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# THE ONLINE OTHERING OF TRANSGENDER PEOPLE IN RELATION TO 'GENDER NEUTRAL TOILETS'

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## **Abstract**

In this chapter we provide an exposition and critical analysis of some ways in which transgender people are 'othered' online and attempts to resist or challenge this. This is achieved through the discursive analysis of 1756 online comments made in response to ten YouTube videos concerning 'gender neutral toilets'. Three themes were developed: 'Gender neutral toilets as sites of sexual danger'; 'Claiming victimhood: Gender neutral toilets as undermining the rights of cisgender people'; and 'The delegitimisation and othering of transgender people'. The theme on delegitimisation and othering is elaborated in detail. It consists of subthemes concerning the invocation of nature and biology to construct transgender people as challenging the given order; the mobilisation of religious and moral values and norms; the delegitimisation of transgender people by constructing them as psychopathological; and the construction of transgenderism as a 'modern trend' created by media and social media. The discursive resources used in othering transgender people overlap with those that have long been used in the offline denigration of sexual minority groups. We conclude that sexual and gender non-conformity is responded to with a limited set of tropes that delegitimise and other non-conforming people in culturally recognisable ways. We note that the framing of effective resistance to anti-transgender, othering online talk is not straightforward but calls for creative, evidence-based, contextually-informed discursive labour.

**Keywords:** Delegitimisation, Discourse Analysis, Gender Neutral Toilets, Othering, Transgender

## **Introduction**

An interest in the ‘othering’ of transgender people in recent years has done much to raise the profile of the everyday and normalised nature of victimisation experienced by transgender people. Chakraborti and Hardy (2015) have emphasised that transgender people regularly experience a range of hate incidents whilst doing everyday things such as shopping, eating out and travelling on public transport. The online othering of transgender people has not yet attracted significant attention within academic research on prejudice and discrimination. Instead research has focused on more ‘established’, socially recognised forms and contexts of prejudice and discrimination such as racism, homophobia and anti-religious hate speech (for example, Cmeciu, 2016; Goodman and Rowe, 2014; Weaver, 2013). In this chapter we provide an exposition and critical analysis of some ways in which transgender people are othered online and attempts at resisting or challenging this. This is achieved through a discourse analysis of online comments made in response to YouTube videos concerning ‘gender neutral toilets’. The data that we draw upon are taken from a wider research project that examines ‘everyday’ experiences of hate crime and discrimination targeting transgender and non-gender-binary people.

The findings that we present identify some key discursive resources that are used to construct and position transgender people in contemporary online debate about gender neutral toilets, the implications of these constructions, and how they are challenged. The analysis allows us to consider whether the resources used in othering transgender people online are the same as those

that have long characterised negative social attitudes and responses to lesbian, gay, bisexual and queer people – groups that have historically been associated with gender ‘non-conformity’ in the popular imagination. In other words, we ask whether we are seeing something substantively new in the ways in which the othering of transgender people is done and functions online or whether it is the *context* that is (relatively) new – while bearing in mind that substance and context are necessarily interconnected. First, though, we will explain and contextualise some key terms and the study’s concerns, beginning with ‘transgender’.

Rather than having a single, stable meaning, the term ‘transgender’ is often applied in ways that are inclusive of identities, expressions and experiences that fall outside contemporary Western gender binaries (Davidson, 2007). As Hines (2010:1) put it:

The term ‘transgender’ denotes a range of gender experiences, subjectivities and presentations that fall across, between or beyond stable categories of ‘man’ and ‘woman.’ ‘Transgender’ includes gender identities that have, more traditionally, been described as ‘transsexual,’ and a diversity of genders that call into question an assumed relationship between gender identity and presentation and the ‘sexed’ body.

Despite this definitional scope, there has been debate about the use of the term within and between communities that it seeks to encompass. For example, it has been suggested that the term’s breadth of application has a homogenising effect, covering over the specific features and needs of the groups to which it is applied, and that the term ‘gender diversity’ may be preferable, given that the explicit reference to diversity warns against homogenisation (Monro, 2003). The term ‘non-binary’ has also been favoured and used by people who feel that their gender identity cannot be defined within the male/female categories afforded by the traditional

gender binary (Hegarty et al., 2018). However, ‘transgender’ *has* been welcomed as connoting a shift away from terms frequently used in the past, such as ‘transsexual’ and ‘transvestite’, with their highly medicalised connotations and their associations with a taxonomic endeavour within sexology concerning non-conformity with gender expectations (Pearce et al., 2018).

Public toilets are perhaps the most frequently-encountered sex-segregated spaces in daily life in many countries and have been described as spaces of anxiety and challenge for transgender individuals (Faktor, 2011). In recent years, the provision of public toilets where access is not gender specific has become a topic of public debate. Providing ‘gender neutral toilets’ can be (and has been) framed within a discourse of broad inclusivity and rights, given that they allow people who may require assistance, such as people with disabilities and children, to be accompanied to the toilet by a helper of any gender. However, the topic has largely acted as a lens for public discussion and debate about transgender people and communities who are assumed to be the primary group whom the provision of gender neutral toilets (and/or any relaxation of restriction in usage predicated on ‘biological sex’) is designed to accommodate. The debate has been engaged with from an academic perspective (for example, Jeffreys, 2014; Nirta, 2014) but has been more socially visible in contemporary political and policy discussion and in media and social media. For example, in 2017 President Donald Trump rescinded instructions that had been issued in 2016 by then-President Barack Obama instructing schools across the USA to allow students to access toilets appropriate to their gender identity.

Studies of public attitudes to transgender people conducted in various countries have found associations between negative attitudes, gender and age, with women and older cohorts expressing more negative attitudes in some studies (for example, Hill and Willoughby 2005; King et al., 2009; Nagoshi et al., 2008; Tee and Hegarty, 2006) and men in other studies (for

example, Norton and Herek, 2013). Negative attitudes have also been related to lower levels of education (King et al., 2009), greater religiosity and religious fundamentalism (Nagoshi et al., 2008; Tee and Hegarty, 2006) and less support for general egalitarian ideals (King et al., 2009). Attitudes toward sexual and gender minorities are highly correlated but significantly more negative attitudes have been found towards transgender people than towards members of sexual minorities (Norton and Herek, 2013).

These studies used various attitudinal measures. For example, a questionnaire used by Tee and Hegarty (2006) featured items concerning a biological or environmental basis for gender, the possibility of a person subjectively creating their gender identity rather than it being determined by their bodies, the possibility of changing gender through surgery, and the normality of transgender people. However, attitudes tend to be studied in decontextualised ways outside the natural contexts in which they are called forth and enacted. Moreover, criticisms have long been levelled at the assumption that data on ‘attitudes’ map onto underlying psychological objects or dispositions that have some stability. Analyses of people’s talk or writing on any subject in a natural context show that views vary depending upon the functions that the talk or writing is performing at any given point (Potter and Wetherell, 1987). In the study reported in the present chapter, we focus on what is *accomplished* by comments on YouTube videos on gender neutral toilets, that is, the text’s ‘action orientation’ and function-in-context, rather than using text as a way of trying to assess what commenters may or may not have been thinking (for example, their intentions and motivations).

The ways in which negative attitudes – or talk/text that constructs transgender people in a problematizing fashion – play out are being increasingly studied. In this emerging research, transgender people have reported being subjected to pressure to conform to normative, binary

views of gender in order to be seen as legitimate (Blumer et al., 2015; Iantaffi and Bockting, 2011). Transgender people may well experience erasure and invisibility when those whom they encounter fail to recognise or validate their gender identity (Hegarty et al., 2018). In recent years, some feminists have argued that the unqualified categorisation of self-identified transgender women as women carries serious social and material implications for cisgender (that is, non-transgender) women, including lesbian women (for example, see Stock, 2018). Those who advocate this perspective have been labelled ‘trans exclusionary radical feminists’ (‘terfs’) by transgender activists and have been accused of promoting the delegitimisation of transgender women. Delegitimisation and erasure can be seen as an ultimate othering because they result from a refusal even to acknowledge the validity of the transgender person’s account of their gendered being. Research has pointed to the serious practical implications of this othering in terms of implicit and explicit prejudice and discrimination, hate crime and compromised psychological well-being (for example, Antjoule, 2013; Chakraborti and Hardy, 2015; Grant et al., 2011; Jamal, 2018; Riggs et al., 2015).

Today, problematic talk and text can occur face-to-face but can also readily occur anonymously in social media and online networks. A body of literature is emerging that explores the similarities and differences between offline and online hate speech (Awan and Zempi, 2016; Brown, 2018) and the ways in which minority and historically othered groups are constructed and positioned in online contexts. Research has also started to explore online representations of transgender people. For example, McInroy and Craig (2015) studied trends in contemporary media representations of transgender people offline and online, focusing on the perspectives of transgender young people. However, social media and material such as YouTube comments on potentially controversial videos were not addressed. The present study adds to this emerging literature through its examination of how gender neutral toilets and transgender people are

constructed in YouTube videos on the former topic and pays particular attention to how transgender people are othered in this online setting.

## **Method**

The final data set consisted of 1756 comments posted on ten randomly-sampled YouTube videos that were identified using the search term ‘gender neutral toilets’. Standard procedures for sampling online data were employed (for example, see Snee, 2013).

Videos were sampled on May 1<sup>st</sup> 2017, with sampling restricted to material that had been uploaded in the previous 12 months. Out of 431 videos identified through an initial search, 100 met our inclusion criteria concerning relevance to the topic of gender neutral toilets, having elicited at least five comments from viewers and not being duplicates of other videos. An online random number generator was then used to select a manageable sample of ten videos. Three videos (two from the UK and one from the USA) involving discussions about and the sharing of opinions on gender neutral toilets were produced by cisgender people and two (one from the USA and one from the UK) by transgender people. One other video produced in the USA involved a transgender woman asking members of the public if they would be concerned about sharing a toilet with her. One video was a feature from the *Jimmy Kimmel Live* show (a late-night talk show in the USA) asking the American public what they thought about gender neutral toilets. Three videos were produced by US news stations and covered a news story relating to President Obama’s guidance to schools allowing students to access toilets according to the gender with which they identified. Comments on these ten videos were excluded from the data set if they did not directly address ‘gender neutral toilets’ or transgender people or if they were illogical or irrelevant to the study. Using these criteria, the 2328 comments produced in response to the videos were reduced to 1756 comments that were relevant to the study.

These were subjected to a form of discourse analysis referred to as critical discursive psychology (Wetherell, 1998; see Coyle, 2016, for a contextualisation of this approach). As a social constructionist approach, this accords with the epistemological stance of the study's research questions and has also been used productively in other research on prejudice and discrimination (for example, Goodman and Burke, 2010, 2011).

### **Thematic overview**

Three themes were developed from the data. We shall discuss in detail the theme entitled 'The delegitimisation and othering of transgender people' but first we shall contextualise this in relation to the other two themes.

The theme of 'Gender neutral toilets as sites of sexual danger' was pervasive in the data and forms a central part of the case that was worked up against the implementation of gender neutral toilets. In this theme, male sexuality was constructed as uncontrollable, with commenters drawing upon notions of sexual violence, child victimisation and distinctions between public and private spaces. The data also constructed transgender people as potential sexual offenders through essentialising sexual trauma and deviance and conflating these with 'transgender' as a category and with transgender people. These recurrently-mobilised constructions problematised gender neutral toilets in socially recognisable ways by using child imagery, by constructing women as vulnerable and in need of protection and by pathologising transgender people and (uncontrollable) male sexuality. This serves to maintain the status-quo of sex-segregated toilets and to construct 'gender neutral' toilets as sites of danger to women and children whilst simultaneously reinforcing gendered norms of male dominance. The outcome

of these constructions was a categorical division between a constructed ‘us’, the dominant, normal majority, and ‘them’, the problematised, othered transgender minority.

The second theme concerned ‘Claiming victimhood: Gender neutral toilets as undermining the rights of cisgender people’. Notions of ‘victimhood’ and the right to claim a victim position were worked up in the data. A construction of cisgender people as the victims of political forces was identified, with political correctness and a wider political agenda being said to mask the ‘real issues’ that society faces. This functioned as a means of refusing to acknowledge the legitimacy of claims about transgender people experiencing prejudice, discrimination and victimisation and the need to take action to address this. Cisgender populations were constructed as inclusive and willing to work towards equality but rights-based claims by transgender communities were deemed ‘special privileges’ that fall outside the category of reasonable requests. Here the claiming of victim status for cisgender people reinforced a distinction between a gender normative ‘in-group’ and a transgender ‘out-group’, again emphasising the otherness of transgender people. We turn now to the central theme yielded by the analysis.

### **The delegitimation and othering of transgender people**

The central theme focused on the delegitimation and othering of transgender people, which surfaced in the other themes too, as noted above. It consisted of four subthemes. Due to space constraints, we shall focus on two subthemes that dealt with a fundamental basis of delegitimation and that elicited some resistance or qualification in the data set. We shall then sketch the remaining two subthemes. In the data excerpts that will be used to illustrate the subthemes, the comments are presented as they appeared on YouTube so any spelling or grammatical errors remain. Where necessary, we have clarified commenters’ material within

square brackets. The origins of each comment are also noted using the commenter's YouTube identifier.

***Transgender people as challenging the given order: Invocations of nature and biology***

'Nature' and 'biology' (and the allied and broader constructs of 'medicine' and 'science') were routinely invoked in various forms in the delegitimisation of transgender people. Together with 'God' and related religious and moral ideas (which will be examined under the next subtheme), these were key elements in the delegitimisation repertoire within the data. They operated in various combinations but performed the same basic function of establishing a given and in some sense ultimate order of things which should not or could not be breached but which transgender people challenge and (try to) contravene. The status assigned to nature and particularly to biology/science within and outside the data conferred authority on comments that invoked them.

'Nature' has long been used as a discursive resource in the denigration of lesbian, gay, bisexual and queer people who have been positioned as 'unnatural' (for example, see Baker, 2004), although nature has also been invoked in defence of sexual minorities (see Hegarty, 2010, for a brief overview). It was not surprising therefore to find repeated invocations of nature and 'naturalness' within the data. For example:

1. 'Try to make unnatural behavior mainstream. This will be their downfall.'  
*(Video 9, direct response from 'Anglosax88' to video)*
2. 'Have fun slowly getting even more depressed while you regret mutilating your penis. You'll never seem or look like or act like or BE a NATURAL woman.'  
*(Video 1, direct response from '\_Dude' to video)*

The first comment offers a version of a standard claim in the data: that transgender people are engaging in behaviour that is contrary to nature but are seeking to have it seen as something normal and regular and that this (either the unnatural behaviour or the normalisation effort) will carry unspecified negative implications for them. In its focus on behaviour, this comment is more nuanced than other comments that invoked nature and that mostly constructed transgender people as unnatural in essence.

The second comment positions transgender women outside the category of 'natural' but in a different way. It presents transgender women as sharing the aim of becoming or appearing to others as cisgender, 'natural' women and constructs that aim as impossible. The nature and scope of the impossibility are stressed through the use of an extreme case formulation ('you'll never') (Pomerantz, 1986), a three or perhaps four part list ('seem or look like or act like or BE') (Jefferson, 1990), and upper case lettering in 'BE' and 'NATURAL' that presents gender in essentialised terms of 'being'. The implications of transgender women engaging in this fruitless pursuit of 'natural woman' status through surgery are presented in terms of impaired mental health but note that mental health problems are constructed as a pre-existing state for transgender women ('even more depressed'). We shall return to the construction of an intrinsic connection between transgenderism and mental health problems later. For now, we note that the positioning of transgender people as unnatural in behaviour or in essence or as falling short of the 'natural' in their claimed or aspired gender serves to delegitimise and other them.

Invocations of biological and scientific discourse mostly functioned within the data to reassert a gender binary and negate the possibility of transgenderism as real or authentic. For example:

1. 'At the current time, science and basic biology tell us that you cannot be born the wrong gender.'  
*(Video 10, response from 'HarryMcKenzie' to other users debating the existence of transgender people)*
2. 'You aren't Transgender because nobody is...since choose or changing your gender is medically and biologically impossible!'  
*(Video 2, response from 'JoeKehoe' to another commenter identifying as transgender)*
3. 'You are either a boy or a girl. There is no "choice" in the matter. There is no gender fluidity or gender binary or whatever other 76 genders that have been invented. If you are a biological man you go to the male bathroom. If you are a biological female you go to the female bathroom. There is no debate.'  
*(Video 10, response from 'HarryMcKenzie' to a commenter stating that transgender people should use whichever toilet they identify with.)*
4. 'If u have a dick use the mans room. Its that simple. We don't need a third bathroom. Transgender people are ridiculous and will never be accepted as the sex they want to be.'  
*(Video 2, direct response from 'CHAFFY6six6' to video)*

The first three comments invoke science, biology and medicine to reject a culturally recognisable understanding of transgenderism ('born in the wrong body' or, as the commenter puts it, 'born the wrong gender') and the possibility of legitimately inhabiting a different gender. The case being made here relies on a version of gender as a biological and fixed phenomenon that, in the third comment, allows only two categories – male and female. That comment explicitly denies the legitimacy of any claims that gender can exist outside that

binary, with those claims constructed as lacking reality and lampooned through their invocation in exaggerated form ('or whatever other 76 genders that have been invented'). In the third and fourth comment, the implications of the biologically-based gender binary for toilet use are spelled out in conditional sentences that orient towards closing down debate, with gender being physiologically determined by genitals in the fourth comment ('If u have a dick use the mans room. Its that simple. We don't need a third bathroom'). That notion of gender as a fixed, biological phenomenon written in or on the body surfaced repeatedly in the data. Within the terms set up by these comments, transgenderism is constructed as a scientific/biological illogicality and a fabrication. People who claim to be transgender are constructed as mistaken, deluded or duped about their very being (the fourth comment labels them as 'ridiculous') and are thereby delegitimised.

However, the specification of biological and physiological conditions for determining which toilet people should use appeared to be qualified elsewhere in the data. Some comments specified conditions based on a transgender person's capacity to fulfil the appearance expectations of their gender identity, that is, to 'pass' successfully as a cisgender man or woman:

1. 'If you look like a man go into the mens room if you look like a women go into the womens room, whats the problem?'  
*(Video 1, direct response from 'HayleyAnne' to video)*
2. 'Trans people who don't pass well should use these bathrooms.'  
*(Video 1, direct response from 'FayAngel' to video, with 'these bathrooms' referring to gender neutral toilets)*

There is an indication of a hierarchy of transgender people in these comments, with people who can pass successfully being valued over those who cannot. The first comment offers a formula for determining which toilet to use that accommodates transgender people within the gender binary based on physiological appearance. This is presented as an obvious, effective response ('whats the problem?') but transgender people whose appearance does not fit within standard gender expectations are erased from consideration, which, as we suggested earlier, is an ultimate form of othering. The second comment constructs gender neutral toilets as suited to this group and as a solution to failures of gender performance ('Trans people who don't pass well'). The construction of a fixed male/female gender binary and its ordering of this aspect of the social world are left unchallenged. For these reasons, what might appear here as qualifications of the biological/physiological conditions for toilet use that were created elsewhere in the data fail as instances of resistance.

Given that 'nature', 'biology' and 'God' function in the same way in the discursive denigration of lesbian, gay, bisexual and queer people, next we shall consider the mobilisation of religious and moral values and norms in the delegitimisation and othering of transgender people in the data set. This extends our discussion above because the construction of transgender people as challenging the fundamental, given order has clear moral tones.

### ***Mobilisation of religious and moral values and norms***

There is a long history of conflict and prejudice between (sectors of) religious communities and sexual and gender minority communities (Herek and McLemore, 2013; Miceli, 2005), although religion may also be associated with attitudes of acceptance (Horn et al., 2006) including towards transgender people in recent years (for example, Beardsley and O'Brien, 2016). In the data, religious and moral values and norms were frequently mobilised to justify

querying or denying the legitimacy of transgenderism and transgender people. Notions of a 'higher power' were invoked to determine and legitimate parameters of 'rightness' and 'wrongness'.

1. 'Deuteronomy 23:1-25 KJV [King James Version, a 17<sup>th</sup> century English translation of the Bible]. A man that has his stones crushed or private cutt off shall not enter into the congregation of God. God isn't no respecter of men I liken women that get their Tubes burned or tied shut sterilization castrating or making themselves into transsexual lesbians would some under his same category as same as crushed stones for a man, sex change operations or vasectomy to tell God their going to have sex, without concern without consequences of making babies.'  
*(Video 2, direct response from 'PamelaGoForth' to video)*
2. 'In my opinion, I don't understand why Trans people are trans. God doesn't make mistakes, and even if you don't believe in him, its ungrateful. Be a tomboy, or a boy who is kinda girlish. Geez.'  
*(Video 7, direct response from 'JoJo The Keeper' to video)*
3. 'One, its not USA. It's the DEMOCRATS. The LEFTIST immoral garbage who rejected God in Christ and now worship the devil.'  
*(Video 3, response from 'Armando7654' to another user claiming the USA is now a global embarrassment)*

In the data excerpts above, God is invoked as the ultimate authority who cannot or should not be defied or disobeyed, at least not without negative consequences. Transgender people are constructed as contradicting the divine will in themselves or as exemplifying a social rejection of the divine will. The first comment conflates gender reassignment surgery with sterilisation

and constructs these as defiance of divine will, which is worked up and evidenced through the invocation and rather free-form interpretation of Biblical text. The second comment urges universal compliance with a divine will that is said to be inerrant. The comment orients towards accommodating transgender people though, by permitting displays of limited gender non-conformity ('Be a tomboy, or a boy who is kinda girlish'). The third comment constructs transgenderism as a consequence of a rejection of God and an embrace of the devil by part of the body politic. In all three comments, transgender people are positioned in opposition to God and to a divinely-ordained gendered social order. For audiences for whom religion is an important evaluative resource in determining what is and is not legitimate, this constitutes an ultimate othering.

The working up and use of religious norms and values to delegitimise transgender people did not go unchallenged. Many commenters challenged the legitimacy of religion and bluntly denied the existence of a 'higher power'.

1. 'A) There is no God and B) Transgender people are literally born with the brain of the opposite gender therefore meaning they are born in the wrong body.'  
*(Video 1, response from 'RegularGirl' to another commenter claiming it is sinful to undergo gender reassignment surgery)*
2. 'I'm not really into fiction books so I'll have to pass, but thank you for the recommendation.'  
*(Video 2, response from 'Isley Reust' to another commenter quoting from the Bible)*
3. 'change their sex? Its not something you choose, it's how your were born, irregardless of what you were assigned at birth, stop using your outdated and oppressing beliefs to restrict others.'

*(Video 1, response from 'ElleStevenson' to another commenter claiming it is sinful to undergo gender reassignment surgery)*

In the first comment, a rhetoric of factuality is used in denying the existence of God and also in advancing the culturally-recognisable biological explanation of transgenderism that we noted earlier ('born in the wrong body'). With an ironic tone, the second comment constructs the Bible as a work of fiction and hence as lacking the ultimate authority as arbiter of right and wrong that another commenter assigned to it. In the third comment, religious values and norms are constructed as tools of oppression that are utilised to restrict others' freedom and are thereby delegitimised. An accusatory tone is also achieved here as the comment positions religious advocates as perpetuating oppression. Here we see that, although legitimacy was a recurrent concern in the data, this extended beyond transgenderism and transgender people. That was expected as contestations about legitimacy have long been recognised as a standard feature of argumentation (for example, Gergen, 1989).

The subject of moral values was also discerned in attributions made about difficulties that transgender people experience. These difficulties were acknowledged but were attributed to bad decisions and choices made by transgender people. Responsibility for creating these difficulties was often assigned to transgender people themselves who were constructed as authors of their own misfortune.

1. 'There is no confusion over the transgender issue being pushed down people's throats; the issues of trans people are self created and self imposed.'

*(Video 4, direct response from 'Vutube379' to video)*

2. 'I say the same to people who are desirous of making themselves freaks! Yes, I do. When you VOLUNTARILY ELECT to undergo such drastic unnatural physical changes, then it is on YOU to fend for yourself. A total nation should not be FORCED TO ACCOMMODATE your self imposed special needs.'  
*(Video 4, response from 'Vutube379' to another commenter challenging this commenter's view that body modification among transgender people is wrong)*

In both comments above, notions of free will are mobilised to construct transgender people as having actively made a decision or choice that does not align with wider societal expectations about gender expression and as experiencing societal censure as a result of their decision. The free will aspect is crucial within this construction. If gender non-conformity were to be essentialised into transgender people's psyches and if transgenderism were not presented as a matter of choice, this could make it more difficult to evaluate transgender people negatively or at least it could call for more complexity in evaluation. The second comment confers on transgender people a responsibility for themselves and perhaps for their own safety by virtue of their having freely chosen to alter their bodies and thereby defy nature ('unnatural physical changes'). As we noted earlier, the positioning of transgender people as unnatural and as having freely chosen to transgress against societal norms about gender delegitimises and others them. Furthermore, it represents them as not entitled to the collective protection that would have come with the decision to adhere to societal expectations about gender expression. In this way, any abuse that transgender people may experience is constructed as having been provoked by transgender people themselves through their infraction of the natural order and as understandable or even morally legitimate. Of course there is nothing new about victim-blaming rhetoric framed within moral discourse, most notably in cases of sexual assault and domestic violence, even if the framing is not always straightforward (for example, Hayes et al.,

2013; Valor-Segura et al., 2011). It was not unexpected to see it as a recurrent feature of the online othering of transgender people.

This was mostly challenged in expected ways. Commenters who offered negative evaluations of transgender people were positioned by others as intruding in an unwarranted way into an issue that is not theirs, as being judgemental and as perpetuating hate – in other words, as morally problematic. This can be seen in the first two comments below:

1. ‘Call it whatever you like. A lifestyle, a mental disease, a delusion. The fact is that there are people who concern themselves with things that have nothing to do with them. There are many people who just blatantly prey off of those who live this way for absolutely no reason.’

*(Video 1, direct response from ‘Rebecca Patch’ to video)*

2. ‘I remain dumbfounded as to how, after millennia, we have not come to understand that judging others beliefs, life choices, biology, or nature leads to conscious and unconscious hate, and that is going to be our downfall.’

*(Video 6, direct response from ‘Sarah Munoz’ to video)*

3. ‘I’m so disgusted by this comment section. Where are people’s hearts??’

- a. ‘I identify myself as a heart. Stop offending me!!!!’

- b. ‘Excuse me, I identify as a CRUEL HEARTLESS BASTARD. Don’t judge me.’

*(Video 1, direct response from ‘Katie Gallivan The Rat’ to video followed by*

*(a) response from ‘iPhone iPhone’ to ‘Katie Gallivan The Rat’ and (b) response*

*from ‘Everyones’sFavoriteCritic’ to ‘iPhone iPhone’ and ‘Katie Gallivan The*

*Rat’)*

However, the third comment above sees that mode of challenge queried when it is accompanied by expressions of personal hurt or moral offence. The first commenter expresses ‘disgust’ at negative responses and calls for empathic understanding of transgender people. Two other commenters respond to this by problematising entitlement claims made on the basis of subjective identification, showing the limits of the logic of this (‘I identify as a CRUEL HEARTLESS BASTARD. Don’t judge me’) and enabling subsequent personally-framed challenges to anti-transgender talk to be resisted – which is what then happened in this online interaction. As can be seen from this example, the framing of effective resistance to anti-transgender online talk is not straightforward. A framing within moral discourse is vulnerable to challenge owing to the likelihood of morals and moral values being treated as subjective and therefore lacking authority.

### ***Delegitimisation through pathologisation and construction as a media artefact***

The remaining two subthemes concerned the delegitimisation of transgenderism and transgender people by constructing them as psychopathological in themselves or as the result of psychopathology, and the construction of transgenderism as a ‘modern trend’ created by media and social media. We have already seen evidence of a discourse of psychopathology in operation, with transgender people positioned as potential sexual offenders, as deluded and, in the case of transgender women, as having had mental health problems before revising their gender identity. A framing in terms of psychopathology has long been a feature of hegemonic constructions of sexual minorities (for example, see Gonsiorek, 1982; Taylor, 2002). It was therefore not surprising to find commenters locating transgender people within a discourse of

psychopathology, particularly given that the American Psychiatric Association's (2013) classification of mental disorders includes a category of 'gender dysphoria' that refers to the distress a person experiences as a result of the sex and gender they were assigned at birth. (As can be seen below, this was explicitly invoked in some comments in ways that provided warrant for a pathological framing.) The construction of transgenderism as or in relation to psychopathology carries a powerful potential for social taint and delegitimation, as indicated by the substantial literature on the stigma associated with mental health problems (for example, Rüscher et al., 2005). Commenters also used a construction of transgenderism as psychopathology to advocate that transgender people should be referred for psychiatric or psychological treatment and to represent any other response as a failure of moral responsibility. These features can be seen below:

1. 'No child should have to share the same bathroom with these mentally deranged people who are so frickin deluded that they think they are the opposite gender.'  
*(Video 2, direct response from 'Raven R' to video)*
  2. 'A person's belief that he or she is something they are not is, at best, a sign of confused thinking. When an otherwise healthy biological boy believes he is a girl, or an otherwise healthy biological girl believes she is a boy, an objective psychological problem exists that lies in the mind not the body, and it should be treated as such. These children suffer from gender dysphoria. Gender dysphoria (GD), formerly listed as Gender Identity Disorder (GID), is a recognized mental disorder in the most recent edition of the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of the American Psychiatric Association (DSM-V).'
- (Video 9, response from 'Thyalwaysseek' to another commenter who stated that transgenderism is not a mental illness)*

3. ‘We need to stop treating this crap like its normal and get these folks the mental help they need.’

*(Video 8, direct response from ‘4Delta’ to video)*

The final subtheme involved the construction of transgenderism as a ‘modern trend’ created by media and social media and as lacking substance and any requirement for social change. Caitlyn Jenner (an American transgender woman and media personality who, as Bruce Jenner, was an Olympic gold medal-winning decathlete) was referenced repeatedly. The sustained media attention that Jenner’s announcement of her transgender status attracted in 2015 was invoked as evidence of transgenderism as a media fad that would pass. For example:

1. ‘Who ever saw a transgender person before 2 years ago? It’s a fad. Before this sex and gender were synonymous.’

*(Video 1, response from ‘CaseyDia’ to another commenter who claimed that people do not understand the difference between sex and gender)*

2. ‘If you think about it, couldn’t you honestly at any moment just decide you want to be part of this new fun “transgender” trend? You would be like Caitlin Jenner.’

*(Video 2, direct response from ‘First Last’ to video)*

Resistance to this took the form of the crafting or invocation of (elements of) histories of transgenderism, constructing it as a trans-historical and trans-cultural phenomenon and imparting an enduring reality to it. In both of these subthemes, the validity of transgender people’s experiences and conclusions about their gender were overridden. Transgender people and their reported experiences were constructed as not to be trusted or taken seriously because they have no inherent or enduring authenticity.

## **Conclusion**

What then does our analysis say in relation to the aims of the research that were outlined in the introduction? The themes and subthemes identified the discursive resources that were used to construct and position transgender people in online debate about gender neutral toilets. These were chiefly uncontrollable male sexuality, notions of vulnerable women and children, entitlement to victim status, nature, biology, religious and moral values, psychopathology, and the idea of media fads. The implications of these constructions were charted: the delegitimisation and othering of transgender people through denying the authenticity and validity of their experiences and of their very being and the positioning of transgender people as a problematised and problematic outgroup who are responsible for any distress they experience and any negative social responses they encounter.

The resources that were used and the ways they were used in othering transgender people in the data overlap significantly with the resources that have long been used in the offline discursive denigration of sexual minority groups. Several times we expressed a lack of surprise at the resources used in the data and the functions they were performing. For example, the motifs concerning nature and biology and the delegitimisation that we discerned through our analysis echoed Bornstein's (1994) elaboration of Garfinkel's (1967) identification of beliefs about gender that are created, expressed and reinforced through social interaction. Bornstein and Garfinkel pointed to beliefs that there are only two genders and this binary is natural; a person's gender is invariant; genitals are the essential sign of gender; and any exceptions to the two genders are not to be taken seriously. The discursive resources and motifs that we discerned are woven into and indeed constitute the fabric of our social world. Sexual and gender non-conformity – and other forms of difference that pose a potential threat to hegemonic ways of understanding and ordering the social world (for example, see Rowe and Goodman, 2014) – is

responded to from a limited pool of tropes that delegitimise and other non-conforming people (from the perspective of the responder) in culturally recognisable ways.

If we want to develop and refine effective ways to challenge and resist the online othering of transgender people and communities, it is important to know in detail how these resources are used and how they function in online interaction. Such challenge and resistance is important because delegitimation and othering have very practical implications if they (re)gain uncontested political traction and serve to deflect any need to take action to address the problems experienced by many transgender people. Instances of challenge and resistance to the othering discursive repertoire were examined in the analysis. There we noted the difficulties that can occur when challenging and resisting within the same discourse used in text that delegitimises and others transgender people (as in the case of a discourse of morality) or when a challenge rests upon the same basic problematic assumptions as that text (as in the case of a fixed gender binary). To reiterate our earlier observation, the framing of effective resistance to anti-transgender, othering online talk is not straightforward. That is no reason to shy away from the challenge. Rather it calls for creative, evidence-based, contextually-informed discursive labour alongside key stakeholders. We hope that our work will contribute to this endeavour.

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