

**TRANSGENDER INFORMATION SEEKING: A COLLABORATIVE APPROACH TO
SUPPORTING THE INFORMATION NEEDS OF TRANSGENDER PEOPLE**

by

Shelby Miller

B.A., The University of British Columbia, 2017

A THESIS SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF
THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF

MASTER OF LIBRARY AND INFORMATION STUDIES

in

THE FACULTY OF GRADUATE AND POSTDOCTORAL STUDIES

THE UNIVERSITY OF BRITISH COLUMBIA

(Vancouver)

August 2020

© Shelby Miller, 2020

The following individuals certify that they have read, and recommend to the Faculty of Graduate and Postdoctoral Studies for acceptance, the thesis titled:

Transgender information seeking: a collaborative approach to supporting the information needs of transgender people

submitted by Shelby Miller in partial fulfillment of the requirements for

the degree of Master of Library and Information Studies

in Library and Information Studies

Examining Committee:

Heather O'Brien, Professor at the School of Information
Supervisor

Julia Bullard, Professor at the School of Information
Supervisory Committee Member

Abstract

The purpose of this thesis is to explore the information behaviour of transgender people, related to the process of coming to discover or better understand one's gender identity. The information seeking habits of transgender people is an area of the transgender experience that has been largely unexplored in research, and existing research has particularly neglected the information behaviour related to developing an understanding of one's transgender identity.

Additionally, this thesis seeks to amplify the voices of trans participants through a methodology inspired by the community-based participatory action research framework. Participants acted in a dual role as research participant and researcher. In the first of two online interview sessions, participants had an open-ended discussion about the information behaviours that helped them come to a better understanding of their gender identity. In the second session, participants analyzed their earlier discussion, looking for common themes and takeaways. This discussion was used as the basis for an evaluation of a transgender health resource from British Columbia's Provincial Health Service Authority to determine ways that it could be improved to better meet the information needs of transgender people.

The results of this thesis suggest that serendipitous discovery of information about transgender identities, as well as information that is affirming, emotionally supportive, and personally relatable are important in many transgender individuals' information journeys. Social media platforms were identified as a good platform for this type of content due to the low barrier to entry for creating content, and their tendency to host more personal content, although these platforms generally host content with a negative view of transgender people as well. The research identified a noticeable lack of affirming and emotionally supportive information in the provincial health resource we reviewed, and suggested ways for that site to better support the

needs of transgender users without compromising its core purpose as a health resource. While this thesis has limitations in terms of its recruitment strategy and participant demographics, it provides important insight into an underexplored area of the transgender experience, information behaviour related to forming identity, and suggests a template for performing equitable research that centers participants' voices.

Lay Summary

In this thesis, I interviewed transgender participants about their experiences searching for information related to developing their understanding of their gender identity. The study took place over two online group sessions. Participants were actively engaged in multiple parts of the research and had opportunities to review the results from both sessions. In the first session, participants shared details related to the information-seeking habits that helped them better understand their gender identity. In the second, participants reviewed the transcript from the first session to identify common themes and used these themes to evaluate an information resource intended for use by transgender individuals. The results of our discussions show that participants responded better to resources that they found relatable and emotionally supportive and suggest ways that the online resource could be improved to better meet these users' needs.

Preface

This thesis was written under the primary supervision of Dr. Heather O'Brien (Professor at the School of Information at UBC). It builds off a project titled "Understanding Early Information Needs of Transgender and Gender Diverse Individuals" that the researcher, Shelby Miller, completed for the LIBR 553 course at the University of British Columbia in 2018. This work was approved by UBC BREB (H19-04070). Funding was obtained through the Arts Graduate Student Research Awards 2020-2021.

Table of Contents

Abstract.....	iii
Lay Summary.....	v
Preface.....	vi
Table of Contents	vii
List of Tables	ix
List of Figures	x
Acknowledgements.....	xi
Chapter 1: Introduction	1
Chapter 2: Literature Review.....	3
2.1 Research Questions	13
Chapter 3: Methodology.....	14
3.1 Methodological Framework.....	14
3.1.1 Community-Based Participatory Action Research.....	14
3.1.2 Positionality Statement	15
3.1.3. Insider Research.....	19
3.2 Recruitment.....	20
3.3 Study Procedure	22
Chapter 4: Results and Discussion.....	26
4.1 Participants.....	26
4.2 Transgender Information Behaviour	27
4.2.1 Passive Information.....	27
4.2.2 Social Media and Online Communities	29
4.2.3 Challenges and Setbacks	31
4.2.4 Discussion of Session 1 Results.....	33
4.3 Data Application – An Evaluation of the TransCare BC Website.....	38
4.3.1 Identifying Issues.....	40
4.3.2 Improving TransCare BC.....	43
Chapter 5: Conclusion.....	50
5.1 Study Limitations	50
5.2 Study Strengths and Contributions.....	53
5.3 Future Research.....	54
5.4 Conclusion	55

Bibliography	56
Appendices.....	58
Appendix A: Informed Consent Form	58
Appendix B: Demographic Information Form	61
Appendix C: Reddit Recruitment - Posted to r/transvancouver	63
Appendix D: Session 1 Interview Guide.....	64
Appendix E: Session 2 Interview Guide	65

List of Tables

Table 1. Demographic information of study participants	26
Table 2. Menu hierarchies of TransCare BC website	39
Table 3. Proposed structural changes to the TransCare BC menu hierarchy	47

List of Figures

Figure 1. Snapshot of the TransCare BC homepage	24
---	----

Acknowledgements

This thesis would not have been possible without my study participants and research partners, including Jesse, June, Kate, and Taylor. Thank you all for your insight and your readiness to collaborate, and for the trust that you have put in me to cobble this thesis together from your stories.

Thank you to Dr. Heather O'Brien, whose LIBR 553 class allowed me to discover a research topic I was incredibly passionate about. I am beyond privileged that you agreed to act as my supervisor for this thesis. It would not have been possible without your feedback and expertise.

Chapter 1: Introduction

This thesis seeks to further understanding about the role that information behaviour plays in the development of transgender individuals' awareness and understanding of their gender identity. Information behaviour refers to "the ways that individuals perceive, seek, and use information in various life contexts" (Case & Given, 2016, p. 3). 'Information behaviour' is an umbrella term under which we find more specific behaviours, including information seeking. Information seeking often stems from an individual's 'information need,' or the "recognition that [their] knowledge is inadequate to satisfy a goal", and is defined as "a conscious effort to acquire information in response to" the individual's need (Case & Given, 2016, p. 6). In addition to this active seeking, information behaviour encompasses information that is received passively. Wilson (1997) describes two potential modes of passive information acquisition: "passive attention, such as listening to the radio or watching television programmes, where information acquisition may take place without intentional seeking" and "passive search...when one type of search results in the acquisition of information that happens to be relevant to the individual" (p. 562).

For many transgender individuals, information seeking plays a part in the journey to come to an understanding of one's gender identity. In a focus-group study on transgender information seeking, researchers Adams and Peirce described a sense of "cognitive dissonance" that trans people experience between "their own perceptions of their gender and those of the world outside" (2006, p. 1-2). In Adams's and Peirce's study, respondents' attempts to understand themselves were stymied by "the fact that they had no name for what they felt" (2006, p. 5). These feelings of dissonance, coupled with an individual's lack of vocabulary to describe their experience, create an information need that they might try to satisfy through

information seeking. These feelings might also be made apparent through encounters with passive information, which could take the form of, for example, a news story, an interview with a transgender activist, or an interaction with an online community of transgender users. Not all information sources are adequate to address these information needs, as many resources contain inaccurate, misleading, or offensive content that could impact an individual's information-seeking. These potential limitations highlight the need for research into this topic. Research could determine what makes an information source helpful to users and suggest ways existing resources could be modified to align with these findings.

This study aimed to uncover the various ways a transgender individual may engage with information behaviour to satisfy these feelings of dissonance, with the additional goal of determining ways to improve resources intended for trans people. Research into this area of the transgender experience is limited, so helping to identify the forms transgender information behaviour can take could be valuable to transgender care providers. In addition to these research goals, I have strived to design a methodology that that creates a more equitable model for transgender individuals to interact with academic research projects.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

While the topic of transgender information behaviour has not been thoroughly explored, I found three studies that related to it directly. Although each paper provides interesting insights into the research topic, they also contain methodological flaws that prevent the papers from providing in-depth analysis. Each paper also suffers from researchers' apparent lack of knowledge about transgender individuals. These manifest across the papers in the form of outdated and incorrect assumptions about the trans experience, and terms describing trans people now widely considered offensive, which have a variety of effects on the outcomes of the studies. I believe it is unlikely these instances are the result of active malice, and that they may be better explained by ignorance on the part of the researchers, outdated terminology from the time the papers were published, or in the case of Pohjanen and Kortelainen (2016), a translation issue from their native Finnish. Despite the intentions of their authors, however, I believe these instances are harmful both to transgender readers encountering derogatory language or concepts while seeking information about themselves, and to cisgender readers, who may take the papers as authoritative and perpetuate these terms or concepts.

I acknowledge that, at times, my literature review can appear overly critical of small details and wording choices of research papers. My goal is not to impose standards of ideological purity on researchers or control who is 'allowed' to conduct research about the trans community. Rather, I am interested in identifying the assumptions that cisgender researchers make about transgender individuals, and examining how they impact research design, data analysis, and participant engagement.

Studies about information use can be broken down, broadly speaking, into two main categories. 'System-oriented' studies "approach searching from the system's

perspective...study[ing] documents, not tasks and processes” (Vakkari, 1999, p. 821). These studies focus on what information sources are being used, with less of an emphasis on why or how. Conversely, studies that “pay attention to the user’s way of conceptualizing search activities” could be described as ‘user-oriented’ (ibid). A user-oriented study would look to understand a user’s motivation for information seeking and the strategies they use to perform that task. Instead of emphasizing the specific information being accessed, user-oriented research focuses on “the person as a finder, creator, interpreter, and user of information” (Case & Givens, 2016, p. 8). Framing transgender information behaviour from a user-oriented perspective would seem like the correct approach, because it would allow the research to be rooted in transgender lived experience. Many qualitative studies about transgender individuals are “related to [their] lived experiences”, an approach that provides the best option for researchers to “better understand the complexity of the lives of transgender persons” (Moolchaem et al., 2015, p. 144). A user-oriented perspective allows my research to better capture those complexities.

The earliest study I could locate concerned with the information-seeking habits of transgender individuals is a 2002 paper from Jami Kathleen Taylor, titled “Targeting the Information Needs of Transgender Individuals”. The author designed a closed-ended survey to use as the survey tool, which limits the depth of participant responses. A closed-ended survey does not give participants the opportunity to explain or contextualize responses, leaving the results of this study unable to capture a person’s lived experience in the same way as an interview, for example. This methodology situates Taylor’s research as system-oriented; it contains many examples of resources transgender individuals accessed, but little insight into why they accessed them. The limitations of this methodology are especially apparent when the researcher makes assumptions about why groups may have responded in a certain way. For

example, when discussing why a majority of participants who reported reading “a controversial book with a very negative view of transsexuals” were post-operative,¹ she speculates that it is due to “the reluctance of pre- and nonoperative transsexuals to subject themselves to additional emotional harassment” (Taylor, 2002, p. 93-4). The researcher’s assumptions are not an adequate replacement for the participants’ perspectives and experiences, and this choice of methodology severely limits what can be taken away from this study.

The next paper, “Is There a Transgender Canon?”, was published in 2006. Researchers had the goal of discovering more about “the transgender community and its information needs” (Adams & Peirce, 2006, p. 1). This is a conference paper discussing the preliminary results of a focus group study. Unfortunately, the lack of detail in discussions of the researcher’s methodology and results limit this paper’s takeaways, and they were not expanded on in a full research paper. The study took the form of “e-mail interviews as well as face-to-face focus groups”, using a seven-question interview guide (Adams & Peirce, 2006, pg 3). The questions are unfocused, with only one relating directly to information seeking. One question in particular, “Women are still considered second-class citizens. How has this affected you? Do you think it affects you more b/c [sic] you didn’t start out that way?” seems fully disconnected from the research question, and the fact that it can only be directed at binary trans women raises questions about whether the research design was created with all portions of the trans community in mind (Adams & Peirce, 2006, p. 3). Furthermore, while Adams and Peirce claimed they reached “data saturation”, they do not provide details on how many participants responded, how many sessions were conducted, what percentage of interactions happened online or in focus groups, or

¹ Post-operative or ‘post-op’ describes a trans person who has undergone bottom surgery. A trans person who is planning to get bottom surgery could be described as pre-op, whereas someone who is not planning on bottom surgery could be described as non-op. Generally, these terms should be avoided when describing trans people; their surgical status has no bearing on the lives of most individuals.

demographic information of the participants (2006, p. 3). Without a clear picture of either the participants or the research methods employed, it is difficult to put the research into any sort of context.

The results section of this paper does not go into much depth, and some takeaways confuse the research design further. For example, researchers state that “everyone agreed that the Internet was a good resource”, but then state “most of the respondents...were old enough that the Internet was not an available resource when they began to seek information” (Adams & Peirce, 2006, p. 5-6). These responses suggest the focus group discussion moved away from participants’ personal experiences, which does not fit with the researcher’s goal of discovering how transgender individuals “have sought to meet their own information needs” (Adams & Peirce, 2006, p. 1). While these discussions suggest a more user-oriented framework than Taylor’s study, the results do not appear to offer much insight.

Both papers use an outdated definition of ‘transgender’, viewing it as an umbrella term encompassing ‘transsexuals’, i.e. individuals who transition to another gender and get gender-affirming surgery, ‘transgenderists’, i.e. individuals who transition to another gender and do not seek surgery, and ‘transvestites’, i.e. a person who dresses in clothes of the opposite gender, such as a crossdresser or drag queen. Today, we would not attempt to classify trans individuals based on their surgical status and consider the former two groups to be simply ‘transgender’. Crossdressers and drag queens would not be considered transgender; their behaviour relates to their gender expression, but not necessarily their gender identity. This conceptualization of trans identity does not affect Adams and Peirce’s (2006) study, as their “research respondents were transsexuals and transgenderists, not by design, but because these were the participants who were identified and became available” (p. 3). Almost one-fifth (16.7%) of Taylor’s (2002)

respondents, however, were crossdressing men (p. 107). Their responses were constantly compared to those of transgender respondents throughout the paper. Not only does this muddle discussions about the survey results, it may reinforce stereotypes about transgender people being cross-dressers or drag performers, and confuse readers' understanding of gender expression versus gender identity.

A more recent study titled "Transgender Information Behaviour" used semi-structured interviews to explore the information-seeking strategies employed by 12 transgender individuals living in Finland (Pohjanen & Kortelainen, 2016). The interviews had a very broad scope, as trans participants were asked about the information-seeking strategies they employed while coming to understand their gender identity, before discussing how the "information needs of the interviewees had changed over the course of their lives" (Pohjanen & Kortelainen, 2016, p. 179).

After the participants realized they were transgender, their information-seeking changed to focus on information related to helping them transition, such as information on medical treatments and surgeries. The paper focuses more on this latter area of information-seeking and provides interesting insight into the experience of these individuals. For example, the researchers note the importance of trans individuals who had already gone through medical processes sharing information with those who had not, as individuals would need a "transgender diagnosis" to get full treatment (Pohjanen & Kortelainen, 2016, 183). If individuals' reported experiences did not line up with medical staff's expectations, they may instead receive an "undefined gender disorder" diagnosis that would make them ineligible for some treatment options, so this information sharing helped individuals learn the 'correct' responses to get the right diagnosis (ibid). These results are limited by the geographical specificity of the study, as strategies to navigate Finnish medical systems are not necessarily applicable to wider portions of the

transgender population. This is perhaps a necessary concession, given the differences in the medical and legal systems that transgender people around the world need to access to transition, rather than any fault of the researchers.

While the bulk of this study's results focus on information related to medical treatment options, the early information needs are not thoroughly examined by the researchers. They mention that "non-directed monitoring produced the first results...interviewees had found information serendipitously...from books, television, movies or the internet" (Pohjanen & Kortelainen, 2016, 178). These information sources are not elaborated on, and the bulk of the study results focuses on participants' medical information needs, meaning a major research question of this paper is still largely unexplored in all existing studies.

Of the three studies reviewed, this one does the best job at situating itself in a user-oriented perspective. Participants were asked about how their need for information related to transgender identity came about, what kinds of information sources they found most useful, and the various barriers they encountered when seeking information. While the scope of this paper is perhaps too broad and biased more towards information behaviour related to medical procedures, it provides good discussion about the information needs and strategies of transgender individuals in Finland.

Similar to the previously discussed studies, Pohjanen and Kortelainen use outdated or problematic language throughout their paper. They refer to the existence of transgender people as the "transgender phenomenon", an othering, sensationalized phrase (Pohjanen & Kortelainen, 2016, p. 173). They also refer to transgender individuals as "transgender individuals", "transgendered individuals", or "the transgendered" throughout the paper, alternating seemingly at random (ibid). This creates a sense of dissonance for the reader, especially when the latter two

terms could be considered offensive. In a resource describing problematic language used to refer to trans people, GLAAD notes that “transgender should be used as an adjective, not as a noun” and that the word “should never have an extraneous ‘-ed’ tacked onto the end [as it] adds unnecessary length to the word and can cause tense confusion and grammatical errors. It also brings transgender into alignment with lesbian, gay, bisexual, and queer. You would not say that Elton John is ‘gayed’” (“GLAAD Media Reference Guide – Transgender”, n.d.).

Because the body of research on transgender information behaviour is limited, I expanded my search for studies about information-seeking habits of LGBTQ+ people more broadly. I was somewhat reluctant to do so, hypothesizing there could be a large difference between the information needs of someone questioning their sexuality and someone questioning their gender identity, and wondered how well a single study could address the needs of individuals across the spectrum of LGBTQ+ identities. I found my concerns echoed by other academics. The author of a comprehensive literature review about LGBTQ+ information-seeking studies wrote that “it is impossible to know to what extent it will make sense to conceptualize LGBT identities together or separately, as many people question the logical coherence that creates and sustains a term like LGBT” (Keilty, 2009, p. 3276). They also criticize existing work on the topic for “a great neglect of transgender information-seeking issues”, citing only the two studies by Taylor, and Adams and Peirce (ibid). In a paper advocating for the importance of studying transgender-specific health information behaviour, Hawkins and Gieseking (2017) note that in most research into LGBTQ+ health-information seeking, “transgender populations are integrated with lesbian, gay, bisexual, and queer people, typically in a homogenous manner” (p. 702). They criticize these studies for failing to “reflect the important experiences of trans-specific information needs” (Hawkins & Gieskin, 2017, p. 703).

The papers I reviewed confirmed these scholar's criticisms, suggesting transgender people are often marginalized or outright excluded from studies focused on the information habits of LGBTQ+ individuals. A study titled "Information Needs of LGBTQ College Students" asserts "information providers off and on campus are often not able to meet the special information needs of the LGBTQ community. To design services that satisfy these special information needs as comprehensively as possible has to be a priority for every university administration" (Schaller, 2011, p. 100-101). While this is a noble goal, the study does not attempt to address issues specific to transgender individuals. Due to limitations including a "limited number of interested participants and general organizational issues, the focus was narrowed to lesbian, gay, and bisexual undergraduate students" (Schaller, 2011, p. 103). Schaller admits that "the diversity within the LGBTQ community could not be fully reflected within the sample group" and that "further research has to include transgendered [sic] individuals as well," but it is disheartening to see a research paper purporting to study the 'LGBTQ community' while excluding entire sections of it (2011, p. 108).

Another paper, focusing on queer sex education for LGBTQ+ youth, neglects the transgender community through confusing and invalidating demographic coding. Although the study was intended to address sexual health information issues among LGBTQ+ youth, the inclusion criteria required participants to have "reported same-sex attraction or behaviours" and "engaged in a romantic relationship of any duration with someone of the same biological sex" (Mustanski, Greene, Ryan, & Whitton, 2015, p. 221). Transgender individuals have the same range of sexualities as cisgender individuals, so these criteria exclude a sizable percentage of transgender individuals from the survey. The criteria are also difficult to interpret for transgender individuals – a heterosexual transgender woman in a relationship with a cisgender man would

technically be in a relationship with ‘someone of the same biological sex’, but would likely not describe her sexuality as ‘same-sex attraction’.

In addition to making inclusion criteria that is confusing for transgender participants, the demographic coding of Mustanski et al.’s study was not affirming to transgender identities. Participants were separated into the categories ‘Male Born’ or ‘Female Born’, and then selected ‘Male’, ‘Female’, or ‘Transgender’ as their gender identity (Mustanski et al., 2015, p. 226). A transgender man, for example, would have his identity invalidated twice by this schema, first by having his data compared with “female born” participants, and second by forcing him to list his gender identity as “Transgender” when it should be “Man”. The decision to group data by participants’ assigned gender at birth may additionally skew results. It is unclear whether the sexual health information needs of a cisgender man and a transgender woman, for example, are comparable, and the researchers do not attempt to justify this method of data arrangement. It is unsurprising that the study had a low response rate from transgender individuals, with only 14 out of 202 participants identifying as transgender (Mustanski et al., 2015, 226). Potential participants could easily have been dissuaded by the obtuse inclusion criteria, or by being represented in the study as their assigned gender at birth, with the gender identity ‘Transgender’. Insensitive and poorly thought-out survey design, in this case, may have directly impacted the number of people willing or able to engage with the study.

The issues that I have taken with these studies are often with methodology that minimizes the input and perspectives of transgender participants. Ensuring my research had a user-oriented perspective rather than a system-oriented one was one way my thesis could avoid these issues, but I hoped I could take this further with a research design that amplified the perspectives and experience of trans participants. Community-based participatory action research (CBPAR),

which is “based on a philosophy of partnership and principles of self-determination, equity, and social justice,” appeared to offer a good starting point from which to approach my thesis (Maiter, Simich, Jacobson, & Wise, 2008, p. 306). CBPAR aims to “directly engage communities and community knowledge in the research process and its outcomes” in order to “enhance the strategic action that leads to community transformation and social change” (Burns, Cooke, & Schweidler, 2011, p. 5). A CBPAR-inspired research framework would help my thesis place greater weight on participants’ perspectives and experiences than the studies I reviewed. The chance to conduct research that puts “knowledge in action” to address “practical issues” within the community was an appealing possibility as well (Maiter et. al, 2008, pg. 306). By drawing on participants’ experience to attempt to improve existing transgender information resources, I could connect a CBPAR framework to my user-based information behaviour study.

This literature review has revealed that this study’s area of research, transgender information behaviour related to the understanding or formation of one’s transgender identity, has been underexplored even in the limited number of papers related to transgender information behaviour. It has also highlighted the various ways in which ‘outsider’ research into the transgender community can misrepresent aspects of the transgender experience. I believe these takeaways demonstrate the value of this project in its underexplored research area, its distinct status as ‘insider’ research, and in its methodological framework, intended to center the perspectives of transgender participants throughout multiple areas of the research process.

2.1 Research Questions

As I discovered while completing my literature review, the topic of early transgender information behaviour, related to the discovery and understanding of one's gender identity, has been underexplored in existing research into this topic. In many of the papers I reviewed, the researchers' evident lack of experience with transgender topics also caused their research to be less centered on transgender lived experiences. My research questions, designed with these gaps in mind, are as follows:

1. What are the information behaviours of transgender people who are developing, or have recently developed, a sense of their gender identity?
2. What are aspects or qualities of information sources that trans people found helpful or unhelpful in their information seeking?
3. How can existing resources designed for trans people be better tailored to fit their information needs?

Chapter 3: Methodology

3.1 Methodological Framework

3.1.1 Community-Based Participatory Action Research

In addition to exploring the research questions I have outlined earlier, one of my goals for this project is to amplify trans voices by giving participants chances to participate in multiple areas of the research process. My research design takes inspiration from community-based participatory action research (CBPAR) to accomplish this. CBPAR blurs the traditional boundaries between ‘researcher’ and ‘participant’, and the power dynamic this relationship implies, by treating everyone involved in the research as a “stakeholder” and “facilitating collaborative, equitable partnerships in all phases of research” (Burns et. al, 2011, p. 8). My research design supports these values by providing participants with the ability to participate in data analysis and application. Following a first group interview, in which participants discussed their own information-seeking habits, participants were invited for a second interview in which we discussed themes that emerged from the first interview, and suggested ways those findings could be used to improve existing resources for trans people.

However, while CBPAR generally looks to work with localized community-based organizations, the transgender population has no formalized or official community structure. True CBPAR would involve community consultation to identify community issues, with the goal of finding solutions through research. It is difficult to identify community issues in the same way with the transgender population, as individuals may be at much different stages of their transition and may have accessed different resources or gone through different legal and medical systems throughout their transition. There are not necessarily shared community experiences that can be drawn on in the same way.

Instead, I have identified research questions and created a research design based on an aspect of the trans experience I feel has not been appropriately explored in existing research. This work is based not only on my knowledge and experience from my work in the Master of Library and Information Studies program, but from my lived experience as a non-binary trans woman. Conducting ‘insider research’ supports a framework inspired by CBPAR, which holds that “community knowledge is irreplaceable and provides key insights” (Burns et. al, 2011, p. 5). While the decentralized nature of the trans community makes it difficult to collaborate on research methods, I can support the values of CBPAR by ensuring my research is rooted in transgender lived experience.

3.1.2 Positionality Statement

My work on this project is inextricable from my personal experiences and my gender identity, so a positionality statement is important to help outline my relationship with the research topic, and my journey as a researcher.

In February 2018, shortly after starting my first term of the Master of Library and Information Studies program, I made the decision to pursue medical transition. This was a step in a years-long journey of self-discovery and self-doubt about my gender identity; I had been openly identifying as non-binary for two years previously, but had been unsure what, if anything, I should do to embrace that identity. I realized I needed to pursue medical transition after a few harrowing months, during which my mental health and well-being were at an all-time low. I felt immediate relief from just taking the actions that put me on track to begin medical transition, leading me to question, *why hadn't I done something about this sooner?*

Part of the reason lay in my limited exposure to the transgender community. As I was first becoming aware of the trans community in the early 2010s, I was generally exposed to similar narratives. Transgender people know they are the ‘wrong gender’ from an early age, their desire to become their ‘true gender’ is persistent and impossible to ignore, they hate any part of themselves that reminds them of their birth sex, and their gender identity slots into the gender binary. This narrative did not fit my experience, so although I continually found myself drawn to trans stories, I told myself I could not be transgender. When a friend introduced me to the concept of non-binary gender identities, it immediately made sense to me, but again, I encountered narratives that sought to narrowly define what a non-binary person is: an assigned female at birth individual, generally, who presented androgynously and did not medically transition. I eventually discovered that, as an assigned male at birth person, I was ‘allowed’ to identify as non-binary, but the other misconceptions I had internalized about non-binary people made me uncertain about what options were available to me.

As I progressed in my transition and met more trans people from different backgrounds, I was struck by the breadth and diversity of experiences, and by the number of different ways individuals had found to express their identity. For every person I met who followed the default trans media narrative, I met ten more who had found their own path towards living authentically. I realized that the limiting, prescriptive depictions of trans identity I had encountered, often derisively referred to in trans circles as the ‘True Trans™’ narrative, were an attempt to flatten a diverse array of experiences into a convenient and digestible box.

In August 2018, a little over two months after I began hormone replacement therapy, a paper titled “Rapid-onset gender dysphoria in adolescents and young adults: A study of parental reports” was published in the open-access journal PLOS One (Littman, 2018). The paper sparked

immediate controversy for its treatment of ‘rapid onset gender dysphoria,’ or ROGD, which was reported by parents who claimed their children showed few signs of gender nonconformity before puberty, and suddenly came out as transgender in their teens after discovering transgender topics online or making transgender friends. While Littman’s study treated the existence of ROGD as a given, it is not a scientific term or clinical diagnosis - it is a phrase coined by three blogs “with a history of overtly transphobic perspectives that are at odds with the current evidence on transness,” 4thwavenow.com, transgendertrend.com, and youthtranscriticalprofessionals.com (Jones, 2018). For her research on the ‘dangers’ of ROGD, which she describes as a “social contagion” and “maladaptive coping mechanism”, Littman (2018) recruited parents of trans children from the same three sites that came up with the concept in the first place. The parents’ questionnaires made up the entire body of data examined by Littman, who did not consider the perspectives of the transgender children or medical professionals to make her conclusions. Trans scholar Julia Serano (2018) criticizes the study as “the most blatant case of begging the question that I have ever seen in a research paper”, and upon review, Brown University retracted its initial support for the paper due to “concerns about research design and methods” (“Brown statement”, 2018).

I was angered and hurt when I encountered Littman’s paper, recognizing her arguments as another attempt at flattening the transgender experience, but with a more damaging end goal. Parents who believe in ROGD purport that if a person does not fit the narrow confines of the ‘True Trans™’ narrative, if signs of their trans identity are not made apparent by their teen years, then they are not ‘legitimately’ trans and should not receive treatment. I was shocked at these parents’ willingness to discard any possibility of their child’s agency, instead believing they had been manipulated or coerced. According to the ROGD narrative, ‘ROGD kids’ discover

transgender topics through the Internet and ‘decide’ they are trans soon afterwards. Assuming these are the only two steps in a trans youth’s process of discovering their gender identity seemed like a huge leap, and connecting this study’s claims to my own experiences and my MLIS education, I believed these were more likely two steps in a larger information-seeking journey.

Littman’s paper was fresh in my mind when I began LIBR 553, Understanding Information Users in Diverse Environments, in September 2018. The professor, my future thesis supervisor Dr. Heather O’Brien, tasked us with a self-directed term project focused on a topic in human-information interaction that we were passionate about. I quickly decided I wanted to research transgender information behaviour with the goal of centering trans voices and experiences, as a way to push back against the reductive perspectives on trans identity I had encountered. Completing the literature review for that project, which has been partially adapted for this paper, I saw much of the same flattening that I had encountered so much of already. Even in papers from supportive and well-meaning researchers, trans perspectives were minimized in favour of the voices of seemingly inexperienced cis authority figures. I completed the term project with a recognition of the gap I had identified in formal research, and with motivation to expand the project, which consisted of a small interview study, into a full thesis.

Almost two years after completing that initial project, my experience, knowledge, and comfort within my gender identity have all greatly increased, and my motivation in this thesis project remains unchanged. I have no specific hopes for my thesis’s findings; my goal is to produce a piece of research that meaningfully engages with transgender lived experiences, while allowing for the active participation and increased agency of transgender participants.

3.1.3. Insider Research

My own transgender identity classifies this thesis as ‘insider research’. When conducting insider research, there is a danger that “the researcher’s perceptions might be clouded by [their] personal experience, and that as a member of the group [they] will have difficulty separating it from that of the participants” (Dwyer & Buckle, 1999). I hope that these limitations are offset by this study’s CBPAR-based framework. As my participants performed a dual role as co-researchers, the results of this study were formed from a variety of viewpoints, which help to overcome difficulties that could have arisen from my ‘clouded perceptions’. My loosely structured interview script also provided me with fewer chances to skew research with presumptive or leading questions.

Insider research also may allow researchers to collect more nuanced and detailed responses from participants. In a study about bereaved parents, participants expressed that they would “talk differently to people who have lost somebody”, and that it was “different if you’re a member of the club” (Dwyer & Buckle, 1999). As my research is concerned with the lived experience of participants, I want to ensure they feel comfortable and trust me to represent them faithfully. I believe conducting this research as an ‘insider’ is a step towards establishing that trust. At the same time, I recognize that ‘insider’ and ‘outsider’ are not stable, mutually exclusive categories. My own lived experience allows me to bring basic literacy and understanding of the transgender experience, elements which I believe were absent from the literature I reviewed, to my research. However, I approach my research with the awareness that my experience is uniquely *my* experience, inextricable from other aspects of my person including race, socioeconomic status, and family background, among others. My participants will bring information that is similarly unique to their experience.

Finally, in this study I performed the dual role of researcher/research subject alongside my participants. My participation in the research furthers my goal of unsettling the researcher/participant power dynamic. I have not served as an impartial observer as my participants disclosed personal details about their history. Instead, I have demonstrated the same openness and vulnerability that this project requires of all participants. I believe that engaging with the project in this manner had the additional benefit of developing trust and rapport with my participants, which led to improved collaboration over the course of the project.

3.2 Recruitment

For this study, I sought out participants who were transgender and comfortable conversing in English. No further inclusion criteria were required, although I did limit my recruitment to individuals and groups located within the Greater Vancouver Regional District. I focused the scope of recruitment in this way, hypothesizing that trans individuals from the same area may have come into contact with some of the same information sources, which could lead to a better discussion about those sources. As noted in my review of Pohjanen and Kortelainen's study, given the variety of medical and political systems transgender people may need to navigate during their transition, survey results would likely be impacted by a participant's place of origin. This suggests a generalized sample, taken from across the country or worldwide, may not produce results that are as easy to compare or draw conclusions from. Additionally, because part of the research design included evaluating a provincial healthcare resource I felt that this recruitment focus would lead to a greater chance that participants had encountered the resource previously, which could generate better discussion about how the resource could be improved.

I planned to use snowball sampling to recruit participants, as such methodology can be used to access participants in “difficult to reach or hidden populations” such as transgender individuals (Miller & Brewer, 2003). I reached out to personal contacts who may have been interested in the project and asked them to reach out to any of their contacts who fit the inclusion criteria as well. I also reached out to the University of British Columbia’s Pride Collective, bringing up the project at a meeting with the Trans and Gender Identities discussion group as an additional strategy to locate participants.

Unfortunately, I was unable to recruit sufficient participants using these methods, and the COVID-19 pandemic made reaching out to other in-person trans groups impossible. I identified the r/transvancouver subreddit² and discussion board as an online space where local trans participants could be reached. To help verify users met the inclusion criteria, in the interest of both ensuring the success of the study and the safety of participants, I asked interested users to direct message me on Reddit. This allowed me to check their post history, ensuring there were no instances of transphobic bigotry in their comment history, and that the account had not been created after my original post had been made. Thankfully, none of the users who messaged me failed these criteria, and I was able to invite every user who reached out.

In the end, five participants were recruited through posts made on the r/transvancouver subreddit. The sixth was a personal contact who agreed to participate in the study.

In a study regarding information seeking habits, recruiting from any sort of group is likely to introduce bias into results. Any participants recruited from a given group, be it a subreddit or discussion group, would have had to find information about that group at some point, increasing the likelihood that they accessed similar information sources. However, I felt

² A subreddit is a community of users on the social media site Reddit, generally organized around one theme or topic.

this was an acceptable limitation in order to ensure I was able to find enough participants to carry out the study.

3.3 Study Procedure

After participants reached out to me on Reddit, or in the case of my personal contact, via email, I sent them emails containing informed consent forms (Appendix A), as well as forms for demographic information (Appendix B). These forms, as well as the recruitment notices posted to Reddit (Appendix C), can be found in the Appendices of this paper. Participants were encouraged to email any questions they had about the survey before deciding whether to sign the consent forms. This research received approval from UBC's Behavioral Research Ethics Board (ID: H19-04070).

Participants were divided into groups of three people, based on availability. Each group completed two loosely structured group interviews over Zoom (see Appendices D and E for the interview script and questions). The session recordings were securely stored on an encrypted hard drive on my laptop for later transcription. Groups of three were chosen to make it easier for participants to track conversations and turn-taking, which are more difficult when interviewing remotely. Participants were given the option to use video or audio-only chat based on their comfort level, but all participants opted for video. Participants were offered an incentive of \$30 for attending the first interview, and \$40 for attending the second. Participants had the option to be paid through either bank e-transfer or Amazon gift card.

As well as leading and moderating discussions, I was actively engaged in the sessions as a fourth participant, sharing my experiences while helping to move the discussions along. My participation supports this thesis's base in community-based participatory action research, as it

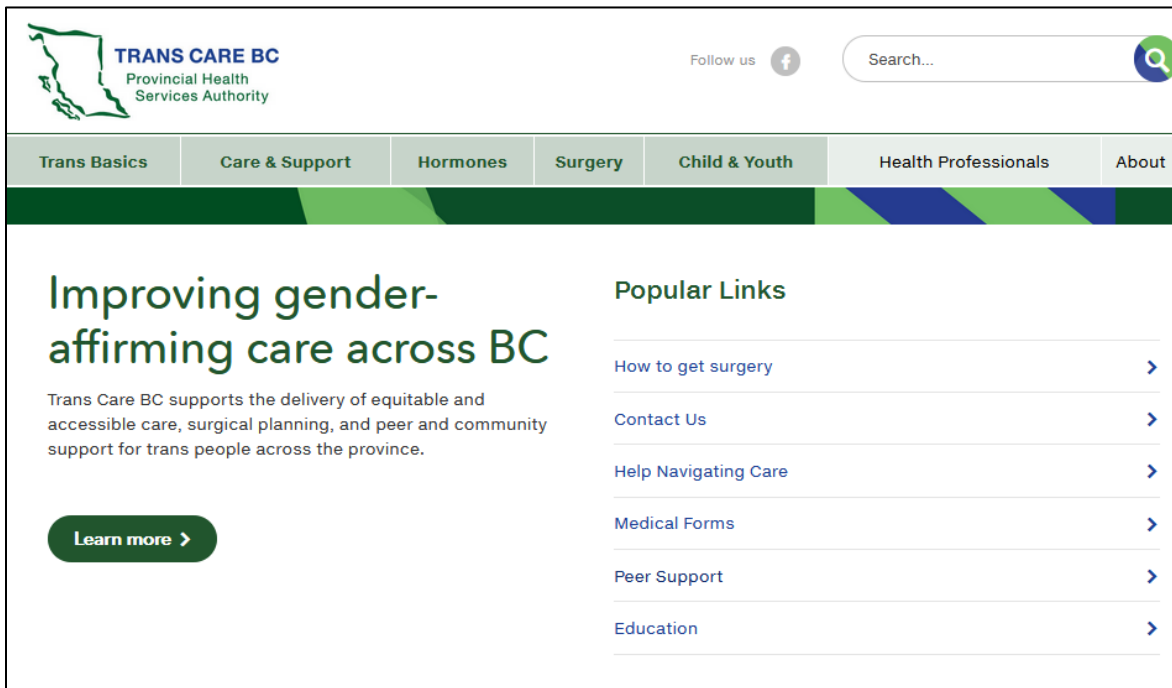
helps position all parties involved in the research process as both researchers and participants, allowing the “distinction between researcher and community to shift” (Burns et. al, 2011, p. 7)

The first interview session had the goal of data generation. Participants were asked to share their experiences with information sources that related to developing their understanding of their gender identity. “Information source” was defined very broadly for the purposes of this study. These could come in the form of any format, from scholarly paper to television show to interpersonal relationships, and could include sources they actively sought out, passively encountered, or were given by another. Participants were encouraged to share all types of information sources they encountered, whether they found them helpful or unhelpful in allowing them to come to a better understanding of their gender identity. Following the session, a transcript was created and sent out to all participants. This enabled participants to ensure they were transcribed correctly and have a chance to review the transcript before the second session. Participants were also sent a link to the Provincial Health Service Authority’s Trans Care website (<http://www.phsa.ca/transgender>), and were asked to review it, as it would be evaluated as part of the second session.

The goal of the second session was data analysis and application. Data was analyzed by the groups using an informal version of thematic analysis. The group members discussed the results of the first session’s interview, with the goal of finding connections or common themes between the members’ responses. Groups were only asked to discuss the results of their own discussion. One group’s transcript was not made available to the other, as this would require more work of the participants, and shift the second discussion from a reflective analysis to an evaluative one. The results of these discussions have been adapted in section 4.2 of this paper, Transgender Information Behaviour.

Next, the group put its findings into action by evaluating the PHSA’s TransCare BC website, pictured in Figure 1. I selected the TransCare BC website for evaluation prior to beginning interviews, hypothesizing that, as the province’s official source for information on trans identities, the site is likely to be referred to trans individuals in BC or found by residents of BC seeking out transgender information themselves. Participants were encouraged to draw on themes identified from our discussion on the previous session to determine how well the website met the information needs of transgender users. I transcribed the interview script from the second session and sent it to participants, so they could have a chance to ensure they were transcribed correctly. The results of the conversations about the TransCare BC website have been adapted into section 4.3 of this paper, Data Application.

Figure 1. Snapshot of the TransCare BC homepage. The site was evaluated by study participants to determine how it could be better tailored to support transgender users.



Five participants who were present for the first session returned to complete the second session live over Zoom. The sixth participant was unable to attend and sent feedback over email later that week.

After completing a total of four interview sessions, two with each group, I used thematic coding to mark sections of the transcripts that were conceptually linked. I used a grounded theory approach to my coding rather than relying on existing or predetermined codes. A grounded theory approach allows theory to be generated “from data systematically obtained from social research”, rather than using data as a tool to “verify theories” (Glaser & Strauss, 2017, p. 1-2). As I reviewed session transcripts, I noted reoccurring themes in the discussion. I highlighted these sections in the original documents and copied quotes and passages that I felt were especially relevant into another document so they could be easily accessed when writing the results and discussion sections.

Chapter 4: Results and Discussion

Throughout this chapter, I will be drawing on quotes and passages from the four interview sessions I conducted. Some participants have opted to have quotes attributed to their names throughout this section, while others have opted to remain anonymous and will instead be designated by a number. I will be referring to each participant using the pronouns they indicated on the demographic information form. Additionally, because I engaged in these discussions along with my participants, some quotes in this section will be attributed to me. I will use the third person to denote when I am quoting something that I said during the group sessions (i.e. ‘Shelby said...’).

4.1 Participants

A total of six participants reached out to take part in this study, with myself acting as a seventh.

The demographic information of participants is as follows:

Table 1. Demographic information of study participants.

Age		Ethnicity		Gender Identity	
19-24	2	Caucasian	5	Non-binary	2
25-30	3	East Asian	2	Non-binary trans woman	1
31-40	1			Trans woman	4
41-50	1				

Unfortunately, no trans or non-binary individuals who were assigned female at birth (AFAB) responded to participate in this study. The relevance of this absence is discussed in more depth in section 5.1, Study Limitations.

4.2 Transgender Information Behaviour

This section discusses conversations from Sessions 1 and 2, related to individual's information behaviour. It addresses the following research questions:

1. What are the information behaviours of transgender people who are developing, or have recently developed, a sense of their gender identity?
2. What are aspects or qualities of information sources that trans people found helpful or unhelpful in their information seeking?

This section will discuss the results of the first interview sessions, combined with the discussion reflecting on the results, which was generated in the second sessions. The first interview session suggested many common experiences amongst the participants, although the details of each differed. First, I will report on individuals' information-seeking journeys, and how early experiences with passive information resulted in active, directed searching. Specific resources or communities that participants found helpful, as well as setbacks or other negative outcomes from their information seeking, will also be discussed. These results suggest that, for many users, information sources that are personally relatable and emotionally supportive are an important part of their journey to discover or better understand their gender identity.

4.2.1 Passive Information

Although participants employed many different strategies when it came to seeking information about gender identity, they reported similar overall journeys. Most participants reported that information sources they received passively gave them new context with which to think about gender identity. Some participants described this as an “epiphany” or “lightbulb” moment. These

instances led to a more active and focused information-seeking process about topics related to transition and gender identity.

Participants received passive information from a variety of sources, including television, social media, print media, and interpersonal exchanges. Participant 2 described her experiences, saying she would “hear snippets in the media, snippets from family members that make you aware of the trans experience, and those passive interactions led later on to an active search of personal identity”. Participant 1 reported that seeing trans people in the real world helped open up her perspectives on gender, mentioning “see[ing] it’s possible, you see people on the streets doing that...casts doubt about what you think is or is not possible”. Shelby cited personal interactions with trans friends and acquaintances as passive information sources that helped her come to a better understanding about her gender. Some participants recalled passive information that they encountered in childhood. Kate remembered “watching Looney Toons and seeing Bugs Bunny in a dress and understanding that was articulating how I felt inside”. June discussed a childhood memory about learning about puberty:

“I was 10 maybe and the Discovery Channel put out this special on puberty. They had an episode for what boys go through and one about what girls go through...I remember...seeing these differences and being kind of upset with some of the things that were supposed to happen with me, then watching the other episode and being like, why can’t some of these things happen with me?”

These participants did not have the language to express what they were feeling at the time but were able to recontextualize and better understand their experiences as they grew older.

4.2.2 Social Media and Online Communities

The most prominent information sources participants used for active searching were social media sites. Each participant reported multiple social media sites that they used as part of their personal information-seeking journeys. These sites included Reddit, Instagram, YouTube, Tumblr, Facebook, and Twitter. Reddit was the most frequently mentioned site by a large margin. Bias towards the platform as an information source was an expected outcome of this study, as the majority of participants were recruited from the r/transvancouver subreddit.

Social media communities were praised by participants for providing opportunities to view authentic, personal experiences of trans individuals, and for providing users with the chance to interact directly with the individuals who created this content. Kate mentioned Reddit was a platform that allowed her to “actually engage with somebody, you could send a message or read their story or what have you...as I was asking those questions I was hearing real-life examples” for questions like “what does HRT [hormone-replacement therapy] do to you?” Several participants mentioned that the ability to share personal experiences over social media created content that was more relatable, which aided them in their personal discovery. P2 mentioned that “read[ing] personal testimonials about trans people going about their day-to-day lives, post-transition, in a way that was not unlike the day-to-day routines I had pre-transition” helped her realize “maybe this is something that relates to me”. Participant 3 summarized her experiences seeking information on social media as follows:

I went on YouTube and started following a bunch of trans people who were transitioning, trans men, trans women, non-binary people. And for me the first step was watching people live normal lives...I wasn't exposed to the LGBTQ community, so that was very comforting, kind of like my brain going ‘wow, this is normal, people can live like this.’

In contrast to these participants, P1 found personal content on Reddit to be of limited use, and found herself looking for a more authoritative source, which she found in the form of an article in the journal *Nature* titled *Sex Redefined*. She explained:

The information on Reddit was a lot of personal stories, like anecdotes, so I don't necessarily know if those would apply to me... You don't know how to place value in other peoples' personal experiences as much as scientific rigor, even though we know... there are a lot of ways in which science is flawed. But when you're questioning, I guess what I'm looking for is something a little more concrete or scientific.

Some participants mentioned making an effort to find online trans communities they could more directly see themselves reflected in. P1, who grew up in Hong Kong, found Reddit communities were "very predominantly used by North American users so the culture is pretty American as well," and because she wasn't as familiar with this culture, "it wasn't as useful for me."

However, she was able to find a more relatable community in Instagram, which is "popular worldwide... back home in Asia many people use Instagram and know how to get on it, whereas they don't really know what Reddit is. You can find other trans Asian people on it as well even though it might be a little more rare." Instagram was also mentioned by June, who reported it "helped me come to terms with being non-binary, seeing what other people want to post themselves wearing on the Internet," and Kate, who found "a whole community of trans women who are parents, who are professionals, in their 40s" while searching for "experiences that resonate with mine." Finally, Shelby reported struggling to see herself in any one community, but "went to lots of trans-femme spaces and saw lots I resonated with and lots I didn't, and went to non-binary spaces and found the same... seeing myself reflected in those different communities in different ways definitely helped me carve out an identity that made sense to me."

4.2.3 Challenges and Setbacks

While participants viewed their experiences with social media positively overall, many also expressed concerns about these platforms. June mentioned the experiences shared on social media could be “glorified, people don’t necessarily present the full reality of anything they’re saying”, and that this led them to “[build] up my expectations too much based on some of the things I’d seen, that [HRT] was going to fix everything and I didn’t necessarily find that to be the case.” They also discussed “a very toxic aspect” of these communities that could result in one getting harassed for their participation, mentioning a time they “took a picture and posted it...one or two people messaged me and just said some horrible shit.” Participants also discussed the dangers of encountering online communities that were built around transphobic or otherwise non-affirming ideologies. P1 and P3 brought up the “questionable communities on Reddit [like] the TERFs³ of Reddit,” and Shelby brought up trans communities such as transmedicalists,⁴ who have negative attitudes towards certain transgender people. While most participants were able to find supportive communities through social media, these platforms also host a variety of hateful communities, giving them the potential to do as much harm as good.

Additionally, many participants encountered barriers that prevented, delayed, or complicated their active searches for information. Societal pressures were a factor that dissuaded June from searching. They noted “the general atmosphere in the 2000s, at last where I lived, anything non-heteronormative was very negative.” Taylor mentioned that they experienced “a serious lack of passive positive information that comes to you,” and discussed the damage that

³ Trans-exclusionary radical feminists, or TERFs, view trans women as male impostors seeking to undermine the safety and political agency of cis women. As of June 29, 2020, Reddit has banned many prominent TERF communities from its platform.

⁴ Transmedicalists are trans individuals who believe an official medical diagnosis and medical treatment are necessary to consider oneself transgender. Many transmedicalists also exclude non-binary individuals, but this is not a requirement of all groups.

could be caused by encountering “negative garbage...presented so well that I’ve caught myself, I’m like, oh my god...that’s me but you’ve portrayed me terribly”. Kate found her attempts to “go somewhere or seek help in the community” stymied by “an internal gatekeeping that was very clear up front...to the point where I didn’t go to a support group meeting until after my name was changed, my gender markers were changed, and after I was [presenting female] full-time at work.” Finally, several participants mentioned challenges related to not feeling ‘trans enough’ or feeling like they had to pursue transition in the ‘right way’. Shelby, June, and Taylor all expressed difficulties understanding their non-binary identities when many visible members of the trans community are binary. Shelby said she “had the impression that non-binary people didn’t medically transition, fueled by a lot of mainstream media of binary trans men or women who have very similar stories, you know – ‘I knew I was a woman since I was a child’”. Similarly, June “thought that in order to be valid as a trans person I had to sort of pursue the transgender narrative that a lot of folks pursue”, and Taylor encountered issues with resources that “say you’re either male-to-female or female-to-male” and “doesn’t speak to any of the other non-binary or trans identities”, experiences which caused them to feel like being trans “doesn’t apply to me because I’m not enough”. While participants encountered negative information from a variety of sources, these sources similarly caused them to feel invalidated, inadequate, or othered for seeking out transgender information.

4.2.4 Discussion of Session 1 Results

The following section is based on discussions from Session 2, in which participants reflected on the discussions from Session 1. Three key themes emerged out of the Session 2 discussions. These themes were the importance of emotionally resonant information sources, the role of serendipitous information discovery, and the appeal of social media sites, specifically Reddit, as transgender information resources. The two groups reviewed only their own transcripts, but the same themes emerged from both sessions.

Both groups found that users' responses to information sources were affected by the emotional content of those sources. Many of the information sources cited as helpful by the participants were also described as emotionally resonant. Different types of information resonated for different people; P2 and P3, for instance, sought out a diverse range of experience from different trans people online, while Kate, June, and P1 sought out more specific communities based on factors including gender identity, ethnicity, age, and life experiences. The information participants found most useful tended to be positive and emotionally supportive, and instances of information-seeking that were unhelpful were generally associated with being emotionally unsupportive and non-affirming. June's experiences with negative societal attitudes towards transgender people, Taylor's experiences with trans information that minimized non-binary identities, and Kate's encounters with trans groups that gatekept support based on transition progress all fit into this category.

These results are in accordance with existing research on the interactions between a user's emotional state and their information behaviour. Savolainen (2014) writes that a user's "emotions and feelings motivate [them] to start, expand, limit, terminate, or avoid information seeking". Positive emotions, such as an individual feeling satisfied with the information they

have gathered, and negative emotions, such as fear or anxiety about a topic, can influence an individual's information behaviour. Due to the stigmas that still exist surrounding transgender identities, it may be difficult for a user to begin seeking information about their gender identity. Encountering information that frames transgender identities negatively could negatively impact their motivation to continue the search, especially as they may be starting their information search from a precarious emotional state. More than providing inaccurate or misleading information about the transgender experience, these types of information can reinforce internalized feelings of shame and doubt that can discourage a trans individual from continuing their information-seeking process. Information that is affirming and supportive can help to assuage a user's fear or doubt, making it more likely that they continue with their search.

The role that serendipitous encounters with trans information play in individual information journeys was also made apparent. Serendipitous "information encounters" occur when a user "acquires information, rather than actively looks for it" (Erdelez et. al, 2016, p. 2). These encounters can help individuals recognize their own feelings of gender diversity, expand perspectives about the possibilities of gender identity and expression, and provide new language or terminology to help individuals better understand their feelings. Considering the apparent link between the usefulness of trans information sources and the emotional support those sources provide, it seems that a serendipitous encounter with a negative, transphobic source of information could have devastating effects on an individual, making it more difficult for them to reach an emotional state where they might feel comfortable with active searching.

Finally, the groups discussed the importance of social media to participants' information-seeking journeys. Many participants viewed social media's low barrier to entry as a key element of its usefulness. Contrary to television or print media, the process of creating content on social

media is accessible to almost anybody, and users who are not creating content still have tools they can use to interact and participate in discussions. P2 said she noticed the “importance of independent content creators in a lot of peoples’ personal exploration...a lot of people really seem to jump onto independent trans content creators talking about gender identity and personal experiences, on platforms such as Reddit, Twitter, or YouTube”. These sites’ user-created content ties into the preference for personal and relatable trans information that many participants shared. These sources tend to be more personal than information from official sources such as healthcare sites; P2 said she found it more “relatable to our day-to-day lives”, while official sources take a more “clinical standpoint”. June discussed how official sites additionally have “a lack in diversity in viewpoints,” whereas social media allowed users to “see a wide range in information and find the things that resonate with you”.

Because Reddit was mentioned as a useful information source by all participants, we discussed in more detail what we thought made this specific platform a good resource. Along with the assets mentioned above, which it shares with many social media sites, Reddit may be better than other social media platforms at facilitating the serendipitous discovery of trans information. Popular posts from subreddits can appear on the main page of Reddit, and users can link to subreddits in the comments they write. This functionality allows users to encounter specialized communities, such as trans subreddits, without intentionally seeking them out. Additionally, subreddits are moderated to ensure content fits the theme of its community. While a user exploring a trending hashtag on Twitter may end up finding a range of supportive and unsupportive content, subreddit moderation makes negative content much less prevalent. Subreddits are still susceptible to bad moderation, but this is not necessarily fatal for a community. If moderators change or begin enforcing rules that users feel are no longer fair, users

can create a separate subreddit with a different set of rules. This approach to user-based moderation limits the potential for communities to gatekeep or provide negative messaging, two elements identified as information barriers in our discussion. However, it can also have adverse effects on its usefulness – having multiple communities which seemingly serve the same purpose can be intimidating for users who have no indication what the “correct” community to follow is. Kate mentioned “r/asktransgender and r/ask_transgender, which was a result of some sort of infighting with mods and they branched off on their own”, an example of the existence of multiple communities which may confuse new users. This is further complicated by trans communities on Reddit that are not affirming to all transgender people. These subreddits can be less visible than positive and affirming ones, as trans subreddits tend to have a directory listing other supportive communities, raising the profile of those communities. However, toxic communities and users are still prevalent on Reddit; P2 described the platform as “unfiltered” and as having “potential for abuse”, and I would be remiss to end this discussion without touching on its toxic elements. The range of information available on Reddit make it impossible to render any coherent verdict about its quality, but the number of participants in this sample who considered it an overall positive source justify this deeper discussion into the platform’s uses.

The specific appeal of Reddit to LGBTQ+ users has been explored in other literature. In their paper “Context collapse and anonymity among queer Reddit users”, Triggs, Møller, and Neumayer (2019) discuss Reddit’s importance as “arguably the most influential anonymity-based social media platform”, as opposed to “identity-based social media” like Facebook which require “real names and profiles”. Reddit’s anonymity provides a space for “LGBTQ people to separate, connect and form group identities while limiting the social and physical risks of harm placed upon queer socialization by heteronormative society” (ibid). This separation and

anonymity are enhanced by users' abilities to make multiple accounts; some respondents to Triggs et. al's (2019) study reported "segregating [LGBTQ] identity into a different account" to further reduce the risk of discovery. Additionally, Triggs et. al (2019) affirmed that many LGBTQ+ subreddits have "rules and social norms" that create largely positive spaces for information sharing and discussion, and respondents in their study noted more "supportiveness and positivity" compared to other subreddits they used. The appeal of anonymous social media platforms has been explored further by Haimson (2018), who found that "online spaces can be important arenas for identity exploration... because attributes like appearance, name, and gender presentation are sometimes flexible" (p. 5). Haimson's (2018) work found "many trans people turn to Tumblr," a platform which, similarly to Reddit, "allows pseudonyms and multiple accounts... to experiment with and express trans identities" (p. 6).

Anonymity was brought up briefly by participants in my study. Kate brought up the importance of "being able to come and go anonymously" when she was first looking for information, although as her relationship with the resource changed, she became more comfortable sharing personal details, to the point where "there's nothing anonymous about my Reddit account." June mentioned that "because [Reddit's] anonymous, people may feel more comfortable" on the platform, but also connected the anonymity to the site's more toxic elements, mentioning they found Instagram "an overall more positive space, I think, because it's far less anonymous and more personal".

Although the use of Reddit was likely over-represented in this study due to the recruitment method, this discussion provided valuable insight into its appeal as a transgender resource for participants. The platform's usefulness as a repository for transgender information is enhanced by a structure that allows for serendipitous discovery of trans topics, anonymity and

separation from other areas of users' social media use, and moderation that helps keep communities specific and focused.

4.3 Data Application – An Evaluation of the TransCare BC Website

This section discusses conversations from Session 2, related to the evaluation of the Provincial Health Service Authority's (PHSA) TransCare BC website (<http://www.phsa.ca/transcarebc/>). It addresses the following research question:

3. How can existing resources designed for trans people be better tailored to fit their information needs?

Following the first group session, participants were sent links to the website and asked to read through it before the second session. Table 2 shows a snapshot of the menu hierarchy on the TransCare BC website at the time of discussion.

Table 2. Snapshot of menu hierarchies on the TransCare BC website at time of group discussion. Some headers, including 'Hormones', 'Surgery', and 'Medical Professionals' have been omitted because they were not relevant to the discussion.

Trans Basics	Care & Support	Child & Youth
Gender <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What's the difference between sex and gender? • What are gender identity and expression? • What does trans mean? • What is sexual orientation? • What language is used to talk about...? 	Accessing Care <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Service Directory • Help Navigating Care • Sexual & Reproductive Health • Mental Health & Wellness Support 	Exploring Gender <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Gender Basics • Gender Health • Gender Development • Parenting • Safety & Privacy
Two-Spirit <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Local groups and initiatives • Books • Online resources 	Social Transitioning <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • ID & Name Change • Binding, Packing, Tucking, Padding • Changing Speech • Hair Removal 	Support for Families <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Family & Friends • Peer & Professional Support • Queer Straight Alliances • Information for Schools • Articles, Books & Movies
Coming Out <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • I think I might be trans • What can I do to feel more positive about my trans identity? • Should I come out? • What should I do before coming out to someone? 	Peer & Community Support <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Peer Support • Community Grants 	Affirmation & Transition <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Social Affirmation & Transition • Medical Affirmation & Transition • Navigating System of Care in BC
Glossary	Support Resources <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Advocacy & Legal Issues • Immigrants & Refugees • Partners & Spouses • Parents, Caregivers, & Family 	

4.3.1 Identifying Issues

One criterion that clearly emerged from our discussion was the importance of resonant and affective components to trans resources. Shelby argued that the site “feels very impersonal after we’ve talked about the importance of resonance, personal experience, and seeing yourself reflected. But the website as a whole seemed very impersonal, very focused on the medical side of things”. Taylor found the site “very dry, clinical...it’s not emotionally supportive,” and P3 felt the site “should be more of a bible, it should be more inviting, more emotionally helpful for your journey”. The site’s focus on clinical information led some participants to discuss the audience for the site, with many participants feeling like users who were questioning or starting to discover their identity were being underserved. P1 said the site felt like it was “designed assuming you already have some background knowledge,” and Shelby felt it was “catering much more to people who have done the work of being like, ‘OK, I am transgender, now what?’”. P2 summarized her concerns with the site, saying:

The PHSA guidelines view [trans identity] from a very clinical standpoint...I guess the point is they’re built more as a guideline for physicians more than individuals. So as a result, you get the treatment guidelines but you don’t get the personal testimonials, the things that might lead people to question whether they want to seek out information in the first place...As far as separating [information-seeking] into two different information-gathering categories, discovering whether or not you believe you’re trans vs. discovering the kind of care that you might want to receive once you’ve realized you are trans, those are two entirely separate things I think, that the PHSA deals with the latter very well and not so well with the former.

Finally, when reflecting on her past experiences with the site, P3 said that “I don’t remember reading it, I don’t remember it being important when I first transitioned, and I think that says a lot about it as the official healthcare web page...It seems like nobody really went to TransCare BC for that first part, coming out, finding out who you are”.

Many participants stated they found much of the website's content was helpful, but it was poorly served by the site's structure. For instance, there is a section of the webpage titled 'I think I might be trans' which is less dry and more emotionally supportive than much of the other content on the site, while still providing useful information for individuals exploring their trans identity. However, to find the content users must navigate to the 'Trans Basics' page, and then to the 'Coming Out' subpage, a progression that participants found illogical. P2 felt that "to a lot of people, the term 'coming out' represents the social communication needed to communicate a new identity, it doesn't necessarily represent personal exploration", calling it the "least intuitive" tab on the website. Shelby argued that "coming out is part of social transition, but you find [information about social transition] under a totally different header tab". Additionally, Shelby mentioned information listed under the 'Exploring Gender' page that was similarly offering emotional support and information related to exploring authentic gender identity and feeling positive in one's gender. However, it is found in the 'Child & Youth' section of the website, and "the audience for the information is cisgender parents of trans children and youth, whereas the information itself could be applicable to a much wider audience including many trans people... it's a poor assumption that only cis people who are interacting with trans people need that kind of information". Shelby felt that it was "a missed opportunity not to have it under 'Trans Basics'... a questioning trans person could find the information useful, if it was formatted differently". Additionally, P1 brought up that TransCare BC, like Reddit, is "operating within North American trans culture, when the website has to serve a Vancouver audience that includes people that are not necessarily familiar with the culture". Resources in different languages, adapted for audiences in different cultural contexts, could help make TransCare BC a useful resource for a broader scope of users.

Finally, some participants felt the site was too static, which could be something that could affect user experience on the site. P3 recommended an inclusion of a changelog to show when the site changes its content, stating that “it looks like they added information that was not there when I checked last time, and I wouldn’t have known about that unless I specifically went to that section again”. Shelby agreed, stating that “I would revisit Reddit cause I would go in with an understanding that every time I visited there’d be new content, something new I could interact with or a new perspective to learn about”. If TransCare BC gave any notice of changes, it may motivate users to return to the site to see if anything new has been added. Instead, the site is presented as a static resource, which may limit a user’s motivation to return to it except to address a specific information need. There is a news feed function on the site, but as P2 pointed out it is “more or less a series of spotlights on clinical providers”, conferences for trans healthcare providers to give advice to other healthcare providers. P2 felt this focus “furthers this image that the website is intended as a repertoire of information for providers and healthcare professionals” rather than trans individuals. Moving the clinical spotlights to the ‘Events’ tab, which does not currently display any information, or making a separate tab for the spotlights altogether, would free up space on the homepage to provide relevant and up-to-date information for the site’s transgender users. P3 felt some content on the site could be refreshed, citing a “YouTube embedded video called ‘Transgender Basics’ that’s a 10-year-old video”, and that the old video “made me feel like the website might be outdated, it’s not trustworthy, it’s antiquated... looking at this makes me go, ‘this is an old website, I’m going to go somewhere else to see what’s up to date”. If a good trans resource needs to be affirming and emotionally supportive, as our discussion suggested, TransCare BC’s clinical language and confusing structure limit its usefulness for trans people early in transition.

4.3.2 Improving TransCare BC

The initial evaluation of the TransCare BC website revealed a number of ways it failed to meet the criteria for a useful trans resource, as identified in our discussion during Session 2. Its content was dry and did not provide users with emotional support, its structure was unintuitive, much of the content appeared out-of-date, and there was no easy way for returning users to see what had changed. Participants discussed ideas that could resolve these issues, which could make TransCare BC a more useful resource for transgender people.

The addition of more video content was suggested as a way to make the site more inviting to users. P3 mentioned the site could benefit from “more introductory gender identity topics with videos... it might be easier to intake something that’s a video than read it. At least some kind of introductory, basic thing, it might be more friendly than mountains and mountains of text”. This content could also address the site’s lack of any portrayals of relatable trans experiences. Shelby said that this kind of video content could be “a way to backdoor relatable trans experiences into the site – if your video was hosted by an out trans person, you’re getting information being presented in a more digestible way but you’re also getting a positive representation of a trans person”. In addition to creating new content to make the site more digestible, existing content could be refreshed using this format. Kate mentioned a “whiteboard video” posted to the front page of the site, which she found dated, saying it was “very 2014 in my mind”. The video features a hand which ‘draws’ pictures and key terms related to the narration. This format feels very impersonal, and the information in the video could be just as easily conveyed by a trans person speaking to camera. Creating videos with trans speakers would be both a way to keep users engaged with content, and a way to incorporate positive portrayals of

transgender people onto the site without detracting from its primary use as a health information resource.

Structural changes could help the TransCare BC site be easier to navigate for users, whatever their reason for visiting the site. Information regarding the trans self-discovery process should be compiled under one heading, with a title such as ‘What to Do If You Think You Are Trans’ to guide users who are questioning or are in the beginning stages of understanding their identity. This tab could compile information found elsewhere on the site, such as the ‘I think I might be trans’ section of the ‘Coming Out’ tab, introductory information on trans topics such as the differences between sex and gender, and some of the material about gender currently found under the ‘Child & Youth’ tab, adapted to address trans individuals rather than cis parents.

Content that could be added to this section include “another tab for common myths and misconceptions”, as P1 suggested. Taylor felt there was “too much dangerous garbage out there”, and that TransCare BC could help by “touching on persuasive negative messaging and avoiding negative information”, as well as “speaking to internalized transphobia”. Shelby agreed, saying that the site was “missing an opportunity to stamp out negative stereotypes and associations...when you come upon the transmedicalist groups on Reddit or whichever groups you’re finding that aren’t affirming, reading about it from an authoritative source...having that ammunition I think would be really helpful”.

Participants also felt that the “Child & Youth” section could be refocused. P2 felt that it was “having a bit of an identity crisis over whether it intends to target the relatives and family of trans people, or whether it targets trans individuals themselves”. She argued for renaming the tab “to something such as ‘Support for Friends and Family’ and made more specialized to that purpose for relatives and acquaintances” whereas “the more general information under that tab,

such as Exploring Gender, could be put into the Trans Basics tab”. The new ‘Support for Friends and Family’ tab could be refocused with information about how best to support trans individuals in the user’s life, and potentially contain more specialized resources, such as material to help explain concepts of gender identity to younger children.

Finally, TransCare BC could improve by compiling links to affirming trans content creators and positive media portrayals of trans people. In a section of the site titled ‘What can I do to feel more positive about my trans identity?’, TransCare BC suggests individuals “read or listen to books by trans authors, listen to music by trans musicians, [and] watch movies and TV shows that respectfully include trans characters”. Shelby found it frustrating that the site would suggest these options without providing good examples of media to start with. She recognized that “expecting [TransCare BC] to make that kind of relatable content might fall outside of its scope, but I think pointing towards good, affirming trans content is definitely a positive way they could provide that”. There are several links to video content, as well as a list of books about transgender themes, but it is under the ‘Articles, Books & Movies’ tab of the ‘Child & Youth’ header, limiting the number of users who could find it. The links and titles are also provided without context or information about the content, and appear to be at least a few years old, which further limits the usefulness of this section. Ideally, this list would be kept up-to-date, made more visible in the site’s hierarchy, and could inform users of what to expect from each resource so they could know what might suit their information needs.

Taylor suggested TransCare BC could provide “links to a YouTube gender therapist” and “tie in the University of Victoria Transgender Archive”, which would help provide content that the site does not currently offer. They also suggested that TransCare BC could set up an online library and “make some trans books available”, as “BC Libraries has zero good trans books on

Libby”⁵. This would be a way that TransCare BC could help reduce barriers to information and make good trans resources more accessible for users. Compiling information on affirming trans resources is another way for TransCare BC to act as an authoritative hub for information, steering users away from toxic content related to trans people. Shelby said that “if I found their list of recommended trans YouTubers, whatever form it took, that might help me to not find videos from Blair White⁶...and that could pre-emptively prevent someone from falling down a really negative rabbit hole”. Compiling media in this way helps TransCare BC provide a more diverse range of content and information. However, Taylor felt that in some instances “there may be no viable free alternative” for some forms of content, and that TransCare BC could consider “creating content where there is no acceptable available content,” in the form of a “podcast, magazine [or] zine”.

Table 3 visualizes some of the feedback participants had about the TransCare BC website’s structure, suggesting ways the menu hierarchy shown in Table 2 could be adapted.

⁵ Libby is an e-book app that allows users to borrow material from public libraries in British Columbia through the BC Libraries Cooperative.

⁶ Blair White is a popular right-wing transgender YouTuber with many negative views on trans people.

Table 3. A snapshot of proposed structural changes to the TransCare BC menu hierarchy. Sections that have been added are italicized; sections that have been removed or moved from their original placement are indicated with a strikethrough.

Trans Basics	Care & Support	Child & Youth Support for Friends & Family
Gender <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What’s the difference between sex and gender? • What are gender identity and expression? • What does trans mean? • What is sexual orientation? • What language is used to talk about...? • <i>Common Myths & Misconceptions</i> 	Accessing Care <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Service Directory • Help Navigating Care • Sexual & Reproductive Health • Mental Health & Wellness Support 	Exploring Gender <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Gender Basics • Gender Health • Gender Development • Parenting • Safety & Privacy
<i>I Think I Might Be Trans</i> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Exploring Gender</i> • <i>Gender Basics, Health, Development</i> • <i>What can I do to feel more positive about my trans identity?</i> • <i>Affirming Trans Media & Content Creators</i> • <i>Recognizing Internalized Transphobia</i> 	Social Transitioning <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Coming Out</i> • <i>Should I come out?</i> • <i>What should I do before coming out to someone?</i> • ID & Name Change • Binding, Packing, Tucking, Padding • Changing Speech • Hair Removal 	Support for Families <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Transgender Basics for Parents & Caregivers</i> • <i>How To Support a Transgender Loved One</i> • Family & Friends • Peer & Professional Support • Queer Straight Alliances • Information for Schools • Articles, Books & Movies • <i>Books & Movies for Parents & Caregivers</i> • <i>Books & Movies for Trans Children & Youth</i>
Two-Spirit <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Local groups and initiatives • Books • Online resources 	Peer & Community Support <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Peer Support • Community Grants 	Affirmation & Transition <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Social Affirmation & Transition • Medical Affirmation & Transition • Navigating System of Care in BC
Coming Out <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • I think I might be trans • What can I do to feel more positive about my trans identity? • Should I come out? • What should I do before coming out to someone? 	Support Resources <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Advocacy & Legal Issues • Immigrants & Refugees • Partners & Spouses • Parents, Caregivers, & Family 	
Glossary	<i>Two-Spirit Resources</i> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Local groups and initiatives</i> • <i>Books</i> • <i>Online resources</i> 	

A summary of participants' suggestions to improve the website, besides the proposed structural changes shown in Table 3, is as follows.

- Include a “changelog” to let users easily see if information has been added or updated.
- Move the Clinical Spotlights to an Events tab, or their own separate tab, to better utilize the News feed.
- Create resources in different languages and cultural contexts to help reach all users in British Columbia.
- Create or link to more video content, preferably hosted by transgender individuals.
- Provide information that helps address negative stereotypes about transgender people, as well as tools to help users address internalized transphobia.
- Link to affirming trans content creators and trans media, such as books or films.
- Create or link to an accessible online repository of transgender resources to help reduce access barriers for users seeking information.
- Ensure links and embedded videos are up to date, changing or removing links with outdated information.

Although this list was generated based on an evaluation of a specific website, many of these recommendations could be utilized by other online resources as well.

Overall, most participants felt the site was adequate but in need of improvement. Kate felt that “coming from Alberta, there’s a lot more information” on the TransCare BC site, P3 felt it was “not bad, some of the formatting needs to be restructured, it needs to be updated...but if you take the time to read everything it’s an okay resource”, and P2 felt it offered “information [that’s] adequate or quite close to what trans people would need,” arguing the site’s problems were “more of a design issue than an actual informational issue”. Some of these issues could be

addressed by simple, concrete recommendations including restructuring the Trans Basics and Child & Youth tabs to target their intended audiences more clearly and effectively. Other recommendations, such as compiling affirming media and incorporating positive portrayals of trans people into the site's video content, require a bigger-picture shift in philosophy related to the type of information and support TransCare BC intends to provide to its users. Based on our discussions and analysis, we strongly believe these recommendations could help make TransCare BC a better resource for transgender people.

Chapter 5: Conclusion

My goal with this thesis was to address gaps in existing research about transgender people by focusing on information behaviour related to coming to discover or understand their gender identity. Additionally, I sought to improve on existing research through a community-based participatory action research-inspired framework that amplified the voices and perspectives of transgender participants throughout the research project.

Over a total of four interview sessions, two each for two groups of three participants, participants and I discussed the information sources that we encountered in the early stages of our transition, reflected on and analyzed our discussions to find common themes and takeaways, and used these takeaways to imagine how the Provincial Health Service Authority's TransCare BC website could be improved to better meet the information needs of trans users. Our results showed that serendipitous information was important to the majority of participants, and that participants responded better to information sources that were relatable, resonant, and emotionally supportive.

5.1 Study Limitations

While I believe this study generated valuable discussion about transgender information behaviour, it cannot make general claims about information behaviour across the transgender community. The small sample size and geographic specificity of my participants make it difficult to extrapolate the results of this study to the larger trans population.

The recruitment strategy that I employed introduced bias into the study and limited the range of potential participants. As a majority of my participants found the study through Reddit, Reddit was likely over-represented as an information source in participant responses. Recruiting

members from any group would introduce bias into the study, as any participants would have previously encountered information that helped them find that group. Online recruitment of participants also introduces barriers to participants based on socioeconomic status, as participants without access to the Internet would not have a chance to find out about the study. Transgender individuals are homeless, unemployed, or impoverished at a disproportionate rate compared to cisgender people, which means a significant number of trans people would not have been able to discover this study (Carpenter, Eppink & Gonzalez, 2020). The shift to online recruitment and meetings was necessary to ensure safety during the COVID-19 pandemic, but it narrowed the range of individuals who were able to participate.

Another key limitation of this study is found in the demographic spread of participants. None of the participants who took part in this study were assigned female at birth (AFAB). The recruitment method of advertising on Reddit likely contributed to this, as trans women and other assigned male at birth (AMAB) trans people appear to be over-represented in many trans communities on the site. While two major communities for transgender women, r/mtf, and transgender men, r/ftm, have a comparable number of subscribers, 788,000 and 763,000 respectively, posts from users on the largest trans subreddit, r/traaaaaaannnnnnnnns, tell a different story. AFAB users often report feeling overwhelmed by the number of AMAB-specific posts on the subreddit, and the use of user tags on posts support this. A random sampling on May 19, 2020 showed a total of 41 daily posts from two AMAB-specific tags, ‘transfem’ and ‘gals’, nearly three times more than the 15 posts made in the two AFAB-specific tags, ‘transmasc’ and ‘guys’. This discrepancy in content suggests a much higher number of active AMAB users on Reddit’s trans communities, which help explain the lack of AFAB respondents to this study. Media coverage of transgender individuals tends to feature “disproportionate, sensationalized

visibility of trans femininities and a comparative lack of media attention to trans masculinities” (Koch-Rein, Yekami, & Verlinden, 2020, p. 4). I am deeply sorry to have contributed to this invisibility with a paper constructed solely from AMAB trans perspectives.

While I recognize the limitations of my participant pool, I also question to what extent representative samples are necessary for qualitative social research, as well as the coherence of the concept of a ‘representative sample’. While representative samples tend only to seek out participants that match the larger population along a certain set of criteria, such as sex or age, these categories fail to truly represent the diversity that may be present in a group. Race, social background, class, sexuality, physical ability, neurotypicality, the diverse array of gender identities, and the intersections between these factors all influence how a person may relate to a research topic. With this number of factors to consider, it is difficult to imagine how any subset of a group could be truly representative of the whole, and any attempt to assemble a traditional ‘representative sample’ necessitates the prioritization of some of these categories over others.

By centering my research in the perspectives and lived experience of myself and my six participants, this thesis has more interest in the specific than the general. This is not a report on the information behaviour of the wider transgender population as much as it is an attempt to record, summarize and synthesize the experiences of seven individuals. I hope that readers do not dismiss the results or discussion present in this paper because the sample represents only a narrow subsection of the trans population. Instead, I hope readers might use this thesis as a template for conversations with transgender people in their lives to better understand their experiences and information needs.

5.2 Study Strengths and Contributions

The discussions that emerged from this thesis provide important insight into the role information behaviour can play in a transgender individual's process of better understanding their gender identity. Prior to this study, the small selection of available literature was more focused on health information-seeking, so this paper's specific focus on information behaviour related to identity formation covers new ground. Compared to existing literature, including studies by Taylor (2002), Adams and Peirce (2006), and Pohjanen and Kortelainen (2016), this study is also unique for its community-based participatory action research framework, which centers the perspectives and experience of its participants and uses findings to suggest improvements for existing trans resources. This methodology was successful at generating in-depth discussions among participants. The two-session structure allowed rapport to develop amongst participants. The first session discussed participants' personal experiences with information behaviour, which served as a sort of 'icebreaker' that I believe helped participants feel comfortable in the second session, which required more collaboration to identify themes and suggest improvements for the Provincial Health Care Authority's TransCare BC website.

In addition to the thesis's contributions to Library and Information Studies literature related to transgender users, it contains a list of criticisms and actionable suggestions that could be used to improve the TransCare BC website. It is not clear to what extent transgender individuals were consulted in the creation of the resource, but this thesis provides research-based feedback that could be used in improving and updating it. While I do not want to generalize these results too much, it is also possible the guidelines we determined in our discussion could be used to improve other transgender resources as well.

5.3 Future Research

This project contributed to the underdeveloped body of literature on transgender information behaviour, using a framework that attempted to put greater emphasis on the perspectives of transgender participants. Due to the limited scope of my project, there is still need for continued research in this topic. There is potential for this project to be replicated and expanded to reach wider sections of the transgender population, and I believe future research would benefit from carrying on some of the values of my research design, namely in its focus on participant experiences, and its goal of using research to improve aspects of the community. While this thesis is too limited to make any generalized claims about the transgender community, perhaps with more research in partnership with diverse groups of participants, more universal takeaways about transgender information behaviour could be made apparent.

I designed this study in part as a response to concerns that I have with how transgender people are represented in research about their information behaviour. However, I also believe this framework could be applicable to research with other marginalized groups as well. I believe insider research can offer invaluable perspective into the unique challenges and nuances of marginalized identities, and research that attempts to meaningfully engage with participants and seek out ways to improve systems that they interact with is more equitable and leads to better research outcomes.

5.4 Conclusion

When I started work on my thesis project, I had the goal of creating research that better engaged with the perspectives of its participants than existing research. Reflecting on the finished product, I believe my goal has been achieved. In this thesis, I used a community-based participatory action research-inspired framework to explore the information behaviour of transgender individuals. My collaborations with my participants revealed the importance of serendipitous information, which was often the first interaction that participants had with information related to transgender identity. We discussed the need for information that was emotionally resonant, supportive, and that the user could see themselves reflected in, to assist users who may be in vulnerable emotional states. The value of social media, which has a low barrier of entry to create content, and often consists of the kinds of personal and resonant content that participants expressed preference for, was also made apparent. Additionally, we identified areas in which the Provincial Health Service Authority's TransCare BC website could be improved, through structural changes that better reflect a trans user's information needs, and content that provided users with more emotional support. While there is still much work that needs to be done around research into transgender information behaviour, I believe that this thesis is a good step towards research that prioritizes participant engagement and input.

Bibliography

- Adams, S. & Peirce, K. (2006). Is There a Transgender Canon?: Information Seeking and Use in the Transgender Community. *Proceedings of the Annual Conference of CAIS / Actes Du congrès Annuel De l'ACSI*. <https://doi.org/10.29173/cais161> doi: <https://doi.org/10.29173/cais161>
- Brown statement on gender dysphoria study. (2018, September 5). Retrieved from <https://news.brown.edu/articles/2018/08/gender>
- Burns, J., Cooke, D., & Scweidler, C. (2011). A short guide to community based participatory action research. Retrieved from <https://hc-v6-static.s3.amazonaws.com/media/resources/tmp/cbpar.pdf>
- Carpenter, C., Eppink, S., & Gonzales, G. (2020). Transgender Status, Gender Identity, and Socioeconomic Outcomes in the United States. *ILR Review*, 73(3), pp. 573–599. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0019793920902776>
- Case, D. & Given, L. (2016). *Looking for Information: A Survey of Research on Information Seeking, Needs, and Behavior*. Emerald Publishing Ltd.
- Dwyer, S. and Buckle, J. (1999, March 1). The Space Between: On Being an Insider-Outsider in Qualitative Research. doi: <https://doi.org/10.1177/160940690900800105>
- Erdelez, S., Heinström, J., Makri, S., Björneborn, L., Beheshti, J., Toms, E., & Agarwal, N. K. (2016). Research perspectives on serendipity and information encountering. *Proceedings of the Association for Information Science and Technology*, 53(1), pp. 1-5. doi:10.1002/pra2.2016.14505301011
- GLAAD Media Reference Guide – Transgender. (n.d.) Retrieved from <https://www.glaad.org/reference/transgender>
- Glaser, B. & Strauss, A. (2017). *The Discovery of Grounded Theory: Strategies for Qualitative Research*. Routledge.
- Haimson, O. (2018). Social Media as Social Transition Machinery. *Proceedings of the ACM on Human-Computer Interaction*, 2(CSCW). doi: <https://doi.org/10.1145/3274332>
- Hawkins, B. & Giesecking, J. (2017). Seeking Ways to Our Transgender Bodies, By Ourselves: Rationalizing Transgender-Specific Health Information Behaviors. *Proceedings of the Association for Information Science and Technology*, 54(1), pp. 702-704. doi: 10.1002/pra2.2017.14505401122
- Jones, Z. (2018). “Rapid onset gender dysphoria”: What a hoax diagnosis looks like. Retrieved from <https://genderanalysis.net/2018/02/rapid-onset-gender-dysphoria-what-a-hoax-diagnosis-looks-like>
- Keilty, P. (2009). Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender Information Needs. In M. Bates and M. Niles (Eds.), *Encyclopedia of Library and Information Sciences*. pp. 3275-3280. CRC Press.
- Koch-Rein, A., Yekani, E., & Verlinden, J. (2020). Representing trans: visibility and its discontents. *European Journal of English Studies*, 24(1). doi: 10.1080/13825577.2020.1730040
- Littman, L. (2018). Rapid-onset gender dysphoria in adolescents and young adults: A study of

- parental reports. *PLOS One*. doi: 10.1371/journal.pone.0202330
- Maiter, S., Simich, L., Jacobson, N., & Wise, J. (2008). Reciprocity: An ethic for community-based participatory action research. *Action Research*, 6(3), p. 305-325. doi: 10.1177/147675030708372
- Miller, R. & Brewer, J. (2003). Sampling, snowball: accessing hidden and hard-to-reach populations. *SAGE Research Methods*. doi: 10.4135/9780857020024
- Moolchaem, P., Liamputtong, P., O'Halloran, P., & Muhamad, R. (2015). The Lived Experience of Transgender Persons: A Meta-Synthesis. *Journal of Gay & Lesbian Social Services*, 27(2). doi: 10.1080/10538720.2015.1021983
- Mustanski, B., Greene, G., Ryan, D., & Whitton, S. (2015). Feasibility, Acceptability, and Initial Efficacy of an Online Sexual Health Promotion Program for LGBT Youth: The Queer Sex Ed Intervention. *Journal of Sex Research*, 52(2), pp. 220-230. doi: 10.1080/00224499.2013.867924
- Pohjanen, A. & Kortelainen, T. (2016). Transgender information behaviour. *Journal of Documentation*, 72(1), pp. 172-190. doi: 10.1108/JD-04-2015-0043
- Savolainen, R. (2014). Emotions as motivators for information seeking: A conceptual analysis. *Library & Information Science Research*, 36(1), pp. 59-65.
- Schaller, S. (2011). Information Needs of LGBTQ College Students. *Libri*, 61(2). doi: 10.1515/libr.2011.009
- Serano, J. (2018). Everything You Need to Know About Rapid Onset Gender Dysphoria. Retrieved from <https://medium.com/@juliaserano/everything-you-need-to-know-about-rapid-onset-gender-dysphoria-1940b8afdeba>
- Taylor, J. (2002). Targeting the Information Needs of Transgender Individuals. *Current Studies in Librarianship*, 26(1-2), pp. 85-109.
- Triggs, A., Møller, K., & Neumayer, C. (2019). Context collapse and anonymity among queer Reddit users. *New Media & Society*. doi: 10.1177/1461444819890353
- Vakkari, P. Task complexity, problem structure and information actions: Integrating studies on information seeking and retrieval. *Information Processing and Management*, 35, pp. 819-837.
- Wilson, D. (1997). Information Behaviour: an Interdisciplinary Perspective. *Information Processing & Management*, 33(4), pp. 551-572.

Appendices

Appendix A: Informed Consent Form

Transgender information seeking: a collaborative approach to supporting the information needs of transgender people

Study Information

Researcher: Shelby Miller shelby.miller@alumni.ubc.ca

Supervisor: Dr. Heather O'Brien h.obrien@ubc.ca

Ethics ID: H19-04070

- Introduction** Thank you for considering to participate in this study. This work serves as my thesis project for my Master of Library and Information Studies at UBC. As a transgender researcher, I am excited to be leading a research project that goes beyond utilizing transgender participants for the purpose of data generation. I have designed this project with the goal of allowing your unique perspectives and experiences to inform all aspects of this research, including data generation, analysis, and putting findings into practice. I am hopeful that this approach will generate interesting and meaningful discussion into an area of the transgender experience that I feel is currently under-explored.
- Purpose** The aim of this study is to learn more about the information-seeking habits and needs of transgender individuals, focusing specifically on the need for information related to better understanding one's gender identity. Participants will collaborate in group settings to discuss their experiences with information-seeking, analyze data they have generated, and make recommendations about a healthcare resource intended to support transgender individuals.
- What you will be asked to do** This study will take place over group interviews lasting a maximum of 60 minutes, and will take place on either phone or Zoom videoconferencing. You will be in a group with up to 3 other participants. In the first session, participants will be asked to discuss the information sources they encountered when coming to understand their gender identity. Following the first session, a transcript will be sent out to all participants who attended the first session. This gives participants a chance to reflect on the discussion and correct any errors in transcription.
- In the second session, participants will be asked to discuss our findings from the first session, attempting to identify recurring themes or form theories. Participants will then put these findings into practice by evaluating the Provincial Health Services Authority's transgender information site, TransCare BC (<http://www.phsa.ca/transcarebc/>), to determine whether they feel it is suited to the information needs of transgender individuals.
- If you have any questions or concerns related to this study after reading this document, please respond to the researcher and they will answer you in a timely manner. If you wish to participate in this study, please respond with the completed consent form.

Participation	<p>Your participation is entirely voluntary. You may refuse to participate, refuse to answer any questions, or withdraw from the study at any time without consequence. No explanations will be required, and your withdrawal will not affect the study.</p> <p>You are welcome to take a break at any point during the group sessions.</p>
Risks/Benefits	<p>In this study, you will discuss your experiences with information-seeking related to better understanding your gender identity in a group setting. Discussion of these topics could prompt you to recall difficult personal experiences, and sharing these experiences in a group setting could cause you to feel vulnerable. The benefits of this study include the potential for relationships and camaraderie to develop among participants and giving you the opportunity to be actively involved in multiple stages of a research project. Additionally, there is the indirect benefit of participating in research which may improve the quality of information resources available to transgender individuals.</p>
Compensation	<p>Participants will be offered an incentive of \$30 for attending the first session, and an incentive of \$40 for attending the second.</p>
Confidentiality & Anonymity	<p>Information collected via the interview will be viewed by the researcher, Shelby Miller, and the thesis supervisor, Heather O'Brien, exclusively. All research data will be stored on encrypted, confidential hard-drives on password-protected computers. Participants will be sent copies of session transcripts, in order to review them and confirm their accuracy.</p> <p>Participants may choose to appear anonymously in this study, or be referred to by a name of their choosing. No identifying information about participants will be included in the final publication.</p> <p>We encourage all participants to refrain from disclosing the contents of the discussion outside of the focus group; however, we cannot control what other participants do with the information discussed.</p>
Publication and Data Retention	<p>Your name will appear only on this consent form and it will be stored separately from your interview transcript. The consent form will be stored by a course instructor for a 5 year period and then destroyed using a confidential service. No names will be attached to computer files, and your name will not be used in any written work or in presentations without your consent.</p> <p>The finished thesis will be published as an Open Access article in UBC's CIRCLE website.</p>

If you have any concerns or complaints about your rights as a research participant and/or your experiences while participating in this study, contact the Research Participant Complaint Line in the UBC Office of Research Ethics at 604-822-8598 or if long distance e-mail RSIL@ors.ubc.ca or call toll free 1-877-822-8598.

I, _____, have read the explanation about this study. I have been given the opportunity to discuss it with the researchers and my questions have been answered to my satisfaction. I hereby consent to take part in this study. However, I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw from the study at any time.

Signature: _____ Date: _____

If you have any concerns or complaints about your rights as a research participant and/or your experiences while participating in this study, contact the Research Participant Complaint Line in the UBC Office of Research Ethics at 604-822-8598 or if long distance e-mail RSIL@ors.ubc.ca or call toll free 1-877-822-8598

Appendix B: Demographic Information Form

Disclosure of any demographic information is optional and will not impact the study.

You may choose to be represented anonymously within the discussion and results sections of the final paper. If you do, you will be assigned an anonymous identifier (i.e. “Participant A”).

You may also choose to be represented by a name of your choice within the paper. Quotes may be attributed to you, but there will be no linking of your name and any demographic information.

- Age:**
- 19 – 24
 - 25 – 30
 - 31-40
 - 41-50
 - 50+
 - Prefer not to say

- Ethnicity:**
(*Select all that apply.*)
- Black
 - Caucasian
 - East Asian
 - First Nations
 - Hispanic / Latinx
 - Middle Eastern
 - South Asian
 - Other: _____
 - Prefer not to say

Gender Identity: _____

- Pronouns:**
(*Select all that apply.*)
- he / him / his
 - she / her / hers
 - they / them / theirs
 - Other: _____

Name:

- I wish to be represented anonymously within this study.
- I wish to be represented in this study using the following name:

Interview Format:

- Please select the formats that you would be willing to use to participate in sessions.*
- Phone
 - Zoom conference

Remuneration:

Please select your preferred format to receive your incentives for participating in this study.

- Bank e-transfer
- Digital Amazon gift card

Appendix C: Reddit Recruitment - Posted to r/transvancouver

Hi r/transvancouver! My name is Shelby, and I'm a trans-femme graduate student at UBC's School of Information. I'm currently seeking participants for a research project focused on the information-seeking needs of transgender people. I am working with Heather O'Brien (h.obrien@ubc.ca), an associate professor at the School of Information who serves as the principle investigator for this study.

The goal of this study is to interview transgender participants about their experiences searching for information related to developing their understanding of their gender identity. As a transgender individual myself, I am motivated to ensure that this project is equitable towards my participants. I'm aware of the power dynamics inherent in many forms of research, especially involving marginalized groups, and have actively sought out ways to subvert or disrupt that dynamic with this project.

The study will take place over two group sessions, which will take place over phone or Zoom. and my goal is to ensure participants are actively engaged in multiple parts of the research. Instead of being limited to generating data, this project will provide additional opportunities to collaborate on data analysis and application. In the first session, participants will share details related to the information-seeking habits that helped them better understand their gender identity. In the second, participants will analyze data from the first session and use it to evaluate an information resource intended for use by transgender individuals.

I'll be offering \$70 total in remuneration for participation in both sessions. If you are interested or have any questions, please leave a comment or DM me and I'll get back to you as soon as I can!

Thanks, and I hope to hear from you soon!
Shelby

Appendix D: Session 1 Interview Guide

- Session will start with a round of introductions. Introduce the topic, provide definitions for “information source” and “information seeking”.
- Obtain verbal consent to record participants before beginning the discussion.
- The majority of the session will be a loosely structured discussion centered around the following prompt:

“Reflect on the different information sources you encountered when questioning your gender identity. To what extent were they helpful in helping you better understand your gender identity?”

- Researcher may share aspects of their personal experiences to initiate discussion.

“My journey really started by talking to a close friend, who had figured out they were non-binary earlier than me, about their experiences with gender and not feeling like they fit into the gender they were assigned. That helped me realize I didn’t fully feel like I fit into my assigned gender either, although I wasn’t able to connect the dots to figure out I was transgender at the time.

I always paid a lot of attention whenever I encountered information about transgender people in the wild – I remember feeling really upset over a news story about a trans teen being bullied, or really emotional whenever I saw a ‘trans timeline’ post. I chalked a lot of this up to the fact that I was bisexual, so of course I was being a good ally to my transgender siblings! Eventually I took a course taught by a transgender professor, who talked about her experience with her gender identity. She described a habit she had that she related to her dysphoria – I had the same habit and had never connected it to my gender. That was the epiphany moment that finally caused me to realize I was transgender.

For a few years I identified as non-binary without really knowing what I should do about it. I remember looking up information about hair removal because that was something that really bothered me, but feeling like it was too expensive for me to pursue. And an impression I had from media coverage focused on binary trans people was that non-binary people didn’t medically transition, so I didn’t know what to do for a while. At one point I saw an interview with an AMAB non-binary artist that popped up on Facebook, who talked about their medical transition, and I realized that was something I was able to pursue. So I needed to encounter all these sources of information to start understanding my gender identity, and getting me to a place where I felt comfortable seeking out information about medical transition.”

- Following discussion, remind group about Session 2, and that a transcript of the session, as well as a link to the PHSA’s TransCare BC website, will be sent for participants to review prior to Session 2.

Appendix E: Session 2 Interview Guide

- Reiterate terms of participant consent and ask for verbal consent to begin recording.
- Group will reflect on the discussion that emerged from Session 1. Lead discussion regarding whether the group could identify any common threads or themes from the group's previous discussion.
- Because the content of this session will be contingent on the content from Session 1, the exact script used may differ. Prompts that may be used include:

“Did anyone notice any commonalities or recurring themes throughout the discussion from the last session?”

“What were some areas where you felt like participants significantly diverged in their experiences? What may have accounted for those differences?”

“How would you summarize the results of our discussion?”

- Write down any major threads or themes that are identified over the course of the session.
- Group will discuss to what extent they feel the TransCare BC website meets the information needs of transgender individuals, using findings from their analysis of Session 1 data as an evaluative tool.
- Because the content of this session will be contingent on the content from Session 1 and earlier discussion in Session 2, the exact script used may differ. Prompts that may be used include:

“As a government health resource, the TransCare BC website is likely to be accessed by a number of trans or questioning individuals looking for information. Based on our discussion, do you believe this site would be a good resource for someone questioning their gender identity?”

“If you encountered this website during the process of questioning your gender identity, what do you think the result would have been?”

“In what ways could this resource be improved? Is there content that you think should be added, or existing content that could be removed or rearranged?”