

WEB OF DECEPTION

The “fake reality” and peer contagion of the internet are leading many teen girls into transgenderism

BY MARY JACKSON

Illustration by KRIEG BARRIE



Helena Kerschner was a socially awkward 13-year-old who struggled with an eating disorder and self-harming when she stumbled upon an online community of teenage girls who shared a similar interest: Elvis Presley.

Tumblr started out as a space where she fan-girled with other teens over old-time rock. It quickly turned into an obsession. The platform, a blend of microblogging and social media, was introduced on the internet in 2007. It boasted 13 billion global page views by 2013 and peaked the next year when users contributed 100 million blog posts daily.

Kerschner was one of them. She said she spent the majority of her days and evenings during high school scrolling and posting on Tumblr. She said that in between discussing fandom interests, she and other teenage girls on the platform would disclose intimate details about their lives. Many shared her social and body image struggles or experienced similar family dysfunction.

Kerschner's fandom interests expanded from Elvis Presley to Harry Potter, Justin Bieber, and the boy band One Direction. With each new fandom, she was introduced to more teenagers, most of whom were anonymous, who exchanged elaborate fanfiction and art—photos, drawings, collages, and videos set to music—sometimes depicting romantic or erotic “ships” (short for relationship pairings). One famous “ship” was an imagined homosexual relationship between One Direction bandmates Harry Styles and Louis Tomlinson. The ship was dubbed “Larry.” In reality, the two men shared a close friendship and dated girls. But on Tumblr, fans obsessively opined that they were secretly married. (One 2011 tweet in which Louis expressed affection for Harry was retweeted 2.6 billion times. It remains the sixth most popular post on Twitter.)

Kerschner said Tumblr users also created “head canons,” deviations from the official canon of a novel, film, television show, or other storyline based on one's personal perception. For example, one might have a head canon that Harry Potter is actually black, nonbinary, and abandoned wizard school to become a professional chef, she explained.

Immersed in this online fantasy world, Kerschner was introduced to the concept of gender identity. In a recent Substack piece, titled “By Any Other Name,” she described how she went from a girl who played with Barbies, dress-up, and toy makeup sets—never experiencing any gender distress—to identifying as nonbinary by age 15 and then transgender.

Kerschner's Substack piece went viral. At age 23, she is one of a small number of detransitioners beginning to pull back the curtain on how fandom, Tumblr, and other online influences play a critical part in teens identifying as the opposite sex. The detransitioners see a need for more caution among parents and professionals to take seriously the threats posed by

online influences. Their stories add to a growing chorus among researchers and parents addressing the role social media is playing in introducing teens to gender ideology and propelling the transgender phenomenon.

“There are a lot of prevailing narratives about how we got here ... but they are not really answering the question, ‘Why are all these girls doing this?’” Kerschner said.

Today, children are increasingly introduced to transgenderism in public schools, in picture books and novels at the library, at doctor's and counselor's offices, in television programming and advertisements, and among family and friends.

Online, teens are exposed to hypersexualized women on the one hand and transgender individuals or “influencers” on the other who showcase (and glamorize) their transitioning journeys—from “coming out” parties to taking cross-sex hormones or undergoing double mastectomies. Some have massive followings and feature prominently on TikTok, YouTube, Twitter, and Instagram. On TikTok, one of the most popular social media platforms for teenagers, videos filed under #transgender have nearly 11 billion views. “Any teenager on social media now is going to be inundated with this ideology,” Kerschner said.

In 2018, physician and scientist Lisa Littman coined the term *rapid-onset gender dysphoria* (ROGD) after studying the spike in the number of teenage girls identifying as transgender who showed no previous signs of gender dysphoria. She presented the first academic study connecting teens' peer circles and social media usage with the transgender phenomenon. Her study addressed the influence of peer contagion—the spread of ideas, attitudes, and behaviors by group imitation and conformity—among adolescent girls identifying as transgender.

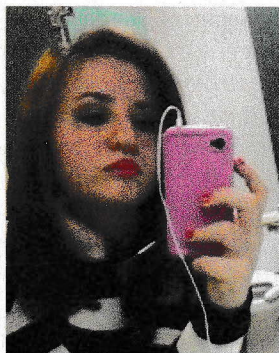
Of the 256 parents Littman surveyed, more than 80 percent had transgen-

der-identifying daughters. The daughters averaged 16-years-old. Littman's study found that more than 65 percent of the teens increased their social media usage and time spent online immediately prior to announcing their transgender identity. Most of the parents Littman surveyed suspected their child used language they found online to describe their transgenderism. Nearly 70 percent of the teens belonged to a peer group in which at least one friend had come out as transgender.

Some parents in Littman's study said they found posts on their child's Tumblr, Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram accounts disparaging “cis-gendered people,” heterosexuality, marriage, and nuclear families. “On my daughter's Tumblr blog, she has liked or favorited or reposted disparaging comments about those who aren't transgender or seem to misunderstand transgender identity,” one participant said. “Online, they are always swapping jokes and comments about cis-gender and about transphobia,” another parent wrote.

I**N THE EARLY 2010S**, before transgenderism was mainstream (and before Instagram and TikTok became popular), teenagers on Tumblr and Reddit were already adopting alternative identities—transgender, nonbinary, demisexual, and neopronouns—en masse due to its unchecked blend of fandom, fantasy, pornography, and so-called social justice. Tumblr's monthly traffic plummeted in December 2018 when the platform banned pornographic and adult content. Many users moved to Twitter, Instagram, and TikTok. (*The Wall Street Journal* reports 22 million teens log onto Instagram in the U.S. each day.)

I spoke with one male detransitioner who goes by “Limpidă”—WORLD is using his pseudonym because of concerns over risks to his teaching position in a liberal state—about his experience with Tumblr beginning in 2014. Similar to Kerschner, he first learned about transgenderism on



Kerschner in 2013



2014



2015



2016



2017

Tumblr. Limpidă was 14 when his girlfriend encouraged him to join the platform to share memes and fandom on their interest in the British television programs *Doctor Who* and *Sherlock Holmes*.

"A lot of our relationship from that point forward was completely mediated through Tumblr," Limpidă said. The sexual politics and pornographic material began to play a large role in their dating relationship: "We got to where we didn't have a life outside of Tumblr. We stopped taking advice from our families and started to see them as oppressive ... part of the cis-hetero-patriarchy."

Limpidă's girlfriend, who experienced autism, anxiety, and an eating disorder, began to identify as a male. He began questioning his own gender identity and eventually believed he was a woman. He changed his name to "Liliana." In August 2019, he started cross-sex hormones. He said no one prepared him for the physical, emotional, and mental effects. A clinician he visited suggested he pursue surgeries to further his transition. That is when Limpidă began to do his own research and discover other detransitioners who helped him question his trajectory.

Limpidă, now 24, chose his pseudonym because it means "clear" in Romanian, the native language of his immigrant parents. He stopped taking estrogen in January and no longer identifies as female: "I don't know how I deluded myself. ... I feel like I'm getting back on my feet."

Limpidă says, "More people are beginning to talk about it and to realize what happened to them."

"It was an act of war against myself."

At a virtual March 12 detransitioners conference hosted by a newly formed support group called Genspect, Kerschner, Limpidă, and other panelists discussed how fandom, pornography, and online influences contribute to young people identifying as transgender. They said medical professionals and clinicians pushed them further down the path by "affirming" them into hormonal and surgical interventions. "Everyone online was telling me at that time, 'If you think you're trans, you are,' and really, they repeat it over and over," said one panelist named Michelle. She said that as she struggled with gender dysphoria, she was repeatedly told online, "Cis people don't question their gender."

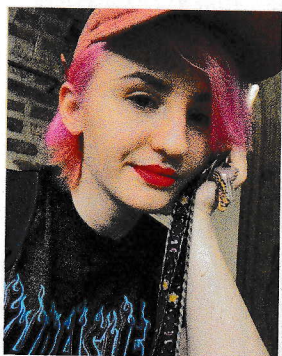
In a 2021 study of 100 detransitioners, Littman found that about half originally believed they would be treated better if they transitioned.

Kerschner said she earned adoration on the platform with each pronoun change or deviation from being a "cis white female," which users viewed as oppressive and bad. One Tumblr friend gifted Kerschner with a breast binder. A handful of her real-life high school friends, who were also addicted to the platform, simultaneously transitioned to male pronouns and identities, she said.

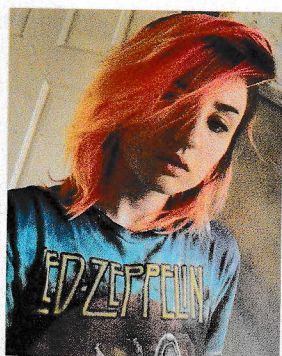
In August 2016, shortly after Kerschner's 18th birthday, she drove from Ohio to Chicago to a Planned Parenthood facility, where she obtained a prescription for a weekly regimen of 100 milligrams of testosterone. Kerschner describes a subsequent dark period of loneliness, rage, worsened mental illness, and "suffocating numbness" she now attributes to the high dosage of testosterone.

The reality of transitioning was far less attractive than the fantasy version Kerschner first envisioned on Tumblr. "It was an act of war against myself," she wrote.

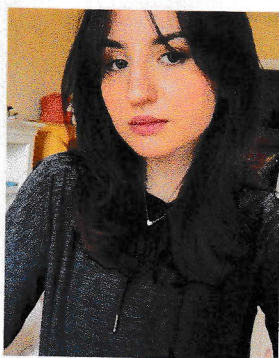
Kerschner detransitioned 18 months later in 2018. She has wrestled with regret and shame. In her Substack piece, she



2018



2019



2021

recounts one moment at a smoothie shop where she realized “not only was I not the only one going through this, but it was a full-fledged phenomenon.”

Janine McLean founded Parents of Rapid-Onset Gender Dysphoria Kids with 10 other parents in 2017. The group now has about 2,000 members who are skeptical of the “affirmative approach,” which fast-tracks vulnerable children into hormonal and surgical interventions. The group is intended to provide support for parents whose children “suddenly—seemingly out of the blue—decided they identify strongly with the opposite sex and are at various stages of transitioning,” the website states. McLean said she hears from about five parents daily.

McLean, of Ontario, uses a pseudonym to protect her identity from her estranged, transgender daughter, who is now 23. Her daughter struggled with social and emotional issues beginning at puberty. She preferred interacting with peers on Facebook Messenger and Tumblr over in-person communication at school. “It somehow felt safer for her, more protected,” McLean said.

McLean limited her daughter’s internet usage to one hour per day. But her daughter’s online activity became harder to monitor once she got a smartphone. At 15, she announced she was a boy. “She told us, ‘This is why I’m having so much trouble’ ... it was a cure-all,” McLean said.

“Online and at school, she received all this affirmation.”

Two years later, McLean’s daughter asked to start taking testosterone. At the same time, a friend she had met on Tumblr who lived in New York was starting cross-sex hormones with her parents’ approval. McLean and her husband said no. McLean said she later found violent and erotic drawings and photos on her daughter’s Tumblr account. But she could not see what her daughter’s conversations were on the platform.

Kerschner and Limpidă said Littman’s ROGD study helped them understand their own experience with gender dysphoria and the ways fandom and Tumblr contributed to their intense desire to identify as the opposite sex. Still, Kerschner said Littman’s findings “barely scratched the surface.”

One interviewer recently asked Kerschner what would have made a difference for her as a teenager. She replied having a loving, trusting relationship with an adult who would have steered her toward valuing her female body. She told me parents play a critical role in helping their children cultivate a life outside of the internet.

Kerschner said the emphasis on screens and devices creates “a fake reality” in which young people don’t form a connection to their bodies and nature. “It’s going to take a while for society to figure out what to do to mitigate this.” ■

Social contagion on social media

Adolescent girls are known to experience social contagion effects when it comes to cutting and eating disorders. A growing body of evidence reveals how social media platforms have a similar effect of causing harm among teenagers.

Since the pandemic, teen girls who use TikTok are increasingly claiming to have Tourette syndrome, a nervous system disorder leading to repetitive movements or sounds. An article in the *Archives of Disease in Childhood* noted that some teen girls reported the onset of symptoms after visiting sites such as TikTok #tourettes. Others posted videos of their symptoms. “They report that they gain peer support, recognition and a sense of belonging from this exposure,” according to the article.

One recent study, published in *Nature Communications*, showed a negative link between social media usage and life satisfaction among girls ages 11-13 and boys 14-15. Increased social media use predicted lower life satisfaction at age 19.

All of this comes on top of a *Wall Street Journal* investigative report last year that found Facebook concealed from the public its own research showing the ways its photo-sharing app Instagram contributed to worsening body image issues and higher rates of anxiety and depression among teen girls.

The WSJ quotes a May 2020 slide presentation shared on Facebook’s internal message board, in which company researchers said, “We make body image issues worse for one in three teen girls.” —M.J.