue within the Catholic Bishops Conference of the Philippines (CBCP) which claims that transgenderism is wrong because tampering with one's inborn biology is considered to be tampering with God's will (Esmaguél, 2015). This example shows the justification of day-to-day exclusions transgender people experience, not only in the difficulties they face legally, socially, and medically, but also in the exclusion of their narratives. In response to such exclusions, numerous LGBT groups have unwaveringly stood by the passage of the antidiscrimination bill (also known as the SOGIE [Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity and Experience] Equality bill) along with increasing the community's visibility.

While still burgeoning in number in the Philippines, local studies focusing on the transgender community have been published. There have been studies focusing on understanding Filipino trans women (Winter et al., 2007) including their experiences on the Metro Rail Transit (Silan, Rivera, & Chulipa, 2016). People's attitudes and conduct towards transgender people have also been explored through studies on trans-affirmative psychotherapy (Salvador, 2016) and through a further validation of the Genderism and Transphobia Scale (Macapagal, 2013).

The research literature, however, has yet to deepen the accounts

of transgender men, especially those that can help counter-narrate the still dominant discourse of the cisgender narrative (after all, a proportion of lesbian, gay men, and bisexuals are cisgender). This study proceeds to show other possibilities and storylines that can be found in transgender biographies. Stories found in trans men's Youtube video blogs can then be one of the many sources for widening the gender meta-narrative.

### **Narrative Engagement With Youtube Video Blogs**

Video-sharing websites such as Youtube have transformed how narratives can be shared and produced. Vlogging (or video blogging) has given many people an avenue to share their thoughts or autobiographies. For trans individuals, vlogging has provided the opportunity to recount experiences, document transitioning, give advice and resources, reflect, and provide visibility for trans people everywhere (Kennedy, 2007; Raun, 2010).

Using Youtube videos as data is one way of understanding the life of a Filipino transgender person. Unlike interviews, vlogs capture the trans person's agency in the self-construction of their identity as a trans man (Raun, 2010). Trans-vloggers, for instance, are allowed the time and space to frame a narrative that is not only coherent for viewers, but also coherent for themselves. Vlogs can also record the actual transitioning process, wherein the viewer can listen to experiences, not just in retrospect, but as they are happening in video. Aside from its narratological nature, Youtube vlogs are digitally archived and accessible, which make them a suitable source for exploratory data.

### **Narrative Analysis as Analytical Lens**

Narrative analysis, the primary method of this study, is a qualitative method tailored to understand themes and developmental processes in people's life events. It is mostly hinged on storytelling, where studying narrative content can be in the form of reading written texts to listening to personal accounts (Murray, 2003).

In narrative theory, the person is humanized by analyzing their life stories in the context of their social world; hence, it leads us to explore

the bigger narrative while taking into account the personal ones that have created it. This is in line with how Hammack and Cohler (2011) have used the narrative approach to define gay men and women's life stories. A similar analytical lens can help in the understanding of transgender men's social and individual discourses.

Our inquiry on the Filipino transgender man's narrative comes with limitations. These include a somewhat unstructured analysis of Youtube video content, and the lack of a precise and linear storyline that is an inherent limitation of narrative analysis. In Hammack and Cohler's (2011) use of narrative analysis, they also recognize the issue of "polyphonic" narratives, which accounts for shifting storylines between individuals since they are also, and ultimately, dependent on the person's own social and psychological situation. This paper acknowledges that the stages and events revealed in the narratives do not determine or describe every Filipino transgender man's life story. My goal is to uncover certain chapters that are consistent and salient enough to consider for narrative inquiry.

### **Research Problem**

This study seeks to fill the gap of transgender research given that the focus on transgender men is sparse. As such, I focus on the following questions: (a) How do Filipino transgender men present their selves vis-à-vis the narratives they share online, particularly during the timeline of their transitioning? (b) What are common themes and challenges found in their stories and how do trans men define their trajectories? (c) How do they position their identities within a society that predominantly stigmatizes transgender people?

## **METHOD**

### **Procedure**

A selection of Youtube channels created by Filipino transgender men were used for narrative analysis. To qualify a Youtube channel for data inclusion, the channel must be (a) directly curated by a Filipino transgender male and (b) must contain more than three videos that

record trans-related life events or discussions in vlog form. I note that not all videos are centered on the person's experiences as some trans-related videos also record advice, education, and advocacy for transgender audiences. Nevertheless, if such content still contains important themes, small retrospections, and other insights that add to their story, these videos were still included.

The profiles of vloggers were purposively sampled in Youtube through its search function, and five out of the seven Youtube channels by Filipino trans men fit the criteria for inclusion in this research. While Youtube channels remain public and can often be shared, I messaged all five vloggers first for their consent to use all their videos for analysis. All trans-vloggers gave their permission and pseudonyms were subsequently used for this study. The ethical considerations in maintaining the confidentiality of publicly accessed qualitative data are addressed in the discussion section.

The Youtube channels were later screened for content. In total, 97 videos were found; however, 14 were not considered because they veered from trans-related content. For example, one was a rant over a music artist and another was a re-upload of music lyrics. All in all, 9.7 hours of Youtube vlogging were analyzed.

Sample videos were first watched to gain familiarity, and also to help create a preliminary coding system. This coding system looked at spoken words while still also taking into account the vlogger's mood and self-presentation. Videos were then watched systematically, starting from the oldest upload to the latest. Data analysis consisted of finding common and salient themes mostly from what is transcribed from the vlog and from a written description of other vlog details (e.g., upload date, video length), then placing them into a narrative framework.

This paper was originally written for an undergraduate class in social psychology. I am also part of the LGBT community, and the paper was a product from the motivation to study unexplored topics in local LGBT psychology. I therefore acknowledge that the sensitivity of the research process is likely affected by a personal trans-positive stance. Moreover, being the sole author of this paper presented a practical limitation as further steps for coding comparisons were not taken to check reliability. This was taken into account in the data analysis and,

as such, I conducted myself accordingly by being cognizant of my role as both a researcher and an advocate of LGBT visibility.

### **The Trans-vloggers**

A vlogger is a person who creates video blogs. For the study, vloggers are the narrators of the stories and the discussions they share in their Youtube channels. Five Filipino transgender men introduced themselves as Rainer, Ken, Daniel, Jason, and Mik in their Youtube channels.

The number of vlogs in their respective channels ranged from 4 to 35. Most of the vloggers were recent university graduates and some were dabbling in the working world by then. All of their vlog uploads were dated from 2009 to 2015. In the video blogs, Rainer primarily spoke in Filipino while Jason and Mik used English. The others, Daniel and Ken, spoke in a mix of both English and Filipino.

## **RESULTS**

I was able to find nine events that arose from all trans men's video blogs. These nine events were categorized under three phases where these individual themes were most prominent. The phases were divided into the pre-transition phase, the transitioning phase, and the post-transition phase. This can serve as a comprehensive timeline for the findings.

### **Pre-transition Phase**

The pre-transition phase includes some of the most psychologically challenging events for trans men. These experiences were mainly focused on finding one's self and trying to negotiate their gender identity. Four themes were most prominent in this phase, namely, the realization of one's identity, gender dysphoria, coming out, and then finally coming to terms with the decision to medically transition.

**Realization and acknowledgment of identity.** This is the point when the person is able to put a name to his experiences. Calling themselves a transgender man can mean that they have finally found

themselves in the term “transgender.” Daniel, Jason, and Rainer have voiced in their vlogs that that they came out as a lesbian first, then found out later on that this identity did not fully explain their experiences. Daniel, for instance, came out to his parents by saying he was a “lesbian” and a “man.” These two contradictory sexual identities (i.e., gender identity refers to a sense of maleness or femaleness while sexual orientation relates to an attraction towards a gender) are oftentimes conflated, even to people who are just beginning to identify as transgender.

Despite this, their words suggest steadfast certainty about the male identity that they ended up carrying. “I was assigned female at birth, but as I grew up I realized that I am not female but I am male, therefore I am transgender,” Rainer said with conviction.

Rainer’s vlog highlights a time when he discovered his male identity. He said, “When I was in second year college, I saw a video blog of a trans man. Before that, I didn’t even know trans men existed.” He related that he started his own vlog channel since he wanted to provide solidarity to those who also felt alone. Trans-vloggers like Rainer and Mik shared that before figuring out what transgender meant, they had believed they were the only ones who felt different.

Mik, on the other hand, was the only person to immediately recognize the difference between his gender identity and sexuality, partially because he “never liked girls to begin with.” He recounts how he used to ask himself what a gay man in a woman’s body was called, and that at the age of sixteen he stumbled upon the term “trans man” or “FTM.” Mik voiced out that he wanted to break the stereotype of trans men only appearing as masculine, mentioning that “If you were a trans man and you happen to be gay, and you wanted to join a gay pageant, go right ahead because you’re still a man.”

An incident with Mik’s relatives became a key point in the realization of his social self. He shared a story about a family reunion where his little cousin approached Mik to ask what his gender was. He jested with his young female cousin by challenging what she thinks, to which she replied, without hesitation, that he was a boy. Later in the reunion, a relative corrected his cousin by asking her to call Mik “*ate*.” *Ate* in Tagalog is used to refer to an older female sibling or person.

**Coping with gender dysphoria.** I note that all trans-vloggers

used the term “gender dysphoria” not in its clinical or diagnostic sense, but rather to label a common inner struggle for trans people. For the trans man, coping with gender dysphoria is the psychological struggle of being subjected to a female body. It is also the stage of trying to counter the discomfort of society’s reception of their *perceived* female gender. An example of misgendering would mostly include others’ use of pronouns and titles like “she” or “ma’am.” Rainer expressed that it was hard to remain optimistic since store clerks kept calling him ma’am ever since. “*Tatawagin akong ma’am paulit-ulit. Nakakainis lang* (They’d call me ma’am again and again. It’s irritating).”

Trans men would also battle dysphoria by binding (flattening the breast), cutting their hair short, packing (placing things in the crotch to simulate a bulge), lowering their voice, and dressing like a man. For example, Daniel expressed that he cannot leave the confines of his house without wearing a binder. For him, his chest was most triggering for his dysphoria. He recalled using ACE bandages to flatten his chest and using duct tape to hold them, which he said was not a comfortable experience overall but was crucial in order to *pass*. Passing meant donning a convincingly male presentation in society. All trans men made an effort to pass as male, and the most salient strategy was binding their chest. Jason and Ken mentioned that they bought their binders online because they were not sold in the Philippines.

However, out of all the trans-vloggers, Daniel was seemingly subject to a formed dejectedness about his situation. He described dysphoria as hating your body, but he initially tried to cope with his non-male body by saying that accepting it is the best thing at the moment. Mik juxtaposed this thought by saying, “Lov[ing] your body is just like saying you should love your abusive parents because they’re still your parents anyway.” Mik was against being confined in a female body and trying to dress up simply for his family and society. He has expressed being envious of those trans men he saw online who were able to transition at a young age.

**Coming out.** Coming out can either become a freeing or constraining experience depending on the reaction of friends, family, or relatives. Regardless of its outcome, this is also the point where a few trans-vloggers discovered solidarity with other trans men in the specific hardships of being trans. Two stories were shared by Rainer

and Daniel regarding their coming out.

Rainer gave a detailed account of his coming out. Because he was not in close contact with his parents, he remembered video calling his dad and calling his mom through phone. He began his disclosure to his dad via video call by asking his dad if he was bothered by Rainer acting and dressing like a boy.

Rainer remembered that his father initially reacted with sadness, but later on told Rainer he was happy that he was able to share that part of him. Rainer also called his mom through phone where she replied that whatever makes him happy would make them happy too. The positive reactions made Rainer tear up because of the support he received from his family and his peers on an identity that is prone to rejection. “I said I love them after coming out.”

Daniel’s case was a bit more complicated. After coming out as a man and as a lesbian, he shared how his father got physical and hit him (this negative reception was also due to his father’s disapproval of Daniel’s on-going abusive relationship). He rationalized his experience by giving such advice: “Do not, please, do not expect they will accept right away. Because they are parents and if they raised you as a girl, they want you to grow up as a girl. Don’t expect too much, so if they don’t like it, it’s fine.”

**Decision to transition.** This phase was the point where medically transitioning was becoming part of their future as trans men, wherein they had negotiated within themselves that transitioning was ultimately the right thing to do. Worries were sometimes still shared. Rainer articulated his worries that his friends and family might think he’d become a different person. “Sometimes I think about what will happen if one day I answer the phone and [my mom] hears someone different. *Maramdaman niya na wala na anak niya* (She’ll feel like she’d lost her child).” The turning point for his plans to medically transition was to resolve his gender dysphoria:

I’m doing this because I want to get rid of my dysphoria. Like I wanna feel complete. Like every day is just like I’m only living half of my life. This is something I’ve been wanting to do for over a year now. Because since I realized I was transgender, I wasn’t right away decisive of actually going through it. I told myself that

I wanted to take my time to think about it.

Ken and Daniel shared their plans of self-administration since testosterone was hard to acquire through prescription. Daniel decided to find a testosterone vial from his friends, whereas Ken decided to do things alone without any medical guidance. After claiming his testosterone vial from his friend, Ken was made to pledge to his friend that he was 100% sure with his decision to take testosterone.

### **Transitioning Phase**

This phase involved storylines following the physical and psychological changes triggered by testosterone therapy. This path follows the point of resolution in their decision to medically transition. Accordingly, this is one of the most defining phases all five trans-vloggers had undergone.

**Hormone therapy or testosterone (“T”).** Testosterone is a transmasculine hormone therapy commonly taken through syringe injection. It usually requires a prescription from a doctor, however some have risked obtaining it without prescription due to limitations like being unable to find a doctor. The fluid inside the vial is then injected over the course of weeks or months. As mentioned earlier, this hormone allows a trans man to develop secondary male characteristics. This is almost akin to boys entering puberty and experiencing significant changes in voice, hair, and bone structure. Regardless of initial unobservable changes, the first day of T was always met with happiness or intense joy as presented by all trans-vloggers, almost as if the person was granted freedom from a life in prison. Jason illustrated how receiving his vial felt like:

I just had this sense of utter joy and just hope and happiness that I haven’t really felt. Like a jolt in a very long while. The vial felt like it was burning in my pocket, the kind that emits life and it just felt pleasantly surreal that a whole new different phase of my life can fit into my pocket. It makes me joyous in a ridiculous way.

Vlogs documenting their first shot (or the experience after the first shot) were all characterized with an upbeat tone. Mik, for instance, was

shown to be with his friend Genie while documenting his first shot of T unsupervised. The vlog captured a moment of excitement as the two friends looked at each other with nervous excitement, needle hovered above Mik's thigh. The vlog then cuts to their enthusiastic reactions afterwards.

Daniel, who has shown a pessimistic attitude on the limited professional help that can be found in the Philippines, was also able to document his reaction, which was a far cry from how he dimly described his future as a transgender man. "Everything feels good. Finally I'm on my way. I don't know what to say actually," he said. Ken voiced a similar experience, sharing that he couldn't even begin to describe his feeling of happiness.

The start of transition also marks the beginning point of reducing dysphoria, which also means an increase in well-being. Rainer, after a few days on T, said that he was never called ma'am when transacting in a fastfood drive-thru (although he admits that it still happens in small instances among store clerks). Jason, on the other hand, was the only one who said he already passes as male 99% of the time. Regardless, he expressed that for the first time he feels like he is on the right track.

Consequently, worries about not passing were now more amplified. Because of the expectation of being gendered as male after T, the tolerance for misgendering is lowered. This can cause relapse to dysphoria since their masculinity is even further questioned despite testosterone. It is important to note that, despite the substantial physical changes hormone therapy brings, it is a gradual month-to-month change.

**Engaging with the trans community.** If previously not in contact with other trans or LGBT groups, the point of transition is where trans men would often seek support. For those who were already members (Mik, Rainer, Jason), the sense of camaraderie grows even stronger. This theme suggests a participation in FTM advocacies and awareness groups wherein the giving and the receiving of support regarding transition (or trans matters) are continued. The sharing of stories allows for trans men to brave the challenges of hormone therapy or to assist others on further procedures like top surgery.

For example, Ken and Mik helped gift binders to some of their trans Youtube viewers (through offered discounts or special raffles). Mik

also mentioned his active participation in his local FTM community which involved creating material for trans-specific events.

Aside from providing help, the trans-vloggers also received help from other trans men. For instance, a random Filipino trans man who was a viewer offered Ken a free vial upon realizing he did not have his required vial for the week. Jason, who had trouble paying for top surgery, opened a Facebook site where he sells themed merchandise for money he would use for top surgery. According to the vloggers, transitioning without a community is more difficult.

### **Post-transition**

Post-transition refers to the stage when voluntary actions of further medical transitioning (either with hormone therapy or with surgical procedures) ends. However, this term is subjective to trans people. Some trans men may not consider themselves post-transition if they have not yet developed a convincingly male form. Regardless, the post-transition phase consists of three events: facing social and institutional problems, the positioning of oneself as either a male or a transgender male (*stealth* versus coming out), and finally ending in advocacy and resolution.

**Facing social challenges and institutional dilemmas.** Discrimination, stigma, or prejudice can vary in intensity or presence depending on the social context. Responses of Filipino society on their transgenderism can be met with mild discomfort or full-on acceptance. Despite all trans-vloggers experiencing a form of acceptance, all felt the limiting nature of being trans in a society actively promoting the gender binary.

Jason brings up the problem of being transgender and of having to enter bathrooms. He said:

When I'm walking towards to the water closet, all I keep thinking is please don't let anyone be inside, please don't let anyone be inside. Otherwise, I'm left with no other choice but to hold it in and hope I don't get UTI. I have to go through so much trouble, psychological and emotional trouble, just from the hassle of using the toilet. It's unfair.

He ties this story to when a male co-worker (who knew Jason before as a lesbian) entered the men's bathroom while Jason was inside. His co-worker was shocked with Jason's presence in the men's bathroom. Jason later realized he was reported by this co-worker to his supervisor. Whether or not it was for good or bad reasons, Jason easily let go of the occurrence and understood that acceptance is not immediate.

Another story was shared by Mik regarding his interview in the TV show *Bandila*. The segment was focused on transgender men and, subsequently, a couple of trans men were interviewed by the hosts in live television. Mik posted a vlog where he vented his frustration:

It just got progressively worse and worse. Not only did they never once properly gender the guys, they kept referring to them as "babaeng gustong maging lalaki." And these newscasters generally did good work and are respectable. It was all so sensational, it was all so...it was for shock value basically. I just felt so disrespected.

**Stealth versus coming out.** This post-transition experience refers to the blurring between presenting oneself as "male" or as a "transgender male." The decision usually depends on the social environment and their relationships with the people in it. While passing as a 100% male can mean their identity as men has been achieved, when placed in a work or school setting, the decision to remain stealth (keeping their transition private) or to come out arises.

Jason recalled having to face this problem in his workplace. Because their company had to move buildings and hire new employees, he used the company break in between to medically transition. Upon returning, the new building included both co-workers he did and did not know. Since his new colleagues were unaware of his trans background, it became a balancing act between deciding to be stealth or coming out to them.

Mik also shared a similar issue in a work setting. Since he perceives himself not to be the type to hide his trans identity, he had to rethink his situation once his company played a question game, the question being, "if you were given 5 million pesos, what would you do with the

money?” Mik said he found himself unable to tell the truth since he wanted to answer that he would use it for top surgery. He shared in his vlog that he became unsure of coming out. “I was confused whether to tell or not. I partially want to come out, but I also liked the idea of being stealth.” The state of being stealth assumes a trans-free male identity, which some trans-vloggers have pondered or desired.

**Road to advocacy and resolution.** Even at this point of transition, challenges are still present like that of gender dysphoria reappearing once in a while, and of discrimination that further added to the plight of trans men. Nevertheless, a road to integration and advocacy becomes a point of resolution for the trans-vloggers. They are able to offer help in changing the attitude of Filipinos on trans men (or the LGBT community in general). For example, Mik mentioned his participation in a forum that invited transgender individuals to comment on the state of the anti-discrimination bill; Jason and Rainer have conducted talks in universities; and Daniel has been the chairperson of a Filipino trans man group.

Some achievements have also extended beyond trans-limited problems. Ken, who is a passionate mountaineer, was able to achieve one of his biggest dreams. He told his Youtube audience that he will be joining a team to climb Mt. Everest. While the trek was only to the base camp, he still expressed an unrivaled enthusiasm that he said was only possible after transitioning. Jason gave a final note after discovering the capabilities of transitioning:

It might sound petty, but think of what that implies. What that means in the bigger picture. These changes or this progress allows us to gradually break free from the limitations that FTMs have always been subjected to. Clothing, hairstyle, mannerisms, habits, reactions. The list goes on and on. Trans men can now have equal chances with happiness and contentment. At this point there are no regrets. Only an optimistic look into the future and what it holds.

### **Summary**

The storyline was able to account for most of the trans-vlogger’s individual experiences, although particular events crossed between

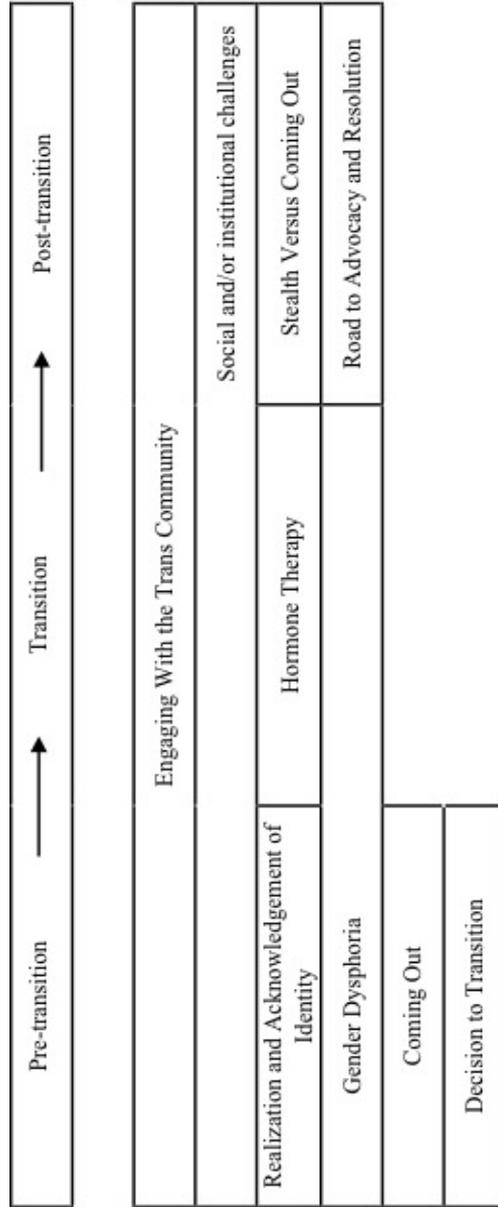


Figure 1. Visual presentation of trans-vloggers' transitioning phases and their events

phases for some (which is noted in Figure 1). The pre-transition phase focused on gender identity as a crucial aspect in the trans-vloggers' lives. *Coping With Gender Dysphoria* shows the events of passing, presentation, misgendering and the person's enactment and reception of their male identity pre-testosterone. The discomfort of the feminine body is heightened especially when brought attention to, like being identified with female pronouns or with the prominence of their female biology. After coming out, cracking under dysphoria or gaining complete resolution of their identity becomes the trigger point for hormone therapy. The *Decision to Transition* event is thus a way towards preparation.

Transitioning then is a significantly cathartic event for all trans-vloggers, however some are still gripped by bouts of dysphoria considering that biological changes are gradual. Social challenges are then joined by the dilemmas caused by institutional or legal forces. And while *Engaging Within the Trans Community* is mostly present even before transition for some trans-vloggers, the security found in this collective transforms more into belongingness, just as the challenges of being a Filipino trans man are more realized and experienced. Finally, acting against these limitations with a firmer identity marks the resolution of the transitioning process.

## DISCUSSION

The study explored the overall trajectory of trans men's narratives in three phases. Pre-transition shows the emergence of the transgender self or, as Pollock and Eyre (2012) defines it, "the growing sense of gender." The narrative also parallels Pinto and Moleiro's (2015) first and second stages of transgender growth: realizing gender difference and finding a label for the identity. Indeed, as told by Jason, Mik, Rainer, and Daniel, discovering the term transgender made a significant impact in their lives as they started to identify with it. This event sparked the trajectory leading to transition and post-transition.

Gender dysphoria was also one of the most salient experiences of being trans. As numerous clinical studies posit, distress and depression or the decline in mental health are the manifestations of gender dysphoria (Budge et al., 2013; Turan et al., 2015). The findings show

a similar trend such as in Rainer's growing irritation from frequently being called ma'am and Daniel's expression of hatred for his body, especially his chest. The findings showed how trans men combated this dysphoria. While gender presentation is a way of aligning with the male body, it also becomes a shield from dysphoria lest they be misgendered as female.

### **Analyzing Transitioning**

The findings captured how transitioning or undergoing hormone therapy becomes the defining event for trans men. Trans men are finally given the opportunity to fix the mismatch between the gender of their mind and the gender of their body. Hence, it is no surprise that such process garners intense joy and relief. Previous literature (Karpel et al., 2015) has already documented this increase in well-being in a quantitative lens, which are supported by this study's qualitative findings.

Austin and Craig's (2013) three types of transitioning (social, medical, and legal), can in fact be loosely applied to the phases that clustered the nine events. Pre-transition lies within the domain of social transitioning. Coming out, adopting new pronouns, and being recognized as male is centered within the self in interaction with the social; transitioning includes the act of medically transitioning because of the trans men's endeavor to change their biology; lastly, post-transition includes structural and legal dilemmas, where trans men fight for institutional integration that currently ignores their problems with public bathrooms, air travel, access to medication, partnerships, human rights, and documents.

Most of the literature and even this study's findings focus on transition being only understood as a medical phenomenon. By way of contrast, I also wanted to address that trans men are also exposed to numerous kinds of transition: the transition to being recognized as a man by friends and family, the transition to a life lived with limitations, the transition of the self becoming more resilient against major challenges, and so on. Each key event within the phases are also points of transformation for the trans person. Coming out, joining trans groups, or deciding to medically transition shows too a kind of

psychological transition. Being able to medically transition requires an awareness of their gender nonconformity.

Further, events within stories are explained by the overall narrative perspective offered by Hammack and Cohler (2011). In the case of the trans man's narrative, the academic literature has usually offered segmented parts of their experiences. For instance, current models have looked into psychosocial processes of the transgender identity. Gagne et al. (1997) focused on the coming out stories of male-to-female transgendered folks. Lev (2004) looked at the decision-making process on medical transitioning. The closest is Pinto and Moleiro's (2015) study on transsexual people, both FTM and MTF, which advanced a perspective into transsexual people's coming into acceptance. However, while their paper can serve as a basis for further LGBT qualitative research, the sample and the virtue of Pinto and Moleiro's (2015) study does not expound on social psychological factors, considering as well that institutional and cultural differences are crucial in the process of transitioning. For instance, the lack of systematic medical transgender resources, legal limitations, and the local stereotyping of trans men shape how Filipino trans men live and understand their gender identity.

### **Conclusion**

The findings in this study, therefore, point to a sequence of shared experiences in the form of a narrative. Pre-transition becomes the take-off for medical transitioning, whereas post-transition provides a semblance of resolution after the hurdles of coming out or coping with gender dysphoria. However, other events can become present in other phases. Specifically, discrimination is not only limited to the post-transition phase. Gender dysphoria and companionship as well are notably present in some phases, particularly for Jason who was reminded of his gender dysphoria when recounting the incident with the public bathrooms.

In spite of these social and psychological setbacks, Jason, Ken, Daniel, Mik, and Rainer's vlogs formed a storyline that can help in understanding how Filipino transgender men live their lives. Some can be Philippine-specific narratives (e.g., tackling social and institutional

dilemmas), while others may be common with trans men's documented experiences elsewhere, like the realization of identity and coping with gender dysphoria (Benson, 2013; Budge et al., 2013). For example, Raun's (2010) research also found that experiences of transphobia, dysphoria, financial and medical dilemmas are inseparable from a transgender person's life. Their stories are then living examples of how society envelopes narratives beyond the gender binary system.

However, part of the conclusions on the findings also have to be contextualized within the period the trans-vloggers lived in and the socioeconomic status that allowed them to overcome the limitations of medically transitioning. In recent times where LGBT movements allowed more visibility and celebration, LGBT identities have now become more accepted. This can lead to trans men being more surefooted in their gender identification. It is likely that trans men who grew up before this timeline may have experienced a different version of the narratives from the findings here. Belonging to a particular generational cohort and social class are indeed factors that have also shaped the narratives canvassed in this study.

From the realization and acknowledgment of identity leading to their resolution and road to advocacy, the trans-vloggers were able to act, change, and reposition their social selves. This translates to being placed in different social spheres, like among friends, families, co-workers, Filipino society (e.g., the media), but also—and most significantly—the placement of a person within their transgender self.

### **Recommendations and Limitations**

Using video blogs as sources of data presents an opportunity for further study, given the novelty of the method and the absence of standards for online data collection. With respect to ethics, for instance, there exists a dilemma on whether publicly accessible content is subject to more relaxed standards of confidentiality when used for research purposes. What is the balance between transparency and respect for privacy in a researcher's use of public qualitative data? More specific ethical guidelines for the use of public online data with personal and identifiable content should be developed.

Vlogs are also mediated, edited, and subject to self-representation.

An implication of this is how Youtube trans-vloggers do not disclose all events pertaining to their trans life story, and the analysis is limited to what they preferred to share. For example, how were their intimate relationships affected and maintained by the transitioning process? What childhood experiences pointed to their trans identity? These questions and gaps can be topics explored in future psychological research on the lives of Filipino transgender individuals.

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