


A nuanced look into youth journeys of gender transition and detransition

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Abstract

Some media have suggested that many youths who have previously completed a gender transition are “detransitioning”. Their experience is often framed around the idea of regrets but rare are the articles that provide a nuanced examination of their journey. This article presents the perspectives of youths who have detransitioned or discontinued a transition regarding their experiences and feelings on their journey from transition to detransition. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 20 youths between the age of 16 and 25 years who were recruited on social media and who transitioned and detransitioned or discontinued their transition. Data were analysed according to thematic analysis. Regrets and feelings of satisfaction can both coexist. The processes of transition and discontinuation or detransition appear to be non-linear and participants do not necessarily return to a cisgender identity. Ambiguous loss theory is applied to frame youth experiences and feelings and to suggest way forward for intervention.

Highlights:

- This paper examines the experiences and feelings of youth on their journey from transition to detransition.

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- Their journey is experienced as non-linear, and often comprised mixed feelings and experiences about transition and detransition steps.
- Ambiguous loss theory allows a nuanced understanding of feelings and experiences of their journey from transition to detransition.

KEYWORDS

ambiguous loss, discontinuation, gender detransition, gender transition, youth

1 | INTRODUCTION

Transgender and nonbinary youths (TNBY) are youths who feel an incongruence between their gender identity and sex assigned at birth, sometimes experiencing distress known as gender dysphoria (American Psychiatric Association, 2022). Transitions, which can alleviate dysphoria, can be social (changes in presentation, such as in hair, name, or pronouns), legal (changes of name or sex assigned at birth or both), or medical through gender-affirming medical (GAM) care (Keo-Meier & Ehrensaft, 2018). Transition access varies geographically although international care standards exist (Coleman et al., 2022). Access to GAM care is offered incrementally, ranging from puberty blockers (reversible), hormonal treatments (semi-reversible), to surgical options (irreversible, generally only offered to those who are 18 years or older, depending on laws) as the decision-making capacity of TNBYs develops. Each transition journey is unique, and decisions, steps, and pace should reflect individual needs and situations (Coleman et al., 2022). Hence, some youth may only undertake one type of transition, whereas others choose to pursue medical, social, and legal transitions.

Evidence shows that prompt access to transition improves wellbeing (Pullen Sansfaçon et al., 2021). Recently, GAM clinics in Canada and Europe have witnessed an increase in TNBY referrals (Bauer et al., 2017), but research highlight that the youth profiles remain stable except for the male-to-female ratio (Arnoldussen et al., 2020). That said, those increases are provoking many debates in various communities, especially around access to care and detransition.

While the exact rates of detransition or discontinuation of gender transition are currently unknown (Irwig, 2022), the media are reporting a growing number of stories about youths, often assigned female at birth, who are speaking out about transition regrets and detransition (Slothouber, 2020). Detransition can be defined in several ways, and, to date, there is no consensus on a definition (Vandenbussche, 2021). It can be described as a process of ending a gender transition to return to a pre-transition state (Hildebrand-Chupp, 2020) although not everyone follows this pathway (Expósito-Campos, 2021), highlighting the complexity and the possible non-linearity of detransition journeys. Detransition can be medical (ceasing or reversing treatment), social (changes of pronouns or presentation), or legal (Vandenbussche, 2021).

Littman (2021) proposes that some detransitioners experienced so-called rapid-onset gender dysphoria (ROGD) from peer “contagion” on social media (Littman, 2019) and that they should be prevented from transitioning. Even though ROGD is neither a supported hypothesis (Bauer, Lawson, & Metzger, 2021; Restar, 2020), nor a diagnosis (WPATH, 2018), it fuels debates about access to GAM care and, indirectly, to detransition.

The media often regard detransition as synonymous with transition regrets or with a mistaken transition (Millette et al., 2021), which stimulates debates on access to medical transition for teenagers (Bowcott, 2020). More broadly, transition can trigger debate around trans-affirming approaches (Indremo et al., 2021), despite the empirical evidence supporting these practices (Bauer, Pacaud et al., 2021; Sorbara et al., 2020). It also feeds anti-transgender rhetoric (Slothouber, 2020).

However, research highlights that detransition is complex and requires a nuanced understanding (Baril, 2021; Butler & Hutchinson, 2020). Youths who detransition are a heterogeneous group (Expósito-Campos, 2021). The question of regrets is often mentioned, but its prevalence varies greatly as do the factors leading to detransition, which can be internal (e.g., another issue mistaken for dysphoria) or external (e.g., transphobia, lack of support [Littman, 2021; Turban & Keuroghlian, 2018]).

To date, scientific evidence remains scarce and focuses solely on the detransition experience. There is therefore an urgent need to generate holistic and more nuanced understandings of youths' detransition experiences, and to examine their journey from early transition to discontinuation, because detransition is necessary anchored in a transition experience, which itself can take many forms and be influenced by a range of factors. This article fills this gap and presents the perspectives of youths who have detransitioned or discontinued a transition regarding their experiences and feelings on their journey from transition to detransition.

2 | METHOD

Developing a nuanced understanding of a new phenomenon, such as the experience of detransition, requires a methodology that allows for in-depth exploration of participants' experiences both in the methods and the analysis. Committed to an ethic of rigorous qualitative methodology and democratic community empowerment (Pullen Sansfaçon & Manning, 2015), this research is based on a qualitative framework of community-based participatory action research (CBPAR) and on reflective thematic analysis (TA).

The appeal of CBPAR is that it engages with social problems and helps formulate a theoretical understanding (of detransition) that is then transformed into action, relying on extensive partnerships between communities and researchers (Resnik & Kennedy, 2010). CBPAR is part of an interpretative research tradition in which social phenomena are analysed from data generated by people with lived experience. Specifically, the idea for the project stems from the results of a large consultation with concerned individuals and organizations held in the spring of 2019. The project was designed and conducted through a participative and democratic collaboration with Gender Creative Kids that works with TNBY and their families and involves a youth consultant who has experienced transition and detransition. The project consists of a three-part pilot project that aims to better understand the discourse on detransition. It draws on three sources of information: an analysis of the discourse found in the media (traditional and social media), a survey of professionals working with TNBY, and interviews with youths who have discontinued a transition. In this paper, we present the data from the youth pilot.

Reflective TA guided the pilot study with detrans youths, from the development of the research question—"How do youths who detransition or discontinue a transition talk about and interpret their experience?"—to the analysis of the data. In line with reflective TA, which is "always underpinned by theoretical assumptions" (Braun & Clarke, 2022), the team agreed to draw on an anti-oppressive, fluid, gender-affirming perspective (Baril & Silverman, 2019; Medico & Pullen-Sansfaçon, 2017). Such a perspective proposes that gender is not always binary, can be asserted beyond femininity/masculinity, and can evolve.

This perspective, which was already shared by the team members, offers the flexibility to understand the idea of detransition as a facet of gender-identity affirmation and as a process of self-exploration and affirmation of gender identity. It also promotes the respect of both transgender binary and nonbinary identities and "supports the potentially changing nature of the [person]'s gender identity and expression" (Baril & Silverman, 2019). Hence, according to this approach, a person who discontinues is not pathologized because it refrains from imposing a "gender biographical continuity" on a person. Therefore, this approach seems suited to addressing the evolving identities of youths who start and discontinue a transition. This conceptual framework allows flexibility in gender identity and emphasizes the importance of supporting individuals in their self-identification in the present moment, whether this constitutes the persistence or discontinuation of a gender identity.

The interviews with 20 participants who discontinued their gender transition or detransitioned were conducted in the fall of 2020 by video calls. We used a mixture of purposive and snowball sampling for our recruitment strategy to recruit a diverse sample of youths (Braun & Clarke, 2022). We were careful to recruit from diverse groups of young people to avoid collecting homogeneous discourse and experiences. The recruitment poster was circulated on our social media and on webpages for the parents of transgender children; we also sent it to group admins of non-binary groups and various detrans groups and webpages. Some participants also shared the poster on their networks, which created a snowball effect. The call for participation notably circulated on a francophone non-binary Facebook group (~4 k members), on groups specifically designated as “Detrans community” and their Twitter and Instagram pages (~2–3 k followers), and on the “/Detrans” subreddit (~ 15 k members). Some influential figures in the detrans communities also reshared the invitation to participate on their networks.

To participate, youths needed to be aged between 15 and 25 years old, having begun a gender transition (whether it be social, legal, or medical) and discontinued this transition. This age range was chosen as it was sufficiently broad to access diverse life trajectories while offering some homogeneity in terms of the current context of gender transitions, which tends to change rapidly, notably with regard to access to services and parental support. The study was open to participants internationally, so youths could participate from everywhere in the world. This helped to obtain some heterogeneity in the sample and was appropriate in the context of COVID-19, which necessitated conducting the research online: this was an opportunity to reach further for sampling. On the call for participation, we invited any youth who met the research criteria to contact the research coordinator. The coordinator verified that the youth was within the age range and had discontinued a transition before sending them an information sheet, a consent form, and a list of resources.

The interviewer asked a series of open-ended questions about the youth's gender journey and explored various dimensions of their lives, such as their motivations to start a gender transition, their perspective on detransition, the reasons that led them to detransition or discontinue their transition, and their experiences during transition and detransition (for example, with their friends, family, peers, or medical institutions). Interviews were transcribed verbatim and then checked for accuracy.

Data were analysed according to reflective (inductive) TA (Braun et al., 2019) using MAXQDA to organize the analysis. The research coordinator analysed the data with the help of a research assistant and the principal investigator (PI). All engaged in a process of *familiarization*, immersing themselves by reading transcripts and noting significant information in the data. Next, the research coordinator began to *generate codes*, adopting an inductive orientation. They began to code the transcripts at the semantic level. As the coding of interviews proceeded and the number of codes was becoming significant, they began to *construct themes* by aggregating the codes. Several meetings between coordinator and PI took place to discuss the coding and reflect on the findings. Through this process, the coding moved beyond the semantic level and began to focus on a more conceptual level of coding (latent codes) (Braun et al., 2019). This process induced the team to review some of the codes and continue to build themes.

Some of the substantial codes were also promoted to themes, as they “capture [d] a meaningful pattern across the dataset, as well as different manifestations of that pattern” (Braun et al., 2019, p. 855). Notably, the theme “youth's feelings and perspectives on their journey” is the focal point of this article because it represents a substantial theme, and we regrouped a variety of feelings under this theme.

Team meetings continued to be held to discuss the organization of the themes and to review and redefine themes, a process which continued throughout the writing of this article. We distinguished the positive, negative, and ambiguous feelings. We also differentiated feelings from the transition, from the detransition, and from the whole process, and the explanations the participants offered for their journeys. This way of organizing themes was helpful to add meaning to the codes, but we want to underline that these feelings are often the result of a continuum of experiences that cannot be completely isolated. The Results section follows this way of organizing the data. As we adhere to inductive, reflective TA principles (Braun & Clarke, 2022), the data presented below discusses

meaningful themes that were conceptualized during the analysis and does not represent the number of occurrences in the interviews.

3 | RESULTS

3.1 | Participant profiles and identities

Participants in this sample were between the ages of 16 and 25 years old. At the time of the interviews, three participants were living in Canada, 11 in the United States, 2 in France, one in Belgium, one in Finland, one in Indonesia, and one in the United Kingdom. Despite efforts to recruit a diverse sample, 19 of the 20 participants were assigned female at birth, and only one youth was assigned male at birth.

At the time of the interviews, after the discontinuation of transition, youths expressed a large variety of identities, which did not always match the gender they were assigned at birth. For example, while some claimed the labels “female,” “woman,” or “detrans woman,” most participants used different labels, such as “lesbian,” “agender,” “gender-nonconforming,” “non-binary,” “no gender,” “gender-fluid,” and so on. Although some participants identified as detrans or as their assigned gender or sex, we noticed that many youths expressed multidimensional identities or distanced themselves from their assigned identity or any form of gender identity.

Some narratives offered an insight into the participant's gender identity at the time of transition. Although three youths (Sam, Sasha, Billie) said they now feel they were never trans, Andréanne, Iris, Shane, and Aren asserted that they experienced transness, and Yael and Jada said they were non-binary or gender-nonconforming when they started to transition. For example, Aren states the following:

I think that transgender, like, being transgender is an identity, and I had that identity, ... that cannot be erased just ... by saying, “Oh, but actually, you were cis,” because no, like, this experience is not what cis people experience. Um, so, um, I would say that I was transgender, and I wasn't misdiagnosed, but I decided not [to] identify with gender anymore and not [to] identify as transgender.”

(Aren, no gender, 24, soc/med/leg)

Participants also had diverse trajectories of transition and discontinuation. Among them, 13 had undergone a medical transition (among whom 12 were prescribed hormones, eight had a mastectomy, and one had a hysterectomy), whereas the other seven only transitioned socially. The legal aspects were not always discussed, but eight youths mentioned having changed their name or gender marker or both. Only three participants were under 18 when they started their medical transition; all the others were at least 18 years old. Seven participants were 18 years old or more when they started transitioning, while five were between 15 and 17 years old, six were between 12 and 14 and one participant was younger than 12. One participant did not mention their age at the beginning of their transition. Table 1 presents the participants' age, gender assigned at birth, current pronouns, current gender identity, and the type of transition they experienced.

For participants who transitioned medically, the delay between the realization of transness and the beginning of a medical transition varied between a few months to 7–8 years (the majority having waited at least 2 years). Depending on their transition pathway and the different steps that were undertaken in this context, the detransition process was varied and may have included different steps such as stopping identifying with the transgender identity; reverting to their original name, pronouns, or sex marker; changing gender expression; or stopping medical treatments. No youths had undergone post-detransition corrective procedures, but some were considering it at the time of the interview (e.g., surgery, laser treatment, or voice training). For many youths,

TABLE 1 Demographic characteristics, gender and transition

Participant pseudo	Current pronoun	Age	Assigned gender	Current gender identity (self-described)	Transition
Andréanne	elle = she	25	F	Fluid, woman & queer, feminine bisexual man	Soc
Yaël	il/iel = he/they	23	F	“PD”, “tapette » (=faggot), agender, fluid, nonbinary	Soc/Med/Leg
Lou	elle/iel = she/they	25	F	Non binary (but just talks about it in safe spaces)	Soc
Iris	elle = she	24	F	Does not think about GI	Soc/Med/Leg
Jada	she	22	F	Female, Lesbian, but does not really give a thought	Soc/Med/Leg
Chris	she	17	F	Female	Soc
Sam	she	25	F	Detransitioned woman/lesbian	Soc/Med/Leg
Shane	she	21	F	No gender ID, just female sex	Soc/Med/Leg
Sasha	she	21	F	Detrans woman/female	Soc/Med/Leg
Lea	she	19	F	Detrans woman	Soc/Med
Sun	he/she	20	F	Does not have a gender identity	Soc/Med
Eleanor	she	24	F	Masculine lesbian woman/Detrans woman	Soc/Med
Jona	she	23	F	Does not think about GI	Soc/Med
Billie	she	16	F	A girl/“boyish” girl	Soc/Leg
Olivia	she/neutral	19	F	Woman	Soc
Dylan	he	22	F	Woman/Lesbian	Soc
Addie	she	23	F	Gender Non Conforming woman	Soc/Med
Emma	she	18	F	Lesbian/butch/GNC woman/ agender	Soc
Nolan	they	25	M	Nonbinary but prefers not to define themselves	Soc/Med
Aren	she	24	F	No gender	Soc/Med/Leg

Note: Soc indicates social transition, Med indicates medical transition, Leg indicates legal transition.

detransition meant ceasing some parts of the process that had been initiated, but it did not necessarily mean reversing all of them to return to a pre-transition state. For example, some kept the name, the pronouns, or the gender expression they had adopted during transition.

3.2 | Between regrets and gratitude: A nuanced look at their journey

During the interviews, the youths expressed their thoughts and feelings about their transition and discontinuation journey. In this section, we present how they discussed their experiences, especially their thoughts, feelings, and perspectives on their journeys. As detransition experiences are deeply rooted in transition experiences (detransition is not possible without a prior transition), we present the youths' thoughts and feelings about these two steps of the process and their perspectives on their journey as a whole.

3.3 | Reflections on the beginning of their journey and decision to transition

During the interviews, the youths spontaneously tried to explain their journeys by commenting on it and on the various stages of transition and detransition. They were clear that their perspective had changed over time; that is, that at the time of decision, they did not have their current understanding. Iris comments as follows:

By the time I did it, I did it because I thought it was the best thing to do for me and my problems. But now I feel like I've better understood why I did that, and like I understand why it's not a solution. (Iris, does not think about gender identity, 24, soc/med/leg).

Although they were conscious that their perspective shifted over time, they shared their current perspective on their past decision to transition and the reasons they feel, today, it was not necessarily the best decision for them. Importantly, these insights are often not singular nor mutually exclusive. For example, if a youth felt that they were transitioning for the right reason at the time, now, in hindsight, they may feel that their decision was influenced by a multitude of other factors, some of which could overlap.

3.3.1 | External pressure to transition

Pressure felt by youth took many forms, and the sources varied from one participant to another: from peers, from online friends, or from a therapist. External pressures were discussed by eight participants and were identified as some of the reasons that had motivated a transition. For example, Shane notes the following:

I think [influence from social circles and peer] definitely played a pretty big role. At least in being the catalyst for beginning the medical part of the transition. I feel like I definitely would've continued to explore, um, like, my gender and, like, sexuality on my own, but I think the need to transition and be so public about it was definitely influenced by, um, like, my social circles and peers. (Shane, no gender ID/just female sex, 21, soc/med/leg)

In one case, the pressure to medically transitioned was caused by a very specific legal context. At the time, a gender-affirming surgery was required for a person who wanted to legally transition. Therefore, the person felt forced to undergo the procedure but, as we will see later in this particular case, not all the transition steps were seen as the wrong decision. Yaël comments as follows:

... I would have like [d] not to have to be sterilized and have the choice... I would have liked to start [my transition] later, as now the law allows not to be sterilized ... so that would have been more simple ... and I would feel less bad... (Yaël, dyke/agender/fluid/nonbinary, 23, soc/med/leg)

Although external pressures are usually felt to be less coercive than those experienced by Yaël, it is nevertheless a theme that was present in the youth narrative.

3.3.2 | Mistakenly believing an experience is gender dysphoria

Some youths explained that they thought they were experiencing gender dysphoria at the time they began transition, whereas in hindsight they now believe this feeling was a manifestation of another underlying issue. Such issues were discussed by about a third of the participants and were varied and included depression, trauma, internal misogyny or homophobia, dysmorphia, discomfort as a woman or with their body, or attraction to men or to masculine activities. These issues may have, at the time, felt like an experience of gender dysphoria, or a sign of transness. Addie explains, as follows:

... looking back at it now, I kinda see it like it was partially me just having, like, internal homophobia and internal misogyny, thinking that, like, it was wrong to be a masculine woman, and it was wrong to

be gay, so I can solve all these things by transitioning, when that's not really how it works (laughs).
(Addie, gender nonconforming woman, 23, soc/med)

3.3.3 | Lack of support during decision-making

Some youths also felt their transition did not work because they were insufficiently supported in their decision-making process. Not being sufficiently challenged and encouraged to explore further their motivation for transition was identified as a reason for feeling that transition, as understood today, was not the right decision. Lea comments as follows:

... when I talk to doctors, and I think, like, surely they must have seen that I was not... Like, I had other problems that needed addressing or that could be ... could have to do with why I wanted to transition. Um, why didn't they, like, try to help me with that? Or why did they just like, like I said before, like, make sure I ticked all the boxes and then, um, just like, start me on hormones without asking me "why?" to all those questions? (Lea, detrans woman, 19, soc/med)

Although they recognized that the process of transition may be complicated, wanting to have someone to accompany them, or sometimes even challenge them about their decision, was present in some of the younger as well as older youths' narratives. Aren relates their story as follows:

So, um, it was a very dangerous time I would say in my life because, um, the, um, transition did help me but somehow, um, everything else, uh, got completely lost and, um, I didn't really get the support or coverage that I think I should have had at that time. [...] I think, definitely, [I needed] a therapist who would, um, ask more questions and, um, analyze a bit more because, for him, it was always, like, "Yeah, you've been born transgendered, this is why, why you feel like this." And w- we never discussed my history, my past, um, my childhood, and things that could have led to me, um, hating my female body so much. Um, and I think analyzing this and, um, could have been the first, um, step to finding the comfort of, um, yeah, finding other things, um, in my life to focus on because I really only had this one topic. (Aren, no gender, 24, soc/med/leg)

Some also mentioned that they wish they were offered alternative solutions to transition, such as theoretical, community, or psychological resources to better accept themselves or deal with underlying issues. For example, some youths explained that they transitioned because they lacked role models (gender-nonconforming women). Others mentioned that, in hindsight, they were pursuing unattainable or stereotypical goals. Nolan explains as follows:

I thought, like, I would just go on these medications and then slowly, uh, resemble a cis woman and it, it just does put you in this sort of, uh, third gender box that I wasn't necessarily, uh, prepared for...
(Nolan, nonbinary but prefers not to define themselves, 25 years old, soc/med)

In summary, for some, better support would have helped them to gain more clarity in terms of deciding to transition and identifying their motivation.

3.4 | Current feelings on their experience of transition

Although many youths felt that their decision to transition, in hindsight, was not the most appropriate at the time, they also do not necessarily feel negative about the decision. The way participants felt about their transition journeys

appears instead to be nuanced and complex, as both positive and negative feelings and perspectives can be found in their narratives. For example, a youth may report regrets, gratitude, and recognition that they needed to follow the transition and detransition processes. Some report they are happy about having transitioned, even though they detransitioned. Others express mixed or ambiguous feelings about their journey.

3.4.1 | Positive feelings about the transition

Transition can be part of a learning process and sometimes qualified as a success, with no feelings of regret and, at times, even a sense of satisfaction. Positive feelings regarding their experience of transition were expressed by 14 participants.

Transition as personal growth

This aspect, of which more than half of youth discussed during the interviews, includes feelings of gratitude and the idea that transition has been a learning process or learning experience. This feeling relates to self-understanding and the process of defining who one is.

Like generally, I don't have like a lot of regret about this. Like I actually think it's all been, like, a valuable experience. (Nolan, nonbinary but prefers not to define themselves, 25, soc/med)

Yeah, I feel like I kept most of the things that I learned along the way. So, that was good. (Chris, female, 17, soc)

Transition as a success

This theme, discussed by a few youth, relates to not having regrets about a past transition and even feeling that it was even a success, even if it was discontinued. Yaël explains:

... Typically, I don't feel like [my transition] failed, and I'm very happy about my transition because all along my transition, I just mmh ... did what felt important to me, at this moment, and I, I never felt like being ... being forced to do certain things because ... because it was the norm or whatever, and I just listened to what I wanted to do, and I think that it's what a successful transition is. I don't see at all the fact of ... it's not coming backward to feel more neutral; I don't see it at all as a failure or a step back, I just mmh, I think it's just to listen to what we want at some point. (Yaël, dyke/agender/fluid/nonbinary, 23, soc/med/leg)

For Yaël, the transition was thus an overall success, despite its including a hysterectomy. This demonstrates the complexity in understanding the experiences of youths who decide to discontinue their transitions, which can be seen as successful despite some components being less positively experienced.

Satisfaction with the changes

About one-quarter of the youth reports still being happy with the changes provoked by the transition or having no problems with how their identities evolved. For example, participants such as Sam, Shane, and Billie kept their chosen names with no intentions to change them back, while others also retained the (total or partial) use of their chosen pronouns.

Um, I really, I really like my name. It's much better than what it was before. (Billie, a girl/"boyish" girl, 16, soc/leg)

Some also feel positively about more permanent interventions, such as mastectomies:

I'm okay identifying as female and not having breasts. Like, I am happier this way. And I did make the right choice, just under weird circumstances. (Sun, no gender identity, 20, soc/med)

As such, discontinuing a transition can manifest positive feelings. Some still enjoy the changes that occurred because of their transitions and regard the outcomes—whether medical, social, or legal—as positive. For others, despite having detransitioned, the positive perspectives on transitioning are created by how they perceive themselves today, after the process. Dylan explains:

Um, for me, I think I'm about done. Um, so it looks like just how I, how I am right now, um, look in the way that I look, identifying the way that I do using these pronouns and this label, I think is that this is successful for me. (Dylan, a woman/lesbian, 22, soc)

However, negative feelings about the transition process are also present in the youths' narratives.

3.4.2 | Negative feelings about the transition

Regrets and grief

The expression of negative feelings, such as regret and grief, was apparent in a little over half of the participants' stories when recalling their transition journeys. Explicit regrets about having transitioned (or having undergone some interventions as part of the transition) were also present in just under half of the narratives.

There is still a lot of like, grief, and sadness and all those negative feelings. (Jona, doesn't think about gender identity, 23, soc/med)

The regret, the regret is tricky. Um, I think I would've been better off without it, absolutely. I wish I could've gotten to the place I am now without that ever happening to me. I don't think it was necessary for me to live the life I do now. I think I could've been a lot better off with, and a lot of different theoretical life paths, but I do... I do like my life now. (Sam, detransitioned women/lesbian, 25, soc/med/leg)

... Sometimes I still get days where like I feel really down about it and like feel like I would ... like destroyed my body I guess in a way, like, it's hard not to feel that way sometimes. (Eleanor, masculine lesbian/detransitioned woman, 24, soc/med)

When transitioning involved permanently transforming their bodies (for example, hair growth or mastectomy), sadness, grief, depression, and missing the pre-transition body were also important themes in the youths' narratives.

New forms of body dysphoria

In about one quarter of the sample, participants reported feeling extremely uncomfortable with the changes caused by their transitions. Some even developed new forms of gender dysphoria, caused at times by the misalignment between their gender identity and how they felt about themselves and, at times, by the changes provoked by the medical transition or by how such changes affected other people's perceptions of them.

My voice, I feel like it will always get attention. Not necessarily the ... not the ... the right kind of attention. And that it's always going to make people doubt me, and that it's always going to haunt me

in the back. It's always going to be indicative of a transition journey, I think. And ... not having breasts, well... It's, for me, it's something important that's part of being a woman, I think; I know there are some who don't have them, for many reasons. But I don't know, I miss it and... There are lots of clothes I'd like to wear that fall off strangely because I don't have any. (Iris, female, lesbian, but doesn't really give a thought, 22, soc/med/leg*)

... I know that my voice used to be, like, so much higher... Like, I could talk, I guess comfortably, as just like a female person. But now I just get kind of nervous, like, every time I open my mouth, somebody's gonna think I'm a man, but that's what I wanted, so, um, it's a little, like, it's... It's just kinda weird trying to learn how to live with it. (Jada, female/lesbian, 22, soc/med/leg)

The new form of dysphoria was therefore sometimes provoked by the change itself, as well as the youths' own perceptions of themselves, but it could also be caused by the perceptions of others, similar to with social dysphoria. In such cases, misalignments are provoked if how others perceive and address a person is at odds with their own perception of their gender.

Experiencing undesirable side effects of the transition

Experiences of post-transition body discomfort, such as vaginal atrophy, were a cause of negative feelings about transitioning. Even those participants who were generally content with their transitions could have negative feelings related to post-transition body discomfort. For example, one participant who had to have a hysterectomy to change their legal sex marker expressed anger and intense negative feelings (i.e. suicidal thoughts) about the intervention its consequences. Yaël illustrates:

I don't have regret because it's not as if I had the choice actually. However, I'm angry; I'm clearly angry against the state, which forced me, at 19, to be sterilized and to ... then ... to deal with all the consequences as a result... If I have to take a treatment for life, it's still quite heavy. If I can't have children like I would like to have, or it's more complicated; it's still also very frustrating, so, sometimes yeah, when I think back to all of that I feel very bad and indeed I happen to tell myself that it would be easier to end things now. The I tell myself I didn't do all of that to ... to end that way but ... well... (Yaël, dyke/agender/fluid/nonbinary, 23, soc/med/leg)

In summary, negative feelings about transition were expressed by 12 out of 20 participants and encompassed explicit feelings of regret, the desire not to have completed certain interventions, sadness and grief for the pre-transition body, new forms of dysphoria, physical side effects of transitioning, and anger. The youths who had completed only social transitions expressed few negative feelings about their transitions, as the latter relate primarily to body changes and the medical consequences of transitioning. Moreover, in most youths' narratives, positive feelings could often be observed regarding the transition, often simultaneously with those negative feelings or regrets. These positive and negative feelings can occur alternatively or simultaneously, creating ambivalence for the youths.

3.4.3 | Mixed feelings and ambivalence about the transition journey

When discussing their transitions, most youths expressed ambivalent, sometimes nuanced, feelings (both negative and positive, expressed simultaneously in the discourse). For example, Aren recognizes how her mastectomy helped relieve her dysphoria and how she would probably struggle today if she had not had this intervention at the time.

[I'm] still very positive [about not having breasts] because it did, um, relieve my dysphoria. [...] I, um, still sometimes have nightmares of having my breasts back. [...] Um, and I know that if I had them, I would experience a lot of dysphoria. (Aren, no gender, 24, soc/med/leg)

At the same time, positive feelings about the intervention compete with an ideal of self-acceptance, which leaves the participant with mixed feelings about the transition:

Um, so, um, it's a bit mixed, but, um, mainly I know... It was kind of the easy way out. Of course, it wasn't easy to go through all those process and have surgery, et cetera, but it was still it really felt like the easy way out. It was like one day, like, one surgery, one cut, and then I feel better instead of having years of self-acceptance. (Aren, no gender, 24, soc/med/leg)

Participants also expressed their ambiguous feelings, such as doubts, questions, or contradictions, more directly. Eleanor mentioned the duality between her present desire that someone, in the past, would have stopped her from transitioning while simultaneously acknowledging that, at the time, nothing could have stopped her from transitioning.

... and, like, there are times where I wish like someone had stopped me or like had been more barriers, but at the same time, like I don't know if that would've stopped me and like... By most accounts, I will have been a pretty textbook like stereotypical like trans guy in terms of like how I felt and like what I wanted and how I presented and like I just, I don't [laughs] I don't think anything would have changed if I went back. (Eleanor, masculine lesbian/detransitioned woman, 24, soc/med)

Youths can therefore experience a wide variety of feelings about their transitions, may they be positive, negative, or ambiguous. It is also possible for them to experience regrets—especially among those who have undergone medical transitions—and at the same time, a feeling of satisfaction about having gone through transition, or a feeling of appreciation about the physical changes provoked by the process.

3.5 | Current feelings on the experience of detransitioning

During the interviews, youths were also asked about how they felt about their experiences of detransition or discontinuation. Similar to the experiences of transition, detransition can also generate positive, negative, or ambivalent feelings among youths.

3.5.1 | Positive feelings about the detransition

Good decision not to go through with an intervention

Some say they would have regretted it if they have gone further in their transition process, so they are glad they were able to change their minds.

... Me, at some point I was like “mmh, I will maybe take T [testosterone],” but in fact I started to reflect, et cetera [...] I think I would have regretted if I finally had taken T. (Lou, nonbinary/ager/ gender, 25, soc)

Um, and I, if I hadn't realized that I wasn't trans, and if I'd gone through the medical transitioning, then that would have been a very difficult process to reverse and to feel comfortable with myself again. (Chris, female, 17, soc)

I was looking into surgery, um, like, late in 2019. Um, but I, I don't know. I just kept getting a bad feeling about it. So, like I never actually made an appointment, um, but... Which I'm, I'm glad I didn't, cause I think I would have regretted it. (Addie, gender nonconforming woman, 23, soc/med)

Having the possibility to change their minds again can also make the decision easier for some youths. This feeling was specifically salient in narratives of youths who did not begin medical transitions.

But I do know I still have the option of transitioning, because I've not made the decision to make anything permanent. (Billie, a girl/"boyish" girl, 16, soc/leg)

Feeling better since discontinuing the transition

To stop a transition could bring feelings of relief and happiness. Being more comfortable and more aligned with themselves and looking forward to the future were also described when discussing feelings about detransitioning:

Um, as for my life, um, it's definitely much better because I don't restrict myself anymore to just doing certain masculine stuff. I'm, I will do, actually pursue my passion. [...] I feel relieved mostly because if I don't, I will definitely be miserable. [...] And I also feel happy, I guess. I... I don't have to put myself in this arbitrary box that I don't ... that I can't cross over even a bit because that means I'm not me, that people will start doubting me, that I have to always put on an act, 24/7. Uh, because I, I can be authentic. (Olivia, woman, 19, soc)

I feel like, um, a weight has been lifted, um, just knowing that, um, the detransition and just stopping hormone treatment was for a good reason, um, it felt like I became more aligned with my identity, um, after suppressing for so long. Um, it's been very nice knowing, like, oh I'm just a lesbian. Like, I can just, like, live life as a lesbian woman, and it's great, but it's also been a little distressing knowing that, like, yes I'm still female, and still a woman, but I do not look or sound like most other women that I know. (Jada, female/lesbian, 22, soc/med/leg)

As these narratives highlight, this theme relates to the experience of not being comfortable with the transition state and discontinuing the process as a way of moving toward a more comfortable situation. These discomforts can relate to a feeling of incongruence with regard to one's identity or to external dimensions, such as gender expression or activities not conforming to outside expectations. The analysis shows that nearly all youth expressed positive feelings about discontinuing their transitions at the time of interview. However, despite bringing some sense of relief, discontinuing the transition could also lead to challenging feelings.

3.5.2 | Challenging feelings emerging from the detransition

Feeling of dysphoria returning

Struggles from the past, pre-transition, such as feelings of dysphoria or dysmorphia, sometimes came back with the detransition process. Mentioned by 9 of the participants, it was the most discussed theme regarding challenging feelings during detransition.

I still, like, even today, I still feel a lot of discomfort around my breasts, [...] Whenever I'm having a really bad day in terms of my eating disorder, I think about like, well, if there are infinite ways to be a woman, like, surely I can get top surgery and still be a woman, right? And so, it's definitely something I've considered. And I... I might even end up getting it in the future; I'm really not sure, um. (Emma, lesbian/butch/gender nonconforming woman/agender, 18, soc)

This was felt very strongly by some participants, who even explained that they may consider retransitioning at some point in life.

I can deconstruct my dysphoria. I could figure out... I could pinpoint places where it came from and like why it got worse or whatever. But no matter how much I try to hold myself to these morals, like, my dysphoria is not just going to go away. I can't just erase the fact that like someday I might want to go on T [testosterone] and like transition again. And it's unrealistic to think that I can just logic myself out of it. (Sun, no gender identity, 20, soc/med)

Another challenging feeling that can be experienced is that of nostalgia or a feeling of missing something from the transition stage:

Well, that's what pains me, in the sense that, as a woman, I don't look like what I wish to be, but the image I have of myself, it's an image, as I said, a bit idealized, in the past, but it's finished now; I don't have that [androgynous] body anymore; it doesn't work anymore. (Andréanne, fluid/woman and queer/bisexual feminine man, 25, soc)

I mean like I do... I mean one thing I do miss is the reduction in body hair. I don't really quite like having body hair. (Nolan, nonbinary but prefers not to define themselves, 25, soc/med)

Hence, even after detransition, dysphoria can return, or a form of nostalgia about the “old,” transitioned self may develop, leaving youths with continuous conflicting feelings.

Feelings of worry about the future

Redefining one's identity through detransition can lead to worries or feelings of confusion about what the future may hold, especially with regard to how and if one's identity will continue to evolve, as well as more generally what the future will hold. Indeed, about a quarter of youths mentioned worries about changing back their identities or feel uncomfortable about the subject, because they have become accustomed to different identities and are unsure if they will ever feel settled.

And it's still quite an odd feeling because I mean, as trans, it just felt so right, until it wasn't. And now it feels so right, and I'm scared, um, that one day it won't. (Billie, a girl/“boyish” girl, 16, soc/leg)

Some also wonder whether they will ever be able to reverse some of the physical changes provoked by the transition or fear being mistaken for another gender. For example, Sasha, who was on testosterone for 7 years and follows other people who have detransitioned on social media, wonders if she will have the same experiences, considering many were on testosterone for a shorter period.

And it does make me a little nervous in terms of like, how soon will I start seeing some of these things; will I see these things? (Sasha, detrans woman/female, 21, soc/med/leg)

3.6 | Youths making sense of their journeys

3.6.1 | Perspective or paradigm shift through time

Discontinuing a transition or an experience of detransition is sometimes accompanied by a shift in the youths' perspectives, which may take the form of detachment from social norms and labels.

It's just... I don't find... I don't find the paradigm of transition useful. It's not that I need to be feminine again, you know? [...] It's more of a paradigm shift for me than like a, a medical process. [...] It's not a new transition, you know? We're not going through these steps to achieve this goal of looking like a normal woman again or whatever. We're not seeking out gender euphoria. We're not trying to resolve dysphoria caused by our transition. (Sam, detransitioned women/lesbian, 25, soc/med/leg)

For some young people, detransition is experienced not as a gender shift but more as a change in the meaning they give to their gender, as well as how they try to meet their needs. How they feel in the present about their journeys also changes with time. Indeed, several youths explained how their feelings about their transition and detransition have evolved. For example, some youths went from feeling frustrated, regretful, or angry when thinking about their detransition to today feeling thankful about having experienced the journey.

I'm honestly pretty thankful to myself that I went through this journey. I had a lot of anger in the beginning, and was really frustrated, and mad at myself, that I had to, like, put myself through all of this. But I felt like that was ultimately unfair, because I needed to do it in order to get to the place I am now, and to understand myself for who I am. So I... I don't regret it, I don't think. [...] And I honestly feel like if, given the chance, I would probably do it again, because I feel like if I had to do it again, I would, just because I think I would have lived the rest of my life being really curious if I hadn't experimented in the ways I have, and just feeling really unfulfilled. [...] So I think it's great that I just took the opportunity to really see, and really figure it out. (Shane, no gender ID/just female sex, 21, soc/med/leg)

Depending on where they are in their journeys, youths may have felt overwhelmed with challenging feelings or have had the time to come to terms with them and see the positive outcomes. This evolving perspective can sometimes create contradictions and ambivalence in how youths feel about their journeys.

3.6.2 | How they feel now: Moving toward self-acceptance and liberation

The experience of transition can bring positive, negative, or ambiguous feelings, while the experience of detransition can encompass positive and challenging feelings. Our analysis has highlighted that these experiences of transition and detransition are complex and certainly not homogeneous, despite common themes being found in the narrative. Youths' perspectives can also change as they reflect on their journeys of transition and detransition.

When reflecting on their journeys as a whole, the themes of self-acceptance and liberation become apparent as this idea was discussed by almost all of the participants. Even participants such as Eleanor and Sam who expressed regrets about their transitions report having come to a greater acceptance, and even being more comfortable with their assigned gender or body:

It's more of like, it's kind of cheesy, but I kind of like love myself more for it, even though there are things I obviously wish I could change, like everyone else, but there's, there's less of a feeling of like,

God, I hate my body or God I hate this part of myself and more just like this isn't perfect, but nothing is, and that's fine, and I think it's helped a lot to be able to tackle those feelings in like a, a more gentle way toward myself [laughs]. Like, it's helped a lot I think mentally. I don't know about physically, but mentally and emotionally, I think it's helped a lot. (Eleanor, masculine lesbian/detransitioned woman, 24, soc/med)

The process also helped some youths gain new perspectives on how they perceive gender and the related social expectations:

I don't feel like I need to seek external validation for my gender anymore because I know no matter what other people say about it, I still, I'm me. I think that's the biggest, like, change. [...] It's very nice. I get less upset when people refer to me wrong [...] don't use the right pronouns or mistake me as another gender. It doesn't upset me as much because I'm like, "Well, I know, I know I'm not that. It doesn't matter what other people think." (Dylan, woman/ lesbian, 22, soc)

Some expressed that their gender journey contributed to acquiring a more flexible vision of gender and more freedom to be themselves, a sort of liberation from the gender norms.

And I think nowadays, I don't mind, um, being a masculine woman. [...] And I think I just have a lot more freedom in my mind to be. [...] I'm not really actively thinking a lot about sort of being a woman. But I think it's just something that I can... I ... or something I find comfortable identifying with. But that ... it's not something that I kind of try or do actively. (Jona, gender neutral/nonbinary, 23, soc/med)

In fact, many participants felt more comfortable expressing their assigned gender or participating in activities usually perceived as feminine, for those assigned female at birth, after their gender journey:

I stopped wearing my binder, not just because I no longer see any point in wearing it, but I'm less ... less uncomfortable with my feminine attributes; I like my breasts; on the contrary, I have always liked them. (Lou, nonbinary, 25, soc)

Um, so I definitely like have been feeling more able to do more like feminine things since detransing. (Sasha, detransitioned woman, female, 21, soc/med/leg)

That being said, as described above regarding participant characteristics, liberating oneself from gender norms does not necessarily mean that youths return to identifying with their assigned gender at birth. They simply do not feel the need to reject it to affirm their identity. This sometimes comes with a detachment from a transgender identity and an impression of being more aligned with themselves.

I definitely feel like I don't have the burden to avoid doing the feminine things, because that's not what men do and it feels a bit, um, I feel like I have more freedom now that I'm no longer identified as trans. (Olivia, woman, 19, soc)

Um, it just feels like a kind of integrity and like... It makes, it all makes sense. Like, my life makes more sense now than it did when I was saying that stuff. (Sam, detransitioned women/lesbian, 25, soc/med/leg)

In summary, our results show that youths can experience a wide range of feelings, from challenging to gratifying. Often, they feel a mix of both. Moreover, youths' perspectives evolve through time and tint how they feel about the choices they have made. Sometimes, the outcome of their decision is currently experienced as positive overall, but the reasons that motivated their initial decision no longer feels as if they are the right one. For example, they may have developed a new understanding of their overall experience and now experience their past transition journey as partially or fully anchored in underlying issues rather than gender dysphoria. In other cases, they must cope with negative outcomes from their transitions but understand that their decisions were motivated by strong and authentic feelings when they began. Youths can also have experienced negative feelings when they stopped their transition but, with time, could make sense of their decisions, accept them more easily, and even recognize the positive outcomes. Thereby, youths' feelings appear as complex, nuanced, and always evolving. Our data also highlights that youths who stopped their transitions demonstrate a great capacity to self-reflect and overcome the challenges emerging from their experiences of transition and detransition by accepting and making sense of their journeys, by seeing how they learned and grew from these experiences overall.

4 | LIMITATION OF THE STUDY

The research has some limitations. First, although the sample was culturally diverse, it consisted almost entirely of individuals assigned female at birth. Also, the project did not use a questionnaire to collect socio-demographic information. This prevents us from doing robust comparison between participants on the basis of such characteristics. Although some socio-demographic information is available, because of the qualitative nature of the data collected and the non-linear experiences described by some participants, such information is sometimes incomplete or lacking. This prevents us from presenting a complete, comparable socio-demographic profile for each participant (e.g., youths precise age at each step of their journey, exact moment and steps taken for each of the transition and detransition journeys). These limitations must be kept in mind when interpreting the results. Nevertheless, the richness of the participants' narratives allows for the discovery of a more nuanced and complex understanding of the experiences of discontinuation, which in itself is novel in this field of research.

5 | DISCUSSION

Youths who detransition form a heterogeneous group. They may go through a variety of experiences (types of transition and detransition) due to multiple factors including cultural diversity in the sample. There is also a variety of feelings, and perspectives (e.g., grief, anger, gratitude, feeling of mistakes or personal growth) at different times of the process. For example, while some youths wished someone would have prevented them from transitioning, others have expressed satisfaction regarding their transitions and acknowledge nothing could have stopped them in this process. Some youths have also asserted having experienced “transness” while no longer identifying with the label, and others feel they have never been transgender or have now adopted a critical perspective on gender.

This heterogeneity of experiences and identity bring us to question the rigid dichotomy between transgender/cisgender identities, as many detrans youths express being neither cisgender nor transgender and rather seem to situate themselves on a spectrum of gender nonconforming, or of sexual identities. Without negating the importance of the cisgender/transgender division in the process of gender affirmation, and as a trans-affirming fluid approach does not impose upon youths to choose between cisgender and transgender identities to support them (Baril & Silverman, 2019), it could nevertheless be complexified and understood as fluid and evolving, along with a fluid and non-binary conception of gender (Enke, 2013; Lindqvist et al., 2021). Some reidentified with the gender assigned at birth ($A = > B = > A$), while others have described their identity differently (fluid, neutral,

nonbinary, etc.), which suggests that detransition is not necessarily a “return to original sex” (Lockwood, 2019) as it is often proposed but instead continuity of the process ($A = > B = > C$). Hence, it may be helpful to describe these experiences as a discontinuation of transition rather than a “detransition,” as some “detrans youths” bifurcate to new directions in terms of identity. However, while we believe that discontinuation may be more inclusive, it should not exclude the use of the word “detransition,” as some young people themselves use it to make sense of their experiences.

Regret and grief, along with other feelings such as gratitude or satisfaction with changes, are experienced by youths, which validates previous research on detransition (Vandenbussche, 2021). A combination of positive and negative feelings is also possible, sometimes creating ambivalence. Discontinuation can bring satisfaction but also worries or confusion. It can also trigger a feeling of mourning a pretransition self, or the loss of a community. Ambiguous loss (AL) theory, developed by Boss (2007), may be helpful to understand these experiences. As AL refers to a situation in which what has been lost is uncertain (Boss, 2007), it applies to understanding the grief sometimes experienced by parents of transgender youths (McGuire et al., 2016). It also helps understanding how ambiguity triggered by external relational ruptures can lead to ambivalent feelings and a state of frozen grief on the individual, family, and collective levels (Boss, 2017).

In our study, AL takes various forms: from feelings caused by a discordance between how people perceived the youths before, during, or after transition and how they perceived themselves to how the youths feel about performing social gender roles that do not fit their identities, present or past. It can also occur internally, as it has been proposed in Golan and Leichtenritt's (2016) study of the maternal experience of stillbirth, whereby some experiences of AL have been provoked by internal experiences. Youths may experience relief in having detransitioned and continue to experience gender dysphoria. Youths in our study seemed to experience AL on both the internal and external axes (Golan & Leichtenritt, 2016).

AL is also helpful to explore how to better support youths. It suggests that resilience may develop through a process of finding meaning in the situation, despite the persisting ambiguity (Boss, 2017), which most youths did, and which seems to have helped them foster self-acceptance and growth. Such a positive stance may result from finding meaning, reconstructing identity, normalizing ambivalence, or discovering new hope (Boss, 2017).

To help all youth, it may be beneficial to increase access to psychosocial support. On the one hand, detrans youths often mentioned not having sufficiently explored their motivations to transition with health providers. Increasing support may be helpful for seeking informed consent. In many jurisdictions, lack of resources around gender affirming care means that youths often undertake transitions without appropriate psychosocial support. On the other hand, it could be specifically helpful for youths who discontinue transition to complete process of meaning-making to cope with AL.

That being said, psychosocial support should not be compulsory or constraining, and access to transitions should not be unnecessarily delayed, as they are already offered incrementally and based on international guidelines that account for a developmental perspective (Coleman et al., 2022). Unnecessary delay can also lead to increases in psychological distress (Sorbara et al., 2020). Gatekeeping and coercive interventions prevent the development of a therapeutic alliance, which is essential for youths to fully explore their experiences. Although some youths wished they were stopped from transition, they also recognized that without going through transition, they may nevertheless have experienced regrets or doubts about a possible future. An open exploration could help youths identify their issues, needs, and expectations before transition, engage better in the informed consent process, and, if it applies, deal more effectively with AL.

Our analysis is also consistent with the idea that we must rethink the notion of regret (MacKinnon et al., 2021). Regret, from an AL perspective, can be understood in a more complex way, but also as a feeling that can be dealt with through finding meaning as the first step toward resiliency. As such, experiencing non-judgmental psychosocial accompaniment before and after transition and detransition may relieve some unpleasant feelings. Many youths in the study discussed how they came out of this experience with a feeling of self-acceptance and personal growth—through making sense of their journey. In this sense, it is essential to develop new services or adapt existing ones to

offer a more open space for exploration and informed consent in key stages of each individual process, regardless of age, as well as to provide support to find meaning and personalized ways to deal with difficulties, all while still leaving the door open for potential retransition.

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

Annie Pullen Sansfaçon: Conceptualization; formal analysis; funding acquisition; investigation; methodology; project administration; supervision; writing – original draft. **Morgane A Gelly:** Data curation; formal analysis; investigation; writing – original draft. **Rosalie Gravel:** Data curation; formal analysis; project administration; writing – review and editing. **Denise Medico:** Conceptualization; formal analysis; methodology; supervision; writing – review and editing. **Alexandre Baril:** Conceptualization; methodology; writing – review and editing. **Francoise Susset:** Writing – review and editing. **August Paradis:** Writing – review and editing.

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DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The data that support the findings of this study are available on request from the corresponding author. The data are not publicly available due to privacy or ethical restrictions.

ETHICS STATEMENT

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