

How AJ Clementine is making that light bulb moment for Transgender youth a whole lot easier

Abstract

This conference paper explores themes of gender identity and advocacy in contemporary media/online spaces. AJ Clementine a TikTok creator who has over 900,000 followers and 59,000,000 likes, she is also transgender. She thoroughly documents her life experiences on the popular social media platform that is TikTok, to present a well-rounded and authentic character. She has morphed the idea of what a counterpublic is into her community/following she has nurtured. She is presenting an essential resource for transgender youth that allows them to see a positive transgender role model in an often-transphobic media landscape. This positive role model, and actual model, just might allow some gender confused youth to finally work out their own confusing gender identity.

Keywords

Identity, Gender Identity, Advocacy, TikTok, LGBT

Introduction

For centuries the LGBTQIA+ population have lived as a largely marginalised community with being able to work out their identity one of their largest hurdles when living in a largely heteronormative and cisnormative society. Media plays a large role in allowing people to work out who they are and is the prominent source that the public people to break down misconceptions about a marginalised group (McInroy & Craig, 2015). One group of the LGBTQIA+ that continually suffers from lack of media representation and misrepresentation is the T in the acronym, transgender people (Cannon et al., 2017). Transgender is the term used to describe the group of people whose gender identity differs from their sex assigned at birth (Cannon et al., 2017), as gender and sex are two different things. This group of people face various forms of mistreatment, discrimination and literal violence against them solely on the basis of their gender expression and more importantly their identity, who they are (Cannon et al., 2017). There is no wonder why many trans people seek comfort and support on many social media platforms that allow anonymity, validation and meaningful support to be created (Cannon et al., 2017). This has led to the creation of counterpublics that many trans people seek to share their experience online to help advocate for trans rights (Jackson, Bailey & Foucault Welles, 2018), one such online creator that is sharing

their story is AJ Clementine. Clementine's advocacy, largely aided with the social media platform of TikTok, has been recognised with over 900 thousand followers and 59 million likes on TikTok (Clementine, n.d.), she is now so iconic that she has also been immortalised in a mural for the annual Sydney Gay and Lesbian Mardi Gras (Clementine, 2021g). Clementine herself has said that it was solely because of seeing Kim Petras, a German singer, go through a well-documented sex change that allowed her to realise that she herself was trans (Andrews & McDonald, 2020), now with the help of TikTok Clementine is doing just that for another generation of trans youth (Clementine, 2020b). It is clear that social media, in particular TikTok, is allowing people of the LGBTQIA+ population to validate their own identities more easily.

Who is AJ Clementine?

AJ Clementine highlights the power of the media in allowing her to realise her gender identity. When she was 15 her English teacher handed her an article about a German singer, Kim Petras who had sexual reassignment surgery at age 16, this is when she finally realised that people felt the same way she did (Andrews & McDonald, 2020). Clementine herself describes Kim Petras as a beacon of light to her (Andrews & McDonald, 2020), which just highlights how necessary positive media representation of LGBTQIA+ people is to youth in validating their identities. Clementine was then diagnosed with gender dysphoria, now known as gender incongruity, at 18 (Tran, 2018). Clementine uses her platform for many things from sharing mundane experiences to explicitly advocating for trans rights. One example of mundane things that Clementine has shared is the privilege all cisgender people have when they pee, this validation only comes for transgender people after having sexual reassignment surgery, this little thing is just an everyday lived experience for trans people that is never really thought about by cisgender people (Andrews & McDonald, 2020). After viewing Clementine's TikTok profile another thing is clear, she has a partner and they are very much in love (Clementine, n.d., Clementine, 2021b). Showing this is an extremely important part of her advocacy for transwomen, she says while it is important to protect yourself it is also important to know that there are good people out there (Andrews & McDonald, 2020, Clementine, 2021f). AJ Clementine is creating an essential contemporary media representation of transgender people, this has the ability to validate identities, advocate for transgender rights and breakdown harmful stereotypes constructed by mainstream media.

Transgender Representation in Traditional & Contemporary Media

Transgender media representation in online and offline media are two totally different things. These representations in the media inform the general, cisgender, public about transgender

people and are vital to how this marginalised population are viewed by a powerful mainstream majority (McInroy & Craig, 2015). However, more importantly media representation of transgender people has significant effects on young trans peoples' identity and their lived experiences (McInroy & Craig, 2015). Representation of trans people in offline media, including television and film, include *RuPaul's Drag Race* (2009 to present), *Transamerica* (2005) or *The Danish Girl* (2015) (Jackson, Bailey & Foucault Welles, 2018). One consistent theme across this offline media representation is that Hollywood loves to cast cisgender, heterosexual actors to play trans women (Jackson, Bailey & Foucault Welles, 2018), while these representations add to trans awareness in the mainstream conversation, it does however reinforce a comical caricature of transgender people as crossdressers for ignorant minds (McInroy & Craig, 2015). It is consistent throughout the trans community that offline media representation is often limited, problematic and stereotypical (McInroy & Craig, 2015).

However, people in the trans community often feel that justice is done, when a character presents as a complex individual where being trans is just another part of their whole identity, not when a character is presented and being trans is their only character trait (McInroy & Craig, 2015). This is consistently achieved less in offline media and more in online media, where trans people can authentically document their own experiences, this leads to a more realistic portrayal of trans people and allows people to see a complex individual rather than disproportionately focusing on their gender identity (McInroy & Craig, 2015). Coincidentally, this is exactly what AJ Clementine does. She on multiple occasions has addressed this bias in offline media representation (Clementine, 2021f), her TikTok presents a multifaceted person, being trans is not her only characteristic. She loves princess fashion, dubbing herself "your modern-day Cinderella" (Clementine, n.d.) but also has a successful modelling and fashion career (Clementine, 2020a). Clementine is presenting a vital alternative to common caricatures of trans people that are presented in offline media, which is vital for gender diverse youth to witness a positive media representation, which one could say is straight from the horse's mouth, in order to affirm/validate their gender identity (McInroy & Craig, 2015). TikTok is allowing trans creators to present an alternative to the stereotype filled sphere that is offline media, whereby TikTok users can see this more authentic content which contradicts caricatures presented by traditional media.

Advocacy in the Transgender Sphere

Advocacy for trans, and more largely LGBTQIA+, people can go all the way back to Stonewall in the 1960's where trans women of colour birthed the LGBTQ rights movement (Mendelson, 2015

cited in Jackson, Bailey & Foucault Welles, 2018). Advocacy for trans people has come a long way since then (Jackson, Bailey & Foucault Welles, 2018), however, trans people are still very much discriminated against just for their gender identity (McInroy & Craig, 2015). Trans people also cop a lot of flack from their queer peers, one well documented case of this was when prominent trans activist Jennicet Gutiérrez yelled at President Obama in 2015 at a LBGT event at the Whitehouse, she called for better treatment of imprisoned trans immigrants and was met with harsh boos from her LGBTQIA+ ménage (Ennis, 2015). Her outburst at President Obama about the torture and rape of transgender immigrants was likened to Kanye West's infamous interruption of Taylor Swift at the 2009 Video Music Awards (Ennis, 2015). This highlights how other members of the LGBTQIA+ community also contribute to a continual pattern of misunderstanding and alienation of trans people, which only contributes to the stereotype that transwomen are disruptive attention seekers (Ennis, 2015), when this pattern only benefits cisgender, heterosexual people. There is no wonder that this has led to the creation of trans exclusive counterpublics.

Marginalised people already sit on the outside of the mainstream public, they consequently form their own smaller public spheres known as counterpublics (Fraser, 1990), the same could be said for trans communities finding comfort in each other rather than the LGBTQIA+ population as a whole. One such counterpublic that formed on Twitter was the #GirlsLikeUs. The creators Janet Mock and Laverne Cox created the hashtag in response to ongoing misrepresentation, violence and marginalisation of trans people; this counterpublic worked to advocate for trans rights in the larger public sphere (Jackson, Bailey & Foucault Welles, 2018). On Twitter alone the hashtag #GirlsLikeUs has been tweeted over 150 thousand times and was largely used for trans people to connect with each other, to advocate and to celebrate the accomplishments of trans women (Jackson, Bailey & Foucault Welles, 2018). Clementine's TikTok is an interesting example when it comes to counterpublics; her profile and content share many similarities with how people interacted with the #GirlsLikeUs hashtag. She regularly documents mundane experiences of being transwoman (Clementine, 2021d), advocate for trans rights (Clementine, 2021c, Clementine 2021a) and celebrate the accomplishments of transwomen (Clementine, 2020a). AJ Clementine and her TikTok content are essentially allowing once exclusive trans counterpublics to move into mainstream online media, as seen with her over 900 thousand followers (Clementine, n.d.). This normalisation and new presentation of a once exclusive counterpublic allows for more mainstream attention which consequently allows for people who have not seeked out this content to see it. This means that more people will be able to affirm their own gender identities from this

increased exposure, as positive media representation is essential for people to affirm their own gender identities (McInroy & Craig, 2015). This allows for better representation and advocacy for trans people, and with increased exposure allows people to better recognise their own identities.

Dangers of TikTok

While TikTok has been a large aid in gaining AJ Clementine a following and allowing her to advocate for change it is not all sunshine and rainbows. TikTok runs off of its iconic 'for you page' which is a stream of videos curated to the user's interests, however, this curation system takes time to adjust to the user's interests (TikTok, 2020). The 'for you page' has allowed many trans TikTok creators to find a supporting counterpublic, however this platform is riddled with transphobia and harassment (Perrett, 2021). This is highlighted in how AJ Clementine turns hate comments into educational content, one that comes to mind is when she educated her followers on pregnancy in trans men (Clementine, 2021c), as well as sharing the effects that constant trolling, transphobia and ignorance has on her mental state (Clementine, 2021d). It is consistent among trans creators that the hate experienced on TikTok is much greater than on any other platform (Perrett, 2021). And while TikTok has done so much for trans visibility, due to the 'for you page' and ease of directing hate, whether that be comments or duets, there is a lack of connection between user and creator on TikTok compared to other platforms which is contributing to trolls hating like there is no tomorrow (Perrett, 2021). This is particularly worrying especially when vulnerable trans youth are accessing these counterpublics as a way to seek validation of their own identities and all they see in the comment section is hate and ignorance. This is even more worrying when 51% of trans boys and 30% trans girls have attempted suicide, compared to 14% of cisgender youth (Toomey, Syvertsen & Shramko, 2018). While TikTok is doing so much good in allowing trans creators like AJ Clementine to showcase their gender identity to the masses and vulnerable trans youth, it is coming at a price of fuelling transphobia and encouraging anonymous users on the app.

Conclusion

Transgender people are an extremely marginalised group of people, this has consequently forced them to seek out their own counterpublics in the past. However, once exclusive counterpublics have morphed into TikTok creators who have developed large followings. Trans people are seeking these TikTok creators, like AJ Clementine, to see an authentic and positive representation of transgender people in the media. This positive representation consequently allows them to validate their own gender identity, this has been identified in so many cases as

being a crucial identity-defining step to validating one's own gender identity (Andrews & McDonald, 2020, McInroy & Craig, 2015). AJ Clementine made a TikTok that mocked the current offline media landscape and its misrepresentation of trans people, see (Clementine, 2020c), she acted as if she were the main character in a holiday movie, however she presented herself as a one-dimensional trans character. Saying things like "Did you forget? I'm a trans girl no one wants to date me" and "I had my own set of jingle bells, if you know what I mean" (Clementine, 2020c). While Clementine presented this as a joke, it is no joke when this shows the mainstream representation that most people see, the current media landscape needs to come a long way in order to present authentic transgender people/characters in the media so vulnerable youth do not have to seek exclusive counterpublics in order to affirm their identities.

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