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# Being A Girl: Trans Experiences of Girlhood at Any Age

**Alex MacKenzie**

## **Abstract**

The theme of liminality speaks clearly to my experiences as a nonbinary trans femme. I will be taking on this theme specifically to talk about the liminal experience of girlhood that comes through a social transition. To contextualize my writing beyond myself, I will be examining Dylan Mulvaney's TikTok series, Days of Girlhood. By examining this series and reflecting on my own experiences of socially transitioning into a femme identity, I will be identifying how trans experiences can contest and reify normative understandings of femininity. The experience of girlhood found in adult transition is distinct from youth transition and cis experiences of girlhood in ways that open questions of agency and how individuals shape their experiences of girlhood. This experience of adult transition highlights further questions of liminality as girlhood becomes intertwined with the quarter-life crisis of turning 30. This liminal experience of age also highlights how femininity is often infantilized and trans girlhood allows for femme identity to be explored in ways that can challenge patriarchal notions of femininity and its value. I will also adopt an intersectional lens to examine the role that race, and community play in white trans experiences. I will also explore how body dysmorphia manifests for those who are both trans and fat and the links between fat liberation and trans liberation.

## **Keywords**

Dylan Mulvaney, TikTok, trans femme, nonbinary femme, transitioning, autoethnography

## Introduction

The process of transition for trans people is a liminal space (Dentice and Dietert, 2015). This liminality can best be expressed through a nonbinary identity that plays with ambiguity and androgyny. Through this paper, I will be examining the liminal experience of transitioning into a trans femme identity. I will be analyzing this transition through two different forms of transition. The first is the social and medical transition of TikTok star, Dylan Mulvaney, which she has documented in her series, “Days of Girlhood.” These videos document the social and medical transition of Dylan into a trans woman. I will be relating Dylan’s experiences to my own experiences of socially transitioning into a nonbinary femme identity. To me, nonbinary femme identity refuses to fit within the boundaries of gender identity or to fully identify with the normative scripts of gender, yet it is presented to the public through a gender presentation that adopts feminine clothing, mannerisms, and appearance. I will be examining our transitions through the lens of girlhood, which Dylan uses as a framework for her videos. Within an academic context, girlhood studies specifically focus on the experiences of girl children. However, Dylan’s series opens a question of how girlhood as a liminal space occurs for trans femmes, especially those who transition after puberty. I will be examining this series, along with my own experiences, to gesture to the ways in which girlhood can be used as a framework to understand the liminal process of socially transitioning as an adult into a trans femme identity.

Critical femininities scholarship has opened the space for trans femme experiences to be reflected in academic feminist spaces. Serano’s (2007) work on the devaluation of femininity speaks to the specific experiences of misogyny that trans women face. She states that “the fact that we identify and live as women, despite being born male and having inherited male privilege, challenges those in our society who wish to glorify maleness and masculinity, as well as those who frame the struggles faced by other women

and queers solely in terms of male and heterosexual privilege” (Serano 2007, 4). The experiences of trans women highlight that femininity itself is devalued. Serano further states that “perhaps no form of gendered expression is considered more artificial and more suspect than male and transgender expressions of femininity” (2007, 5). Serano’s analysis has been expanded on by other critical femininities scholars through the concept of femmephobia, which is the systemic devaluation of femininity, as well as the regulation of patriarchal femininity (Hoskin 2019). Patriarchal femininity encompasses normative feminine ideals, including whiteness, able-bodiedness, cisnormativity, heteronormativity, youthfulness, and slenderness (Blair and Hoskin 2015; Hoskin 2017). This intersectional approach to femininity allows us to see how the misogyny experienced by trans femmes, especially those who do not necessarily ‘pass’ at all times, is reflective of the femmephobia that comes with embracing a femme identity as well as the power of patriarchal femininity to regulate those that fall outside of the normative bounds of femininity. The concept of passing refers to the ability for trans people to be mistaken for cisgender people and thus, have their trans identity be undetectable (Dias, de Rocha and Tateo 2021). This allows for trans people to avoid the prejudice and discrimination that accompanies their identities. Passing highlights that gender is performed day by day in the public context of social relationships, as detailed in Butler’s concept of gender performativity (Dias, de Rocha and Tateo 2021). Thus, gender itself is a liminal experience that is constantly being negotiated.

Dylan Mulvaney posted “Day 1 of being a girl” on March 12, 2022, via TikTok. In the first video, Dylan highlights a variety of short anecdotes from her day: crying three times; writing a ‘scathing’ email, and then not sending it; ordering dresses she could not afford; and telling someone she was fine despite not feeling that way. The video ends with Dylan asking, “How’d I do ladies? Good? Girl power” (Mulvaney 2022a). The subsequent videos offer

a wide variety of topics, experiences, and perspectives that Dylan faced daily in these early stages of her transition. The videos were posted regularly for 100 days and then have continued to be posted sporadically. These videos and Dylan's account have gone viral with the majority of videos having at least one million views and Dylan's TikTok account gaining 6.9 million followers. Within this first video, Dylan appeals to the audience primarily through emotional vulnerability, portraying herself as having excessive emotions through the multiple crying episodes. Yet, she also portrays herself as having a repressed emotional state through her failure to send the email and by lying about her emotional state. This video reflects soft femme digital culture, which is defined as a combination of emotionality, vulnerability, relationality, and hyperfemininity (Schwartz 2020, 2). Dylan utilizes emotionality to form a connection with the audience. The last line of the video, which asks, "how'd I do ladies?" (Mulvaney 2022a), highlights how Dylan is utilizing this platform to form a sense of connection and community with women, both cis and trans. It also implies that Dylan is attempting to perform womanhood in an acceptable manner that would make her fit within the boundaries of sisterhood that often define normative femininity. This appeal to sisterhood is evident in Day 12's video, in which Dylan discusses her decision to carry tampons despite not personally needing them (Mulvaney 2022b). This appeal to sisterhood targets cis women directly as they are the assumed, though not only, users of tampons. This video is by far Dylan's most popular, with over 24 million views.

Day 12's video highlights one of the critiques of Dylan's content, which is that her videos appeal primarily to a cis audience by providing a "trans 101" approach that describes topics such as tucking, facial laser hair removal, and hormones in a way that would be commonly known to a trans audience. Dylan has addressed these criticisms and highlighted that the videos are meant to create understanding and acceptance of trans women by cis audiences, an effort that could be useful given the increasingly mainstream dominance of transphobic rhetoric (Mulvaney

2022c). I find Dylan's videos fun and refreshing as they construct this liminal space of girlhood where the experience of transitioning is vulnerable and communal, rather than something that one is expected to already understand. Using TikTok to discuss the experiences of transition offers this information not only to cis audiences but to trans audiences, especially trans youth, who do not have access to a larger trans community to guide them through their transitions. The use of girlhood as a frame for this series is unique, as this approach is not common within trans studies literature and trans girls are not heavily represented in girlhood studies literature, let alone trans women.

Approaching transition through the lens of girlhood highlights the privilege that structures Dylan's videos. While Dylan has personally dealt with transphobia during her transition, her videos have also been critiqued by the online trans community for representing only the positive aspects of the trans experience, which are also based on her privileged social position. Dylan is white, thin, and appears to be financially stable, or at least has become financially stable through her online fame. These underlying privileges became an issue when Dylan was named a "2022 LGBTQ+ TikTok Trailblazer" for Pride month. This award, and the accompanying silly video that Dylan made to commemorate it, were heavily criticized by other trans creators as they viewed the title of "trailblazer" to be fitting for other members of the community who have had longer and more inclusive forms of activism. As previously mentioned, Dylan explicitly makes her videos to cater to cis audiences, but has since made more of an effort to embrace and address the trans community and use her platform to highlight the struggles of the larger community (Mulvaney 2022c). While Dylan's privilege allows her to have a positive approach to transition and to curate this kind of online identity, it also reflects that her platform is about the mundane, silly, and messy experiences of transitioning. While I respect these critiques, Dylan has also expressed how she did not know how to accurately represent the trans community as somebody who was new to it and had not

necessarily made those connections. I relate to this struggle as I have been trying to find a way to embrace my gender identity in all its complexity for years, but have often felt fear in embracing a trans identity as I may not fit all the expected boxes.

In my personal experience, this inability to identify with trans identities is linked to my intersectional position. While I am privileged by race and class, I have recently felt a pull towards the category of “queer, fat femme” to describe the intersecting marginalized identities that have impacted my inability to understand my identity. Taylor (2022) highlights the use of the phrase “no fats, no femmes” in gay male communities, which encompassed my experience of gay male identity where I always felt too femme to fit into the expectations of the community, and my body type did not allow me to easily fit the desirability politics of the gay male community. I began to embrace a nonbinary identity, which allowed me the space to begin to explore my femininity. Simultaneously, the COVID-19 pandemic lockdowns allowed me the opportunity to openly explore women's clothing from my home with a lack of societal pressure. Slowly, I began to embrace femme as an identity that allowed me to wear women's clothing, makeup, and have long hair without having to fully commit to an experience of transitioning. I have increasingly desired to present solely as femme in public yet utilize the label of nonbinary to highlight the inability of my gendered experience to fit into the defined categories of binary gender. However, one aspect of embracing femininity that was always difficult was my size, as it was difficult to find cute, feminine clothing due to the limited plus size options that exist. Fatphobia intersects with femmephobia to regulate slenderness as an imperative of patriarchal femininity which leads to the incompatibility of femmeness and fatness (Taylor 2022, 59). Over the years, I have found an increase in clothing options, however, my body does not necessarily fit the typical proportions of a plus-size woman. This contributed to a fraught relationship with my body due to its incompatibility with feminine clothing.

One aspect of transitioning that offered me pause was the medical aspect. While I had a fraught relationship with my body, I never fully related to the narratives of body dysmorphia that came from the trans community. However, I related to the experiences of the narratives of body dysmorphia that came from the body positivity, body neutrality, and fat liberation movements that I also engaged with online. Thus, I began to heal my relationship with my body through a radical acceptance framework that works to appreciate my body as it exists. The desire to embrace my body as it is makes the common trans narrative of being “born in the wrong body” feel inauthentic. While body acceptance does not contradict trans identities, the prospect of medical transition felt increasingly unappealing as I was working to heal the dysphoria around my size. Thus, in my current gender presentation of appearing in public primarily in femme outfits comprised almost entirely of women's clothing, I feel stuck in a liminal space between the androgyny that is presumed of nonbinary identities and the inability to fully claim a trans femme identity due to a lack of desire for medical transition. As I have embraced a femme identity while also accepting my body, I have come to find femininity in the curves of my body, even if the fat does not distribute in the same ways as on plus-size models. I have come to discover a femme sensuality in my relationship and am beginning to see myself as desirable. Embracing a queer, fat femme identity allows me to embrace myself as a person who can be desired, pretty, beautiful, soft, and delicate—despite all of the ways that the excess of my weight, the binary categorization of my body, or the inability to adequately perform ideal femininity may keep me outside the bounds of womanhood, even trans womanhood.

Thus, I find myself in a period of girlhood myself, and I believe this is why Dylan's videos have spoken to me so strongly. In these early stages of embracing a trans identity, I feel a desire to connect with all of the femme objects and aesthetics that were denied to me in my childhood, a desire that also appears throughout Dylan's videos, as she plays with dolls and

embraces childhood favourite songs and movies. Having recently turned 30 and being in a liminal position in my academic career, I feel myself easily slipping back into my childhood and wondering, how can I be the person I have always felt that I am? How can I fully embrace my identity in all its complexities and all the ways it refuses the rules that delineate who I am supposed to be and where I fit in? I embrace the framing of girlhood as a way of realizing that femme-identifying people are always in the liminal space of becoming and inventing new ways of being in a world that is obsessed with masculinity and all of the capitalist, dominating systems of power that it forces us into. Embracing girlhood allows us to embrace those femme objects and emotions that have been deemed immature, unruly, and excessive.

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## Author Biography

Alex MacKenzie (she/they) is a trans non-binary, queer femme Ph.D. candidate at York University in the Gender, Feminist, and Women's Studies department. Her graduate work focuses on fan engagement with K-pop by queer and Black fans. Her work is interdisciplinary, drawing from the fields of cultural studies, queer theory, transnational studies, urban studies, fat studies, trans studies, critical femininities, and critical race theory. Her work will be published in the *Excessive Bodies* journal and has presented at the Critical Femininities Conference and the Feminist Digital Media Conference. She is also a research assistant at the Canada-Mediterranean Centre at York University and teaches in the field of Urban Studies at the University of Toronto.