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Abstract

This paper looks at the ways in which a person's identity may be legitimized or delegitimized by looking at the supposed identity transformations of Rachel Dolezal and Caitlyn Jenner, and the subsequent internet reactions. Through analyzing the article, this paper considers the citizen critic and their role in creating an identity through five criteria of legitimization:

1. Identity has evidence to back it up

2. Perceived truthfulness of the Person

3. Permanence of Identity

4. Experience of Oppression

5. Activism and/or Advocacy

In the summer of 2015, with the discussion of identity based conversations, such as the stories of Caitlyn Jenner and Rachel Dolezal, brought back the larger discussion on identity politics. Caitlyn Jenner, who officially came out as transgender on the cover of *Vanity Fair* in 2015, was suddenly an everyday topic, and not for her athletics or her past marriage to the Kardashian family. Instead, people were discussing her very public and very quick transition from male to female. Some called her a hero, which earned her the Arthur Ashe Courage Award, while others criticized and even questioned her new identity (Moyer 2015). Jenner's story quickly became the contrast for another widespread and confusing story on identity: the race of Rachel Dolezal. Rachel Dolezal, a civil rights leader in the Spokane, Washington chapter of the NAACP, was faced with accusations that she was appropriating a culture when her parents approached the news media and told them that they were both white (Koerner & Dalrymple 2015). Immediately, people online saw the parallels between these two stories. Many blogs and online news sources began to compare and contrast the two women: some saying one identity was more valid than the other, they were both valid, or neither identities were valid. The conversations that took place on identity and identity politics carried from its origins in the 1960s, during the Civil Rights era. Now, the discussion does not seem to focus on what these identities are and what they mean, but how people choose to put themselves into these boxes. Even more interesting is how people judge the legitimacy of individuals who proudly proclaim their identities.

Caitlyn Jenner and Rachel Dolezal's stories of identities being questioned raises its own questions: how does one decide which identities are legitimate and which ones are not? When someone comes out to someone else, how does that other person decide whether or not the

original person is truly the way they identify? How do we conceptualize identities as legitimate or illegitimate? These are questions that I focus on in my thesis project, under the main research question of: What criteria do individuals use to justify their views on identity legitimacy?

Focusing on the stories and receptions of Caitlyn Jenner and Rachel Dolezal, I intend to discover how people on the Internet pick which identities are valid and which are not. I will be doing this through using discourse analysis on an online article, "Rachel Dolezal is not Caitlyn Jenner: Race and Gender are not the same" and its subsequent comments. By analyzing this article, I hope to explore the greater relationship between identity and legitimacy, which has been previously ignored. Furthermore, as today's societies shift to be more open and accepting, there are more and more individuals coming out and sharing identities that differ from the social norm. By answering my research question, I hope expand the understandings of identity change and formation, ultimately allowing for more compassion for those who do change their identity.

Literature Review

Identity appears, on its surface level, as a very simplistic idea, as it is what makes each of us who we are. However, as identity has become something that is highly politicized over time, identity has become incredibly nuanced, and scholars have taken on the challenge of explaining identity and identity politics.

The definition of identity is simply what makes each of us who we are when it comes to personality and ideas. Because it is an intensely individualistic process of discovering what makes you unique, identity allows us to understand the world around us and fit into larger groups. As Taylor (2002) argues, "all human experience is processed through the self. Much that is

automatic may be screened out at an earlier or more primitive level of processing, but at some point all experience, no matter how apparently trivial was, or is, processed through the self," pointing to how influential an identity is, as it can help you to process the human experience (11). This influence can be seen throughout any sort of identity, but perhaps is best seen through a transgender identity, where a person identifies as a gender that differs from the one they were assigned at birth. For example, as Teich (2012) argues, "the realization that one is trans can take anywhere from a few moments to several decades. Usually transpeople have an inkling early on in their lives that their assigned gender feels out of whack with their bodies. […] The human mind does its best to help us survive, which can translate into triggering intense denial," where the original identity (male or female) is forced upon a transperson, until they are finally able to assert themselves and come out as their true identity (30). This all comes from the question that Taylor (2002) says to that people are able to use to shape who they are: "Who am I" (34). In answering this question, he argues, we are able to use our "personal identity [to] orient [us] to the world around [us]. For example, it affects what [we] pay attention to because [our] personal identities tells [us] what [we] value" (Taylor 2002, 37). In creating a personal identity we create a world in which we can create understanding.

Identity has stopped being merely, personal, however, since identity politics was created in order to allow people who share a similar identity to rally to create change. Identity politics came into importance when, "in the late 1960s a new kind of emphasis emerged with both [the Civil Rights and Women's Rights] movements […] Those who started calling their movement "Black Power" instead of Civil Rights, and "Women's Liberation," as distinct from "Women's Rights," created a politics that went beyond the issue of access and focused more explicitly on issues of identity than these earlier movements" (Nicholson 2008, 1). The groups that were

created due to these shared identities allowed for immense change, such as the Civil Rights Act of 1964, and the continued work of women's rights and liberations groups to have the Equal Rights Amendment passed. However, despite the politicization of identities, it is important to note that this "is a tricky political category because it depends so much on choices that are shaped by fluid social circumstances. One of the key determinants seems to be the society wide level of political mobilization, both intellectual and practical," meaning that these identities shift and grow frequently, making it difficult to pin down what each identity means (Anner 1996, 7). As these shifts in what it means to identify a certain way takes place, more and more people find their niche in an identity and flourish within it, allowing more space for change and progress as more individuals can find their personal identities represented in groups. In fact, as Anner (1996) argues that since identity politics began with Civil Rights and feminist movements, "identity has been the driving force behind many U.S. social movements. Excluded from both traditional social institutions and organizations supposedly committed to egalitarian principles, movements for the liberation of women, the disabled, people of color, and gay men and lesbians burst into the political limelight in the 1970s and 1980s, often scoring stunning successes," showing what important rallying factor identity can be in social movements.

Identity has allowed the space for individuals to come together and create large scale social change--such as the passing of laws surrounding Civil Rights movements. However, it is also important that identity politics does leave a large space in movements, as not everyone fits into the box of that specific identity. Furthermore, citizens are frequently told that it is better to work together as a large group to get things done, as Hekman (2004) says, "since the advent of liberalism in the seventeenth century, we have been told that identity does not belong in the political arena. The citizen of the liberal polity is, like the modernist subject, abstract and

disembodied" (6). Indeed, other scholars even argue further that not only should those working towards change hold abstract, hard to identify groups, but in fact, using identity politics to share the viewpoints of individuals with a shared background to cloud solution based thinking, as "none of the solutions that have been offered have been embraced by all parties; no one approach to identity solves all the issues raised" (Hekman 2004, 2-3). This points to issues of identities being divisive, and how difficult it can be to create a one-size-fits all solution, both for creating change and even for simply fitting into one's own identity.

Now that we have a better understanding of what identity politics is, we can look at how it impacts groups as they create their own identities. First, let us turn to the groups directly mentioned in the literature as influencing the creation of identity politics: women and people of color. These two groups originally formed their identities because "in [their] earlier movements, activists had struggles against prevailing ideas about who women and black people were, ideas that had often been used to prevent members of both groups from occupying social spaces open to men and to whites" (Nicholson 2008, 1). From there, people of color especially, were able to create these new identities that were "defined as ethnic in nature," but were really based on stereotypes created simply for exclusion, proving that these identities are created as a tool to cope with society's restrictions (Romanucci-Ross & Devos 1995, 17). However, that does not mean that parts of these identities and culture do not come from an initial shared background, for instance, "a shared history, shared values, shared goals, and a shared set of behaviors including, for example the language we speak" (Taylor 2002, 38). Furthermore, as Nicholson (2008) argues, the creation of a large group identity allowed for not only understanding the needs of their group, but also "to redefine the goals of a just society" (3). This push for a just, equal society through

the creation and representation of identities allowed for many changes to be made in the 1950s and 1960s.

There is another group that is important to look at when considering identity politics: the LGBTQIA+ community. This is especially important to look at given that the LGBTQIA+ community has been particularly active in the last few years, looking for and achieving legislative change, such as the right to marry. Gray (2009) looks at "rural queer-youth identities as performative, socially mediated moments of becoming," where, rather than simply creating an identity for political purposes, these groups use their identity to connect more as themselves, using a theme of authenticity to get others to accept them (21). Gray (2009) uses "a sociological tradition that theorizes identity as a highly social, contextual, and collective achievement rather than a psychological expression of an internal process of integration," allowing for us to see how these queer-youth groups allow for each other to assert their identities in a way that builds up the others (19). This idea is continued by Cohen (1991) as he pushes for "Foucault's suggestion that instead of defining ourselves as 'gay' or 'lesbian' we attempt to create ourselves as 'becoming' such seems to offer an important advantage," not only in creating a group sexual identity, but in creating who we are in general, leading back to our personal identity.

Now, to turn to how different identities are received, it is important to look at stories of how identities are accepted or rejected, as found in the small pool scholarly literature related to it. The best example found in the literature looks at the stories of LGBTQIA+ youth who share their identities (or "come out of the closet") with their family and communities. As Gray (2009) argues, "rural LGBT identity politics rely almost exclusively on public faces that look 'just like everyone else' not just to integrate into local communities, but to maintain their access to the care necessities needed to get by," meaning that these youths need to be similar to the majority

groups in their communities, except for their sexualities (39). These similarities allow for these youths to be accepted into their communities, but as Gray (2009) later argues, "LGBT visibility in the media means we are more widely seen but not necessarily better known. While more images of LGBT people certainly stream into Americans' lives through television, films, and the Internet, the increase in visibility has not translated into pro-gay stances at the voting booth or in the hall of Congress," showing that despite the acceptance of queerness in the communities, these identities are still rejected on a larger, societal scale (122). Furthermore, we must also consider that even though these youth identities might be accepted, they are also rejected for a large reason: "young people's pronouncements of identity are easily dismissed as products of adolescent confusion," showing that this acceptance really only takes place some of the time (Gray 2009, 91). While Gray is one of the only scholars who looks at the rejection or acceptance of identity, she allows for me to see that there is a gap in literature that talks about what happens once an individual decides to identify a certain way. While she describes some criteria, such as visibility, there is still a gap where more criteria (and additional research) will help to find ways that people will accept the identities of others as legitimate.

Methods

In order to discover more about what criteria individuals on the internet use to justify their views on identity legitimacy, I will look at a popular news source that has compared and contrasted the stories of Rachel Dolezal and Caitlyn Jenner: *Salon*. I have chosen *Salon* because of its popularity, allowing me to have an understanding of what an average Internet User (in this case, the in-group) thinks about those changing their identity (out-group). Additionally, I have

chosen to use Jenner and Dolezal as examples because the reaction to both of these individuals and their identities has been widespread and varied, allowing me to truly see what criteria individuals use to determine identity legitimacy.

Using *Salon*'s online article "Rachel Dolezal is not Caitlyn Jenner: Race and gender are not the same," I will examine the arguments that author Mary Elizabeth Williams (2015) makes in order to see what criteria she uses. Here, it is important to note that Williams (2015) has already made an argument: Jenner's identity is legitimate, but Dolezal's is not. In order to have a larger sample size and to look at other arguments and other criteria will also look at the comments on this article to ensure multiple points of view. Due to time constraints, I will be focusing on the comments posted on the day of the article's original posting (June 15, 2015) in order to get the initial reaction of users. Additionally, I will be looking at comments that are directly related to the article that also have replies, showing that they have an argument that gives back to the larger conversation on identity legitimacy.

By choosing to use the comments on the *Salon* article, I hope to achieve some understanding on how individuals who are not scholars determine the legitimacy of identities. A similar approach has been done. been done in the past by Rosa Eberly (2000) in her book *Citizen Critics*. Eberly (2000) uses letters to the editor, reviews, media coverage, and court cases to conduct her studies on what the citizens had to say in response to censorship. First, she defines a citizen critic as "a person who produces discourses about issues of common concern from an ethos of citizen first and foremost--not as expert or spokesperson for a workplace or as a member of a club or organization" (Eberly 2000, 1). Similarly, I will not be looking at scholars or policy makers who argue one way or another for the legitimacy of these identities, but rather at the average Internet user who has felt the need to share their point of view. Due to time constraints, I

will only be looking at one source, noting that the Internet has become one of the easiest ways for individuals to share their points of view with not just their immediate community (as might be found for local newspapers), but with the entire world.

To analyze the data that I will collect, I will be using discourse analysis to come up with the criteria that individuals use to decide the legitimacy of an identity. In the realm of identity politics, discourse analysis has been used before in order to gauge attitudes and to better understand the arguments that individuals were making. Caballero Mengibar (2015) writes that using this type of analysis creates a better understanding of arguments, and that critical discourse analysis "is an invaluable approach when used to expose patterns of language use which allows for uncovering, vis-à-vis critical evaluation, the production of knowledge in society" (52). Furthermore, Song (2015), also shows in her article that discourse analysis is not only good for understanding arguments, but even for understanding attitudes and opinions, making it a good tool as I seek to understand how people decide their views on others' identities.

By analyzing these arguments and creating these criteria, I hope to explain the complex relationship between an individual's identity and other people's perceptions of it. By examining this relationship, I will be helping to build on the topic of identity politics.

Findings

To begin understanding this concept, I first read the article, "Rachel Dolezal is not Caitlyn Jenner: Race and Gender are not the Same", before jumping into the comments. Williams (2015) discusses the differences between Jenner and Dolezal, ultimately coming to the conclusion that while Caitlyn Jenner is a woman, based on Jenner's interviews in Vanity Fair, Dolezal is not a black woman, but is instead a habitual liar who is attempting to make the best of

her parents revealing her true identity. In her article, Williams (2015) states that Rachel Dolezal's identity is not as valid as Caitlyn Jenner's for multiple reasons. Most important for Williams (2015) is that Dolezal has completely made her identity up, where Jenner's identity is completely real, using evidence from Boston University study that states that the brains of transgender people do appear to be different. Furthermore, Williams (2015) cites many lies that Dolezal has been caught in, from using the wrong color of makeup in order to pass as black to Dolezal's parents saying "she's fabricated claims of being born in a teepee, using bows and arrows to hunt for food, and living in South Africa." To contrast this, Williams (2015) quotes Jenner, who said, "Bruce always had to tell a lie […] Caitlyn doesn't have any secrets," in order to show that the only time Caitlyn Jenner ever lied about who she was happened when she was forced to identify with the gender assigned to her. From Williams (2015) article, I took away two criteria to compare with the comments: 1) The use of evidence to back up claims of identity and 2) the audience's perceived truthfulness of those who claim a certain identity.

The need for evidence speaks to the need for people to understand that it is possible to identify that way. As Williams (2015) continues to argue through her article, race and gender are not the same--scholars decided that gender is something that is constructed and people can choose, but since they have yet to decide the same for race, Dolezal simply cannot identify that way. To illustrate this point, Williams (2015) quotes a Boston University study that argued, "there is increasing evidence of a biological basis for gender identity," but stated that there was no research on race. This need for research on black identity was brought up throughout in the comments, as well, as many commenters asked for more evidence from Williams, particularly on why transgender people can identify that as such from those who did not seem to think either identity was valid. While this perhaps points to the weaknesses in Williams' own argument, it

also speaks to the idea that people will not see an identity as legitimate without the identity being proven as something that has been studied and is possible to actually identify as.

The other important criteria from the article itself was the perceived truthfulness of the person claiming their identity. For Williams (2015), Jenner was being truthful about their identity, although she listed no other evidence for this other than Jenner herself saying so. Dolezal, on the other hand, had been caught in many lies in the past, such as her claim that she was "born in a teepee" showing that she had little to no credibility when it came to her identity (Williams 2015). This is again confirmed in the comments, although the comments show support for either of the article's subjects. Many commenters asked about the realities of Jenner faking her transition and her identity (Tesak Supporter 2015), pointing to a mistrust of Jenner and her previously held male privilege. Furthermore, many other commenters agreed with Williams, pointing to Dolezal's more blatant lies as reasons for why she cannot be seen as being credible, such as member @SRoseNYC's comment, "a starting point of standing in solidarity with oppressed people is not lying to them". This shows that in order for an identity to be accepted, it must come a place of credibility and believability.

Another criteria emerging from the comments, although similar to truthfulness, is the ability to change back into an individual's true identity. It is important for an identity to be seen as permanent and long lasting in order for it to be seen as legitimate. For example, user @WolfIslandDiver (2015) wondered if Dolezal used her white privilege when applying for jobs, or in interactions with police. The compared this with the permanency of gender reassignment surgery, arguing that because surgery is usually irreversible, Caitlyn Jenner is stuck in her new identity, whereas Rachel Dolezal retains the ability to take off her dark makeup and being passing as white again (WolfIslandDiver 2015). This creates an interesting parallel, as many

transgendered people may not choose to have all or any surgery. Does this mean that their identity is not valid? Many believe that would be the truth, but others disagree, pointing to a larger conversation that was not fully covered within the confines of the comments. If the permanence of an identity is a criteria for its legitimacy, then it sheds another light on what an individual must do in order to have that confirmed.

Yet another criteria that came from the comments section was the experience of oppression within the identity. As both Dolezal and Jenner originally experienced the privilege of other identities (white and male, respectively), their lack of shared experience around oppression became a serious conversation piece for the participants deciding on the legitimacy of their identities. Several commenters on one thread, started by the user @treehouselibrary, conceptualized this idea by comparing it to different scholarships (@Treehouselibrary 2015). In the discussion, @treehouselibrary (2015) uses the example of Rachel Dolezal getting a scholarship meant for African American students to Caitlyn Jenner getting one for women. They argued that this was difficult ground because neither of these individuals came from a background in which they experienced the same oppression (either racism or sexism, respectively) as the other individuals applying for the scholarship. Indeed, as user @Docile Leming later replies, "what [one] can't do is an alternative history along [with their identity … Identity] starts from that moment of change, going forward. But it cannot assume the past of others." Their quote helps to showcase the difficult nature of these identities--how can one adopt an identity if they have yet to experience the oppression and difficulties that comes along with it. The question of how these individuals fit within their identity was never truly answered by the participants, and while it did not seem to help these citizen critics come to a consensus on the

Dolezal and Jenner debate, it did show another criteria that helped judge the legitimacy of identity.

The last criteria to be discussed and truly seen within the first day of commenting is their activism and advocacy, pointing to a need to be involved not only with their identity, but identity politics. By this, I mean the extent to which an individual has been active in their community, for example the black community for Dolezal and women or transgender communities for Jenner. As user @GarvinIII71 (2015) says in defense of Dolezal, "You can't […] say this woman that is working for the equality of people of color is wrong," speaking on Dolezal's position with the NAACP in Spokane, Washington. This helps to show that despite the controversy surrounding Dolezal, her work in the black community was something that helped people rally to her--after all, it appears they thought, at least she helped the community she identified with. This can be compared with Jenner's lack of support for the LGBTQIA+ community, although it can be argued that since her coming out as transgender has been so public it allows for her to be an advocate in that way, although this was not impact discussed within the comments. Either way, it seems important to remember that an individual cannot simply identify a certain way, they must also be active within the group they are identifying with.

Discussion and Conclusion

For my study, I sought to answer the question: what criteria do individuals on the Internet use to determine the legitimacy of an identity. I did this by looking at an article on *Salon*, and its comments in order to understand how average Internet commenters understand and conceptualized the identities of Rachel Dolezal and Caitlyn Jenner, both of which became

household names in the Summer of 2015 for their very public trans* identities. Upon deciding

the method, I used discourse analysis to understand the attitudes and ideas of those commenting,

allowing for me to parse them down into usable criteria.

By analyzing the article and its comments, I was able to uncover five major criteria for

finding the legitimacy of an identity:

6. Identity has evidence to back it up

7. Perceived truthfulness of the Person

8. Permanence of Identity

9. Experience of Oppression

10. Activism and/or Advocacy

The criteria point to some of the research of past scholars. For example, criteria one, the

identity have evidence to back it up is similar to what Gray (2009) argues when she says that

"rural LGBT identity politics rely almost exclusively on public faces" that identify in the same

ways (39). Here, Gray (2009) shows that the validity for LGBT youth in rural areas lies on

public figures who share their identity, while in the *Salon* article, both Williams (2015) and the

commenters relied on scholarly work to decide on whether or not the identities were legitimate.

Additionally, both criteria two and three are also similar to claims of Gray's (2009). In

her book, she argues that often times queer youth have their identities brushed aside due to their

parents assumptions that the identity is just a phase they will grow out of (Gray 2009, 91). This is

very similar to the ideas that commenters had where they were afraid that both Dolezal and

Jenner would change their identities back. Similar to how parents thought their children were

lying about being gay for attention, Williams (2015) assumes that Dolezal is lying about being

black.

Furthermore, the last two criteria, the experience of oppression and the activism and

advocacy can easily be linked back to ideas of identity politics. Since the rallying of identities to

create change became popular in the 1960s, it has remained important to be connected to causes

related to identity. Many people come together over the oppression they have felt from being in

their marginalized groups, such as racism and sexism. Here, there is difficulty for the members

of groups to allow new individuals in who do not share that same history of pain and oppression.

Here is where, especially for individuals claiming an identity such as transgender, understanding

and advocacy truly come into play. For instance, if Caitlyn Jenner spoke on the need for an end

to sexism, then it would allow her more access to joining women's groups. This is successfully

seen when we examine the response of people, especially feminist and transgender rights groups,

to Jenner receiving the Arthur Ashe Courage Award, as they protected and spoke up for her

when critics argued that Jenner was not worthy for it for changing her gender.

It is also important to highlight the ways in which these criteria build upon the criteria

that have been created by other scholars. For example, criteria one, although similar to what

Gray (2009) found, is different in that it not only focuses on there needing to be previous

examples of that identity being represented, but in the need for actual scholarly literature. Since

these comments were not made by scholars, but rather be the citizen critics that Eberly (2000)

uses, this certainly shows a growth where everyday internet users want (and even expect) for

arguments to be backed up by scholarly evidence. Additionally, while Gray (2009) points to the

fact that parents do not see their children's sexuality as valid because it has not been determined

as true or permanent yet, the commenters on Williams' (2015) *Salon* article see those two things

(truthfulness and permanence) as being separate criteria. While this adds, perhaps, to the list of things that an individual must prove in order to have their identity fully legitimized, it also shows that perhaps there is an ease over the six years since Gray (2009) wrote her book. For example, while perhaps Dolezal's identity is not seen as permanent yet, for those who believed that she was telling the truth about her identity as a black woman still saw her identity as at least partially legitimate.

Additionally, when it comes to identity politics, criteria four and five help showcase findings that say that individuals still care about these identity groupings, even when it comes to someone's personal identity. This is a new development that has not been seen in previous scholarly works, but points to the ever growing needs for people to rally around some sort of cause that gives them, and their identity, a greater meaning.

On a societal scale, these criteria allow for a larger discussion to be had when it comes for identity. If the common person thinks that an individual must jump through at least these five hoops (not to mention whatever legal and medical hoops to be seen as their identity by legislation), then how does someone who is not famous or has grown up without the privileges that allow them to formally come out on the cover of *Vanity Fair* have their identity legitimized? For these "average" individuals who identify in ways not in keeping with the cisgender, heteronormative societies they live in, it becomes harder to answer for this laundry list of criteria that must be answered in order to feel as though they are accepted.

It is interesting that, within these findings, the participants never said that they either Dolezal or Jenner had attained all of these criteria. Indeed, by the end of the first day, the group of commenters never seemed to come up with an answer over which (if either, or both)

individual had a legitimate identity. While perhaps Jenner had Criteria 1-3, Dolezal was certainly more active in the Black community, and neither had truly experienced any oppression. When faced with this difficulty, how can we accept either identity? This perhaps points to further research, as there are clearly more nuances and criteria to be found.

We can look at the fact that Caitlyn Jenner has, since the writing of the article, faced much derision due to her transgender identity and her willingness to speak and advocate on more LGBTQIA+ issues to show that one can, over time, achieve all of these criteria. While it is important to note that Jenner has a lot of wealth and privilege, as well as a team of publicists, even the average individual can take steps to fulfilling each of the criteria, even on the smallest of levels.

Additionally, looking at the criteria as an individual looking to accept others' identities, it is important to look not only at how they fit into these criteria, but also at how we can flex the criteria to allow more people into their own identities, therefore moving away from the criteria we as a society place upon them. For instance, even if a transgender person does not have the money or desire to have all of the gender reassignment surgeries, their simple statement of their identity can and should be enough for the acceptance of their identity.

In looking back at my study, I am able to see some limitations. The largest limitation placed upon this sample is with the amount of comments. Due to *Salon.com*'s website, I was restricted to only the very first day of comments. Although this restriction worked well due to the high volume of comments and the time constraints on this project, a further study could certainly use more sources, or find a single source that allowed for more comments to be viewed for analyzing.

Another limitation would be that I chose to use discourse analysis on the comments of an Internet news article to get my data, which influenced the type of data that I got. I chose to do this for many reasons, including time constraints and my own bias. Another researcher who chose a different method (interviewing, for example) could come up with very different criteria.

In looking towards future research, it is important to note that this study was just an introductory look at legitimacy of identity. As others continue to come out, this will continue to be an important topic. In continuing my own research, I would like to eventually broaden the sample to allow for multiple websites, and therefore multiple point of view, to see if these criteria are carried throughout the stories. Additionally, although it is a completely different topic from my own research question, I believe it is important to understand the experiences of those who are coming out. For this reason, I think future research could also include an interview-based study that looks at what individuals who identify in ways that subvert society's norm do in order to feel accepted.

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