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Thicker than Blood

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THICKER THAN BLOOD

A Capstone Project Presented in Partial Fulfillment
Of the Requirements for the Degree Bachelor of Arts
With Honors College Graduate Distinction at
Western Kentucky University

By

Kendall A. Norwood

May 2017

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Professor Tim Broekema, Chair

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I dedicate this capstone to
Patrick Daniels for always providing guidance and strength
And
My family for providing endless support

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

It is hard to believe that this project is finally complete. Many sleepless nights later, this project signifies a close to my time as a collegiate member of WKUPJ. Along the way I have received much guidance and support from not only my friends and family, but also my peers and professors. I could not have made “Beyond Letter: From Rachael to Riley” without the collaborative efforts of Cassidy Mayo. Thank you for always being a backbone in our group efforts and always moving this project forward. I’m grateful to Tim Broekema for constantly challenging me to be better and providing endless guidance. Thank you to Mac McKerral (P-Mac) for not only inspiring me, but for helping me grow as a student. I appreciate the input from the 17 remaining members of the PJ 436 Projects senior class. Most importantly, thank you to my loved ones for staying by my side through this whole process. It is because of all of you that this project was possible.

Finally, I want to thank each individual who let me document his or her story throughout these four years. Thank you for opening your homes, hearts and lives to my camera and me. I have learned so much from each experience with you. A special thank you to Riley, who inspired this capstone and made it all possible.

ABSTRACT

Everyone seeks acceptance in one facet or another throughout his or her life, and for Riley McCracken this desire for acceptance is no different. “Thicker Than Water” is a photojournalistic look at the life of a young person who recently has entered the phase of physically transitioning from female to male. Through documentation of Riley’s journey, this project showcases a humanizing and personal face to the relevant discussion of LGBT rights fought for nationally as well as in Kentucky. Riley’s story is one that echoes the struggle that many trans and gender dysmorphic individuals face, but the struggle is not understood by a large segment of the population. This project shares a story that does not fit the confines of cisgender identification, and adds a face to an ongoing issue through a unique perspective.

This project is a documentation of Riley’s life and how his unique experience correlates to universal themes of acceptance and family. Through a photo story and multimedia piece, with collaborative efforts from Cassidy Mayo, I showcase how Riley finds acceptance in himself and within the community. To experience the full project and the expanded collaboration visit [here](#).

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INTRODUCTION

From behind my camera, I developed a passion for photography many years ago, and as my passion grew, so did my interest in sharing the stories of those around me. I unintentionally sought after something deeper in my subjects. What started as a casual question would spark a full discussion, ever expanding, and serving to develop my curiosity and creativity.

As a photojournalism student, I would quickly learn that this need to question was essential for developing visual storytelling, and that beyond asking questions, I needed to share the answers. It was a requirement. For this reason specifically, the picture story exists.

The picture story is a visual narrative outlining the workings of an individual or potentially many individuals. From the small details of the morning routine to the depths of whatever struggle he or she may face, each aspect is documented and accounted for visually. Similarly, the role of the picture story is to showcase the life of those being photographed.

Yet the picture story is hard to explain to someone, especially to a potential subject. How do you ask to invade someone's life—every minute and each struggle—to document each detail visually? Initially, it can be easy to get someone on board, because in theory it does sound like fun, like your own personal paparazzi. But that is never really the goal of taking on a new story. That just scratches the surface. Yet, with each push closer to the goal more resistance from your subject can and in my experience usually occurs.

The quest for access is not always a direct question but a supposition. At first, a tiny game that goes back and forth, at first: “What is your schedule, when can I come,” slowly transforms into “I’m already here, let’s get started.” With each new access the subject opens a new level of vulnerability and as each level of vulnerability is exposed, a depth is added to the story. So it all seems fine, and you hit a stride working and shooting with your subject, until randomly with no warning signs, he or she stops returning your calls. Suddenly your desire to share their story results in ignored text messages and unanswered phone calls, however, that is just a normal part of the process: get the story in and done in the time you are granted, whether it is a school/work deadline, the acceptable end to the story, or just the end of the subject’s willingness.

“Thicker Than Water” was born out of a need to fulfill an in-class assignment. Randomly drawn, the little piece of paper I picked so gingerly out of the hat more than a year ago, simply stated, “Alternative Lifestyle.” So, I sought out a story, and as I narrowed down my ideas, Riley’s story came to light. Riley began his transition as I began my project. It was the perfect timing. The journey from who he was to who he is and from what the small in class assignment started as to what it is continuing to become was more than I had anticipated. But it became everything I could hope for with a character and project of this nature.

PROCESS

The start of the photo story process is fairly formulaic. It begins with an interview with the character to find out what the story direction might be and then shooting the actualities that line up with that initial interview and any other subsequent interviews. The process slowly builds from there until the end points and holes reveal themselves, and then those empty spots are filled in and built upon layer by layer until the story is whole.

Beyond the planning, comes the actual process of shooting. It becomes a matter of taking over the subject's life and documenting as much as possible. With Riley, I started off the project slowly, pushing my way further and further into his life, knowing that I was broaching a typically touchy subject. Yet, I knew he needed some pushing. So slowly I occupied his life and his space until we reached the point where he would forget I was even there. Once this level of understanding and acceptance is reached, the images just flow.

With regard to putting the project together, the story structure followed a basic guideline of "you, need, go, search, find, take, return, and change." This means when planning out how to shoot the project, my colleague, Mayo and I, both looked at this guide as a reminder for matching actualities to story. The "you" section focuses on character, meaning any piece of the story that revealed who Riley was would theoretically fall within this category. We chose a slow reveal to create an interest in the audience. After we established who Riley was and is, we showcased whom he wanted to be and what he wanted, which was ultimately just acceptance.

The rest quickly followed: “go” showed him taking testosterone; “search” was building relationships; “find” was forming new family; “take” was giving up his blood family; “return” was seeking acceptance from his “real” family; and “change” was building his life with Mitchell. From this point, we filled in the missing pieces.

ACCEPTANCE

In life, we all operate under the same understanding that acceptance is something every single person deserves, no matter his or her age, race, gender or sexual orientation. Yet, a large segment of the population never deals with a struggle for acceptance as difficult as gender misidentity.

This documentary explores the life of Riley McCracken, a recent Western Kentucky University graduate, and his search for acceptance as he continues the process of transitioning from his female sex assigned at birth to male, with which he more closely identifies. Because of this transition, Riley has been forced to hide who he really is from his family. He has faced moments of being cut off from his family but continues to seek that family support he once enjoyed.

Riley struggles to find the love and acceptance that a family is supposed to provide. His girlfriend, Kendra Mitchell, serves as a great source of strength for him and has helped him begin to find himself. He has to find it within himself to find who really wants and needs to be. Riley has worked to open himself up to the LGBT community around him by getting involved with “drag” performances, and he works to build friendships with other transgender people who serve as a new family for him. Riley’s story so empirically contrasts the idea that blood is thicker than water.

The main conflict in this documentary is between Riley and himself and Riley and the world around him. After not feeling comfortable in his own skin for more than two decades, Riley is ready to finally trying to be completely himself. This includes finding the people who are willing to love him for who he truly is.

Acceptance is the guiding theme for this project with the idea of family coming in as a close sub-story. I wanted to show the theme of community as Riley used his community to find himself. Through this story, I attempted to create a platform for sharing his story. As the project continued, it developed into a larger format, multimedia and web-based project.

Riley's story provides a face to relevant political discussion of LGBT rights that are being discussed today. These rights are being fought for now more than ever, making the timing of this story even more relevant, especially in Kentucky, where there is no statewide law that prohibits the discrimination of individuals based on sexual orientation. That means nearly 77 percent of Kentucky's workforce that is not protected by an ordinance covering gender identity discrimination or sexual orientation discrimination¹.

Riley's story echoes the struggle that many trans and gender dysmorphic individuals face, but it is not a story that is widely understood. It is a story that some would never in their life experience, but by sharing Riley's story, I hope to give perspective into the mind of someone seeking acceptance. I hope the audience connects to this search for acceptance and can feel that they can accept Riley as well. I attempt to connect a real story with the headline, and that is one of the biggest reasons people should care.

¹ Christy Mallory and Brad Sears, "Employment Discrimination Based on Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity." (UCLA: *The Williams Institute*, Feb. 2015).

FAMILY

When Riley's dad found out that Riley was interested in pursuing a relationship with a girl, he told him, "Either you pick the family and change your ways or you pick the girl and move out of the house." However, Riley chose option three. He chose himself. For Riley, coming out was a less than desirable experience, but deciding that he really was transgender was the first time he felt like he could get off antidepressants and take a chance to really be himself. Three months into testosterone shots he called his mother and told her,

"I'm not sick. My voice is changing for a reason. I am transitioning. I'm three months on 'T' and this is happening. I know you're [going to] be upset, but that's not what I'm trying to do. I decided to pick myself, and I'm tired of people running my life. I'm finally actually happy."

This idea of family was the backbone of the story we shared.

Though the purpose of the project was storytelling, interviewing Riley and discussing the different pieces of his life allowed him to explore who he is as a person greater than any unprovoked self-discovery he could have made. Riley was able to build upon questions we posed, which led him to grant us more insight into the man he was trying to become. This process is one of the greatest benefits of storytelling for the characters. Beyond having a copy of the project to reflect on, Riley is able to benefit along the way as the project is developed. This is one of my favorite aspects of photojournalism.

One of the goals we had for this project was to interview either Riley's mother or father. As the project progressed, Mayo and I came to realize of just how strained the relationship with his parents really was.

We discovered that when Riley's parents legally separated, and ultimately divorced, his mother chose to leave the family entirely, not just her husband. Riley told us in interview that at one point he felt like he truly hated his mother. She was probably the most unwilling to accept Riley in the family. Riley said his mother once told his father that if his father did not stop treating him like a son, that Riley would truly want to be one, which is what happened, though this is something that would have inevitably occurred in Riley's life. So keeping this understanding in mind, Mayo and I knew that the parents would be most unwilling to speak to us, so we pursued other outlets until the story developed in a direction to, where speaking directly with the family was not nearly as important as we imagined.

Part of completing a project like this is understanding that the structure is constantly changing, and something that may have seemed important at one time, may not stay important. Therefore, when we were unable to achieve access in certain places in the story, we refocused our efforts to other parts of the story.

CHALLENGE

The great experience of being a photojournalist is the never-ending challenge of being a one-man band. The product lies completely in your hands. You are in charge of audio, video, direction, lighting, and what seems like a thousand other things. You hold all the responsibility, whereas those in other media industries typically have a team. When this is the case, one mistake can be much more costly. Add a partner, and the difficulty to stay in control is even greater. Though this project ran seemingly smooth, mistakes were bound to happen along the way, and they did.

For instance, during our first video interview with Riley, we divided up tasks. My partner, Cassidy Mayo was on audio and Camera 2 and I controlled the main camera and the lead with questions. Malfunction with Camera 2 and error with the audio recording resulted in essentially unusable material. This was unfortunately not discovered until after the lengthy interview was complete. However, we knew we had no choice but to move forward and shoot the interview again, so we did.

In more general instances, scheduling was another major problem while working on a project of this type. Regardless of the fact that we as shooters are both full-time students, we also chose a subject who was a recent graduate and had a hectic schedule of his own. Between my partner and myself, we were able to create time for shooting better than had we worked individually. However, this did not mean that Riley was always available during this time or that the actualities that were happening lined up with the story we were trying to tell. Conflicting schedules have been fairly commonplace during the past four years, so it was nothing good time management skills could not overcome.

Yet, it is unfortunate when it causes you to miss out on sharing a possibly integral piece of the story. I firmly believe that no matter how strong a project is that there will be at least a few things you leave wishing you had captured or explored further. A project may never feel fully complete.

Even so, sometimes the scheduling conflicts are not the fault of the shooter but the subject. Subjects can easily quit on a project at any point throughout the process. It does not matter how good the story is going. Anything could change. This means that unresponsiveness is often the biggest challenge on any project. I learned early in the photojournalism program that even though you are telling the story of another, they are not always as invested in the way you share their story as you may be. The characters of any photo story or documentary have lives beyond the immediate story that is being shared. When the story produces conflicts, the subjects—in my experience—always choose themselves first. It's natural for them to make that choice, but it does not create good results for the photojournalist. Being capable of overcoming these challenges is the greatest skill to build, but sometimes, no matter how much progress you make or how strong your connection with your subject is, they may just decide that it is not important enough to them. Thankfully, Riley stayed in contact as best he could, even if it did take an extra text message or call.

With these potential obstacles in mind, we knew we had to remain steadfast in our approach and make the most of what we had. The greatest trait of any photojournalist is resourcefulness, and for every challenge thrown our way, we persevered. We knew what we needed to get, and we were going to do whatever possible to get it.

THE INITIAL PICTURE STORY



Figure 1. Riley McCracken, 21 of Benton, KY, was born Rachael McCracken. Though he no longer identifies as female, McCracken is early in the process of transitioning male.



Figure 2. McCracken is in the process of moving in with his girlfriend Kendra Mitchell, 21 of Princeton, KY. "I basically have already moved in, but I still have all my stuff at

my other apartment," McCracken said. "When we broke up this last time for a bit, we still knew we had to work on ourselves but I think moving in will be good for us. We're in a better place than a few months ago."



Figure 3. McCracken and Mitchell share a dog, Sparky. The dog stays at Mitchell's apartment, even when McCracken is not living there. "Even when we aren't together, having a dog and knowing that we would eventually be back together made it possible for us to stay best friends," said McCracken. "She's still my ex now, but that doesn't mean she will be for long."

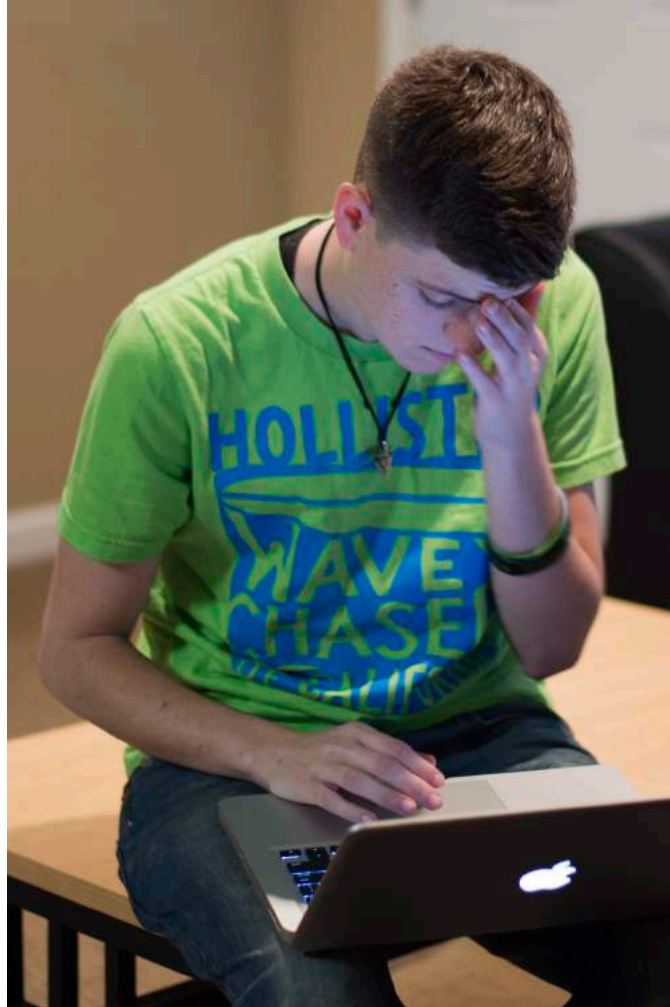


Figure 4. As part of being medically cleared to start Testosterone shots, McCracken must participate in weekly Skype sessions with a therapist. "I'm ready for 'T,' but I'm not looking forward to starting puberty all over again," said McCracken. "This time, I have my voice cracking to look forward to."



Figure 5. “My parents don’t know that I’m starting ‘T’ yet, but they’ll notice soon enough,” said McCracken. “My dad still hasn’t handled the fact that I’m gay yet, so if I have to dress girly and put on my panties when I’m home, sometimes I will. I’m ready to be done with that.”



Figure 6. Mitchell will be administering the testosterone shots each week for McCracken. "I really struggled with my gender dysphoria last semester and I was so depressed, but now that I'm getting things figured out, I'm feeling better about it all," said McCracken.

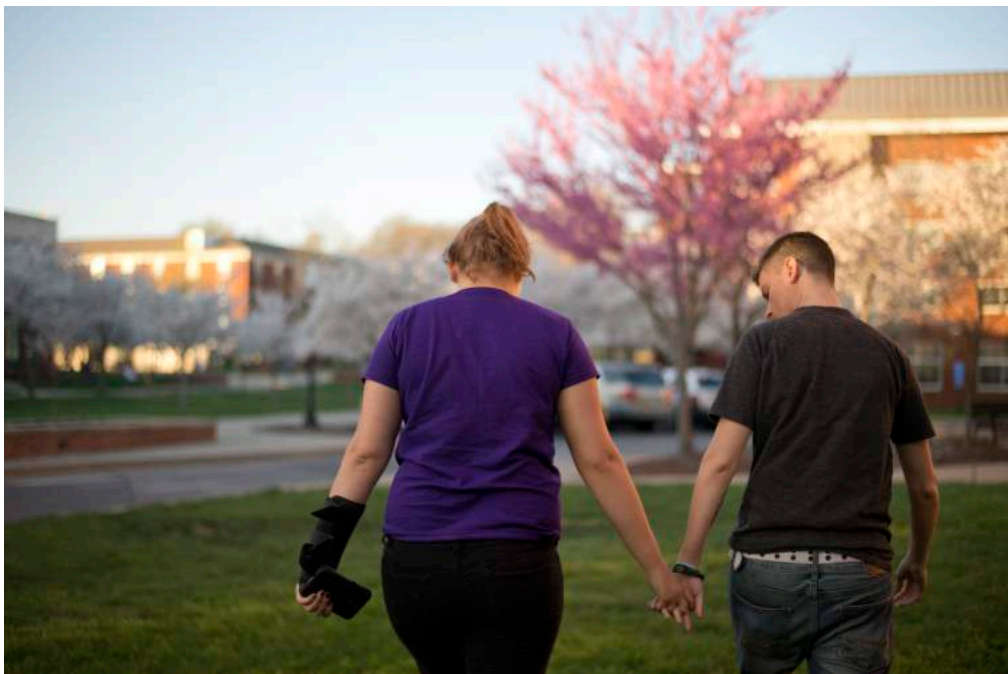


Figure 7. "We're starting to try dating each other again," said McCracken. "We know we can be together but it just took having some time apart to fully see that we're better dating."



Figure 8. McCracken has competed in five drag shows. "It's my best means of expression," McCracken said. "I just get up there and do whatever I want for the audience."



Figure 9. McCracken auditions for a drag show through Western Kentucky University's Housing and Residence Life's residence program. "I did this show last year, and it was the first show I ever did," said McCracken. "Now it seems like old news for me."



Figure 10. McCracken contours his face and adds facial hair to define his masculine features. "I've been doing little things to boost my testosterone," said McCracken. "For now, I do what I can."



Figure 11. McCracken relies on Mitchell to help with his makeup and frequently shares makeup and hair products with her.



Figure 12. "Kendra is my best friend, ex or not," said McCracken. "She's been there since the beginning of this process and will be with me along the way."



Figure 13. McCracken works for WKU Public Broadcasting Station.



Figure 14. McCracken begins testosterone shots in less than a week. "It's been like I've been waiting for this my whole life," said McCracken.

To see the full multimedia project, visit [here](#).

“ANALYSIS OF TRANSGENDER”

Within the past decade, a rise in media attention to the lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer (LGBTQ) community has occurred. With recent legislation such as the “Defense of Marriage Act of 2015” being overturned and evaluation of fairness ordinances within local communities, it comes as no surprise that the most prevalent movement in today’s society is focused on the rights of members of the LGBTQ community. Some are even equating the movement to that of the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s. Regardless of whether the comparison can be made fairly, only approximately 0.6 percent of the population for adults and 0.7 percent of the population for ages 13-17 actually make up the transgender community². With these statistics in mind, the shift in focus raises the question: What exactly is driving such strong media attention toward such a small sector of the population, and moreover, why is this the case?

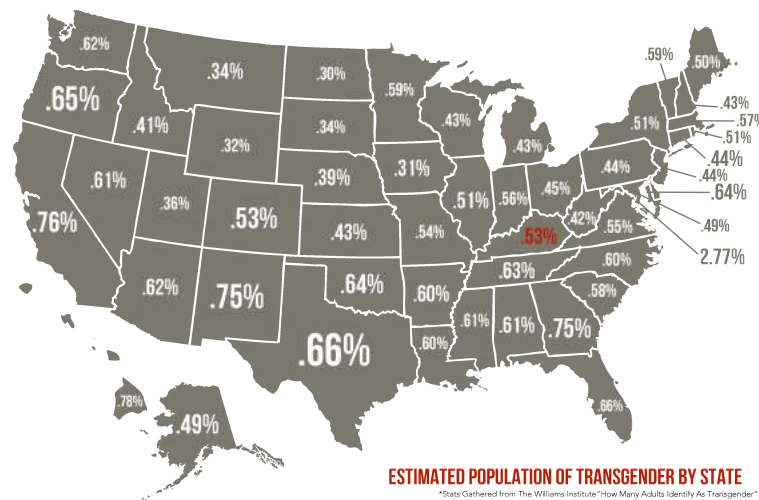


Figure 15. Estimated Population of Transgender By State

² J.L. Herman, A.R. Flores, T.N.T. Brown, B.D.M. Wilson, & K.J. Conron, “Age of Individuals Who Identify as Transgender in the United States.” (UCLA: *The Williams Institute*, 2017).

Every day, more and more terms that apply to the LGBTQ community are added to promote inclusivity, but for many these terms can be confusing and ever-changing. At the risk of sounding ignorant, many individuals choose to stick with the simplest terms that are most universally known, like “gay” and “lesbian.”³ However, some individuals, are beginning to question the fluidity of gender itself—with even more people questioning the normal binary divisions of male versus female with regard to gender⁴.

For those that believe this way, gender has become a cultural identity rather than biological. This gender misidentity relates to the transgender portion of LGBTQ. Lesbian, gay and bisexual all deal with sexual orientation. However, with regard to transgender, sexual orientation does not play a role in how members of the transgender group identify. If a person identifies as transgender, then they may be straight, gay or bisexual. The orientation is not reliant on gender.

“The phrase ‘transgender’ refers to breaking gender identity or transcending the boundaries of gender,”⁵. The transgender experience is more easily understood when the gender confusion is clarified.

Moreover, “Gender Dysphoria” “refers to discomfort or distress that is caused by a discrepancy between a person’s gender identity and that person’s sex assigned at birth.”⁶ This struggle is part of the process of acceptance among transgender on an internal level. This personal understanding of his or her gender is a distinction that may

³ C. E. Koch, “Media Exposure and Self-esteem of Gay and Lesbian Young Adults.” *Fordham University*, 2013.

⁴ R.W Connell, “Gender.” (Cambridge: *Polity Press*, 2002).

⁵ J. Green, “Becoming a Visible Man.” (*Vanderbilt University Press*: Nashville, TN, 2004).

⁶ E. Coleman, “Standards of Care for the Health of Transsexual, Transgender, and Gender-Conforming People.” (*International Journal of Transgenderism*, 2011).

never reveal itself, but this is where gender fluidity becomes the identity of choice. The American Psychiatric Association (APA) has replaced the diagnosis of “Gender Identity Disorder” with “Gender Dysphoria.” This change promotes a better understanding that being transgender is not a disorder but a distinction. It removes the negative stigmatization of this condition.

Though policy has become more focused on equality in the last decade—with changes in same-sex marriage laws and the repeal of the military’s “Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell” policy—the transgender community still faces hardship and discrimination.

The prevalence of transgender individuals, however, is widely due to media coverage. Through the Gay & Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation (GLAAD) the LGBTQ community has been represented publically for more than 30 years. During these last three decades, GLAAD’s work has attempted to promote and protect the perceptions of members of the LGBTQ community. Further, GLAAD releases an annual “Network Responsibility Index” to track and then later demonstrate the role of LGBTQ members represented on television and in broadcast. Since 2006, the “Network Responsibility Index” has seen an “increase in the rate of inclusion and quality of LGBTQ characters” that is showcased⁷. This increase in roles representing LGBTQ characters impacts the real people experiencing life as a transgender person.

Alternatively, Bandura’s social learning theory, presents the idea that behavior is frequently modeled. With regard to television and media, audiences become more susceptible to the perceptions and stereotypes that they are presented⁸. Television portrayal of minorities has not always been kind in its treatment of the LGBTQ

⁷ GLAAD, “2015 Network Responsibility Index.” (2015).

⁸ Albert Bandura, “Social Learning Theory.” (*General Learning Press*: New York, 1971).

community. The portrayal of minorities typically follows a pattern of “non-recognition, ridicule, regulation, and finally respect.” LGBTQ characters have widely been shown as comical or mischievous⁹. This sort of portrayal caused audiences to equate what they were seeing on television and in the media with reality. This negative perspective was damaging to members of the LGBTQ community.

Following the mid-2000s, the perspective of the transgender persons shifted from ridicule to regulation. Now, transgender people are entering the respect phase, though this remains tenuous. GLAAD has found that the appearance of transgender individuals on television has significantly increased, and even more so, the media channels in which audiences consume their television programs have changed with more focus in online streaming services such as Netflix.¹⁰ The shift in programs from the mainstream networks has allowed programs to produce content that has the freedom to produce more controversial content that advertisers typically avoid¹¹. After the success of programs featuring transgender roles, more mainstream channels have started to accept sharing these stories and creating more LGBTQ roles. This acceptance of the mainstream allows a parallel in acceptance from audiences.

That is not to say that transgender or other members of the LGBT community have been fully added to mainstream television. In 2016, only four transgender characters were expected to broadcast on primetime-scripted television and of nearly 900 series regulars only 43 were LGBTQ¹².

⁹ R.W Connell, “Gender.” (Cambridge: *Polity Press*, 2002).

¹⁰ GLAAD, “2015 Network Responsibility Index.” (2015).

¹¹ C. E. Koch, “Media Exposure and Self-esteem of Gay and Lesbian Young Adults.” *Fordham University*, 2013.

¹² GLAAD, “Where We Are on TV.” (2016).

Additionally, the minority members of the LGBTQ community differ from other minorities in that isolation can occur to a greater degree. Other minority members typically have family, with which to relate their struggle with, but for LGBTQ members who typically lack this, they are forced to seek role models outside the home. Research has shown, “that having an association with someone in the media can build self-esteem of stigmatized groups.”¹³ Since these individuals are so reliant on the media and public role models, exploration into how the media changes self-esteem and perceptions is vital.

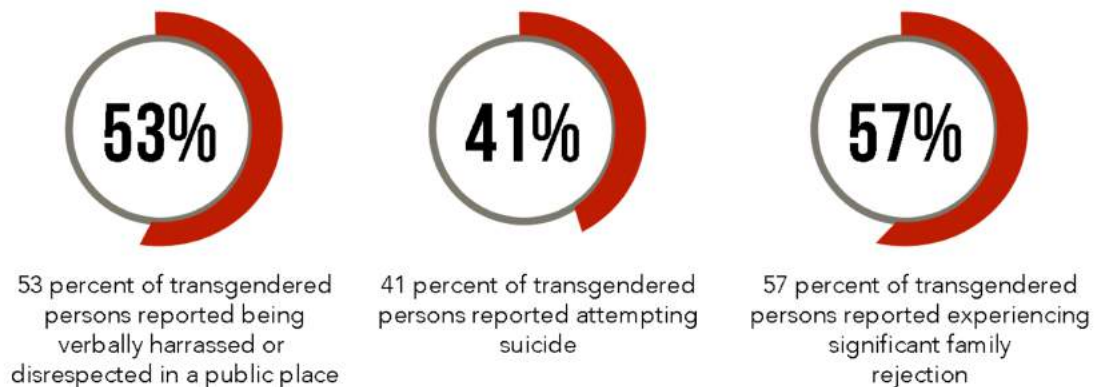


Figure 16. The National Center for Transgender Equality's National Transgender Survey Report

The struggle and movement of the lesbian, gay, transgender, and questioning community parallels the media portrayal of members of this community. Though the minority of transgender individuals is less than one percent¹⁴, the stories and roles that the media portray only help the majority gain a better understanding of who these

¹³ C. E. Koch, “Media Exposure and Self-esteem of Gay and Lesbian Young Adults.” *Fordham University*, 2013.

¹⁴ J.L. Herman, A.R. Flores, T.N.T. Brown, B.D.M. Wilson, & K.J. Conron, “Age of Individuals Who Identify as Transgender in the United States.” (UCLA: *The Williams Institute*, 2017).

individuals are. However, each individual's story may not be unique by sharing the stories of transgender individuals, the individual may find personal growth and the community can grow as well.

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