

Exploring the Impact of the COVID-19 Pandemic on the Identity of Trans and Gender Non-Binary Youth

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Background

Identity development is a normal and healthy aspect of human growth and can be influenced by external factors such as historical events (Elder, 1998). Research has demonstrated that COVID-19 has had an impact on the development of personal identity (Booker et al., 2022; Pasupathi et al., 2022), professional identity (Brown et al., 2022; Cullum et al., 2020; Findyartini et al., 2020; Sequeira & Dacey, 2020), and racial/ethnic identity (Gao & Sai, 2021; Wagaman et al., 2022; Zhang et al., 2021).

During the peak of the COVID-19 pandemic, many schools were closed, resulting in individuals spending more time in their homes than they would under normal circumstances. Many trans and non-binary (TNB) youth lost access to in-person support groups (Paceley et al., 2021) and turned to online communication (Hiebert & Kortess-Miller, 2021), which may have impacted opportunities for gender identity development (i.e., exploration and resolution).

This qualitative study examines the self-reported impact of COVID-19 on gender identity exploration and resolution of TNB youth.

Methods

Data Collection. Participants, recruited by Qualtrics Panel Services in spring 2022, were asked to complete an online, cross-sectional survey with both open- and closed-ended questions. **This study focuses on participants responses to the open-ended question: "How has the COVID pandemic changed or affected your own understanding of your gender identity?"**

Data Analysis. Data analysis was conducted by two coders using the six phases of thematic analysis proposed by Braun & Clarke (2006, 2013). An inter-rater agreement of at least 80% was achieved.

Sample. The analytic sample included 295 youth ages 13-22 ($M = 18.6$).

Table 1
Sample Demographics (N = 295)

Demographic Variable	n	%	Demographic Variable	n	%
Current Gender Identity ^a			Sexual Orientation ^a		
Nonbinary	254	86.1	Plurisexual	153	51.9
Trans	12	4.1	Monosexual	54	18.3
Transman	62	21.0	Asexual	50	16.9
Transwoman	19	6.4	Queer	63	21.4
Other	22	7.5	Other	10	3.4
No Response	4	1.4	Race/Ethnicity		
Sex on Original Birth Certificate			White	165	55.9
Female/Girl	260	88.1	Black	41	13.9
Male/Boy	26	8.8	Latinx	44	14.9
Intersex	4	1.4	Asian	14	4.7
Perfer not to respond	5	1.7	Biracial/Multiracial	27	9.2
			Other	4	1.4

Note. ^aThe percentages for current gender identity and sexual orientation do not add up to 100% because participants were allowed to list multiple identities.

Results

Table 2
Themes and Exemplar Responses (N=295)

Main Theme	Subtheme	n (%)	Exemplar Response
No Changes		85 (28.8)	"It hasn't changed it at all, I already knew I was trans and was comfortable being trans."
Unspecified but Significant Changes		9 (3.0)	"Yes"
	Increased Confusion/Pain	13 (4.4)	"Yes, I've realized my I'll have to hide myself for a very long time."
	Time for Identity Development	166 (56.3)	
	Reflection and Realization	137 (46.4)	"It's made me realize i am a non-binary trans guy and not just nonbianry because i had more time for introspection."
	Acceptance and Self-Worth	35 (11.9)	"It's given me time to learn how to love myself for who I am"
	Expression and Experimentation	24 (8.1)	"I was able to wear the clothes that made me feel comfortable in quarantine."
Trans Visibility on Online Platforms		31 (10.5)	
	Knowledge	19 (6.4)	"The pandemic made me go online more, as a result i've now learned terms that fit me."
	Connection	13 (4.4)	"I feel a stronger connection to my identity due to spending more time online in queer spaces as part of staying home during the pandemic."
	Personal Visibility	5 (1.7)	"I was able to be online more which having a space where less people heard my voice and could constantly see my pronouns meant that my correct pronouns were used more often."
COVID-19 Specific Factors		36 (12.2)	
	Masks	10 (3.4)	"with the use of masks I feel like i pass more (others see me as a man) since my features are covered"
	Identity Suppression	10 (3.4)	"It has made me conceal my gender identity far more due to being stuck at home with my parents."
	Break from Social Pressures	16 (5.4)	"I've gotten more comfortable with my identity as there was less social pressure around me and it let me express myself through my own means."

Conclusions and Implications

These results indicate that for many TNB youth, the COVID-19 pandemic and lockdown had an impact on their gender identity development and perceptions. Specifically, the importance of time for identity development was highlighted.

Limitations of this study include the cross-sectional, retrospective design and the limited number of participants who were transwomen or trans/nonbinary and assigned male at birth.

Future research should continue to examine identity development related to COVID-19 as well as further changes that may have occurred as stay-at-home orders ended, and public spaces became more open.

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