Manufactured Fear:
Transphobia in Digital Spaces

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Abstract

This paper investigates links between disinformation, digital echo chambers and transphobia on social media by examining transphobic memes found on X. A codebook analysis of 50 transphobic memes was conducted to uncover underlying themes. Those themes were disinformation, miscontextualization, and trolling, which reinforce harmful stereotypes. The research reveals that most of the content online relies on false information to normalize hate. These findings underscore the urgent need for improved digital literacy to counter online transphobia effectively in digital spaces.

Keywords: transphobia, online hate speech, disinformation, echo chambers, trolling

Introduction

The transgender community has long been the subject of societal scrutiny and institutional discrimination. From being denied access to gender-affirming healthcare to facing legal battles over identity documentation, transgender people are continually forced to defend their right to exist. These offline struggles have migrated into the digital spaces in recent years. Platforms like X, which have become major sites of public discourse, often serve as echo chambers for hate (Matarín Rodríguez-Peral, Gómez Franco, & Rodríguez-Peral Bustos, 2025).

What makes this topic personally significant to me is the way I have seen online hate directly impact the lives of transgender friends. Their existence is regularly turned into memes, jokes, and moral debates by strangers online. This normalization of cruelty, often veiled as humour, reveals an unsettling pattern of dehumanization.

Many of these hateful posts do not appear to be random. Instead, they seem to follow recurring themes and are often rooted in belief systems or ideologies that blame trans people for social decline, moral decay, or portray them as a threat to traditional values. In this context, digital spaces become more than just platforms for expression; they function as tools for reinforcing and spreading prejudice.

This paper examines a selection of 50 transphobic memes shared on X, analyzing the reasoning behind their creation with the goal of identifying the underlying beliefs and motivations behind online hate toward transgender people. By exploring these underlying reasons behind this digital hostility, the paper aims to better understand the mechanisms that fuel online transphobia.

Literature Review

Transphobic hate speech online often takes the form of memes. These memes circulate rapidly within digital echo chambers, where people sharing the same beliefs validate each other's opinions. This is an inherently human practice, people like to surround themselves with others who share similar views (Pickles, 2021, Introduction, para 1), yet it should be enjoyed with caution. On platforms like X, users are frequently exposed to content that reflects their existing beliefs and rarely encounters perspectives that challenge them. Within these spaces, memes become more than jokes; they are tools for shaping public opinion and reinforcing hostility. Matarín Rodríguez-Peral, Gómez Franco, & Rodríguez-Peral Bustos (2025) highlight how the structure of these social media platforms, particularly X, enables public and instantaneous interaction (p.1). Making hate speech viral in instances, even among users with no personal connections to the issues at hand. This suggests that hate is not merely consumed but is shaped and spread by the people using X and the algorithms behind the apps.

Díaz Ruiz and Nilsson (2023) make the point that disinformation can be spread convincingly because, in the echo chambers that share this content, the meaning of critical thinking gets misused (p. 18). This is not only harmful but truly dangerous because it means that people online believe their transphobic views are based on critical thinking when in reality, they are not.

This environment allows transphobic memes to thrive. Lim, Quach, Thaichon, Cheah, & Ting (2024) note that, when talking about social media, "...it provides fake news producers with a platform to reach a large audience within seconds" (p.660). Making the distribution of hateful content about transgender people quick and dangerously efficient. Another reason for online

hate is anonymity. It further motivates users to share aggressive or hateful content (Shams-ur-Rehman, Rehman, Saleem, & Jaffri, 2025). Additionally, especially on X, the subject of trolling becomes relevant. The platform is known for its intense trolling content, with more trolling posts shared here than on other platforms (Santos, Pimentel, & Mariano, 2023, Discussion section, para. 4).

Schäfer, Rebasso, Boyer & Planitzer (2024) argue that hate speech online can influence the way society perceives social groups by reinforcing stereotypes (p. 557). When a meme mocking transgender people is liked, reposted, and shared, the behaviour is reinforced, and the hate it carries becomes more normalized. Consequently, transphobic memes do not just express opinions, they shape how transgender people are understood. When memes repeatedly depict transgender people as mentally ill or dangerous, they create and solidify harmful public narratives.

This repetition matters. It trains audiences to associate trans identities with either a threat or a disorder, which then translates into real-world discrimination. Matarín Rodríguez-Peral, Gómez Franco, & Rodríguez-Peral Bustos (2025) emphasize that specific online portrayals of people have long-lasting effects, particularly when they go unchallenged (pp.3-4), which in the X echo chambers, often is the case. These negative portrayals contribute to social exclusion and legitimize prejudice.

What makes transphobic memes dangerously harmful is how they mask violence with humour. Hate is framed as entertainment. When memes frame transgender people as symbols of moral decline or mental illness, that narrative becomes embedded in popular culture. Making it easier for harmful beliefs to be shared without having to fear pushback. Santos,

Pimentel, & Mariano (2023) state that "…Online trolling can be perceived as a low-risk and high-rewarding aggressive behaviour", people can use their anonymity to get satisfaction from voicing their aggressive tendencies without fear of real-life repercussions for themselves (Explaining Online Trolling: Social Learning and General Aggression Model section, para. 2).

In these contexts, memes function as a form of social currency, encouraging users to participate in hate without acknowledging that these actions have an impact on real-life transgender people.

Methods

To gather and analyze the information included in this paper, a codebook was created. In it, 50 transphobic memes were collected, coded, and analyzed. Said memes were analyzed with the intent of better understanding the reasons behind their creation with the goal of identifying the underlying beliefs and motivations behind online hate toward transgender people.

Sources

100% of memes used in this codebook were collected from X. A burner account was created in order to search from an account that was not affected by the X algorithm yet. Searching for the hashtags #Transgenderban, #Transgenderism and #Childabusetransgender provided the content used for this paper. Those hashtags were chosen because they appeared to be the most effective ones that led to the side of X which opposed transgender people overall. It proved to be most efficient to use the image search on X to find a meme and then search the comment section of said meme for responses, which were most commonly also

memes. It can be noted that many memes were repetitive and finding 50 different ones took multiple tries. During the collecting process memes in video format, mostly GIFs, appeared next to picture format memes. Those video-format memes were not chosen for this paper because capturing their essence in a screenshot was not possible.

Codebook Construction and Coding Process

The 50 memes were chosen because they fit the overall topic of hate against trans people and then screenshotted and inserted into a Google doc. The memes were not sorted in any specific kind of order but rather included in the order they were found while doing the research. In the initial coding round, the coders focused on the first 10 memes copy-pasted into the Google doc. The first round of coding included two coders who were chosen because they did not have much prior information about the topic. This was to try and keep the coders as unbiased as possible before entering the topic. The codes used in this initial first round were Misinformation, Disinformation, and Child Abuse and they turned out to be faulty codes because the required 66% or above of intercoder reliability wasn't reached. Unfortunately, the exact number of intercoder reliability has been lost in the process of writing this paper, which is acknowledged as a limitation of the work. The desired 66% of intercoder reliability wasn’t reached mainly because the Child Abuse code got misinterpreted by the coders, so in the second round of coding the code Child Abuse was changed into Indoctrination. This led to the next round of coding, also done by the same coders, to reach the desired 66% or above. In this round, the intercoder reliability reached 100%, as both coders sorted the 10 memes into the same categories. Following this success, the remaining 40 memes were coded by one of the

original coders. Another restructuring of the codebook happened afterward since during a conversation with my professor, it became clear that the code misinformation had been misinterpreted and could not be used. This led to yet another round of coding that the coder had to do, this time with the codes Miscontextualization, Disinformation, and Indoctrination.

In a last turn of events, the code Indoctrination was changed to Trolling. This happened because Indoctrination turned out to be too vague of a code. Using these final codes was a success. In this final round of coding 14 memes were categorized as miscontextualization (n=14), 23 memes were categorized as disinformation (n=23) and 13 memes were considered to be trolling (n=13). Though coding the 50 chosen memes into the three categories turned out to be an eventual success, it should be mentioned that due to the frequent change of codes, my coder spent a significant amount of time with the memes and by the last round did not look at them with fresh eyes anymore. There is a possibility for bias on my coder's end.

Below are 3 examples of memes, one per code:

Figure 1 Trolling

Figure 2 Disinformation

Figure 3 Miscontextualization

Findings

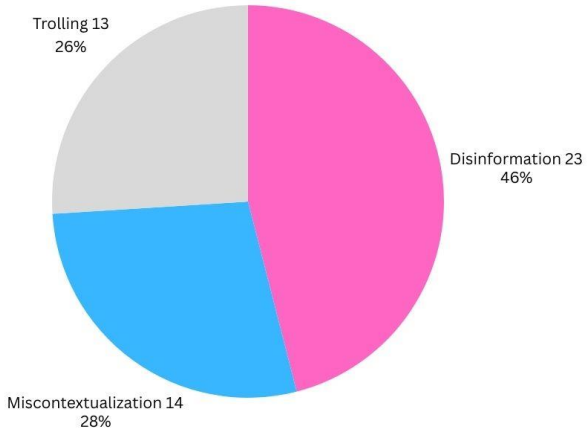


Figure 4 Pie chart of coding results

The analysis of the 50 transphobic memes collected from X revealed valuable insights into the nature and distribution of online hate speech targeting transgender people. In the final coding round, these memes were sorted into three distinct categories: disinformation, miscontextualization, and trolling. The coding process was iterative and involved several revisions to ensure that the meanings of the codes were understood by the coder and allowed them to provide clear categorization.

In the final round of coding, 46% of memes were classified as disinformation, leading to an n size of 23 (n=23). This indicates that nearly half of the sampled content was seen as portraying false information or distorted messages regarding transgender individuals. The high amount of disinformation in the data suggests that meme creators rely on fabricated or

manipulated data to reinforce transphobic narratives. This reliance on lies allows harmful stereotypes to grow and normalizes the spread of misleading information on digital platforms.

Miscontextualization accounted for 28% of the total sample, leading to an n size of 14 (n=14). These memes were found to take genuine facts or images and present them out of context, twisting the original meaning to create narratives that support anti-trans viewpoints. The frequency of miscontextualized memes implies that creators may be using selective editing to mislead their audience. This category reflects an attempt to manipulate context, thereby shaping public understanding in a way that reinforces bias against transgender people.

The remaining 26% of memes were coded as trolling, leading to an n size of 13 (n=13). Trolling, as used by the creators, involves deliberate provocation through hateful or aggressive content that is intended to provoke reactions and engagement from online communities. The fact that trolling accounts for a significant portion of the memes studied suggests that aggressive behaviour and intentional provocation are rewarded within these digital environments. High numbers of likes, shares, and comments contribute to the normalization of transgender hate online.

In summary, the distribution of the memes, 46% disinformation, 28% miscontextualization, and 26% trolling, demonstrates that transphobic messages on X are multifaceted. The data indicates that false information is the dominant strategy used in these memes, while miscontextualization and trolling also play significant roles in shaping harmful narratives.

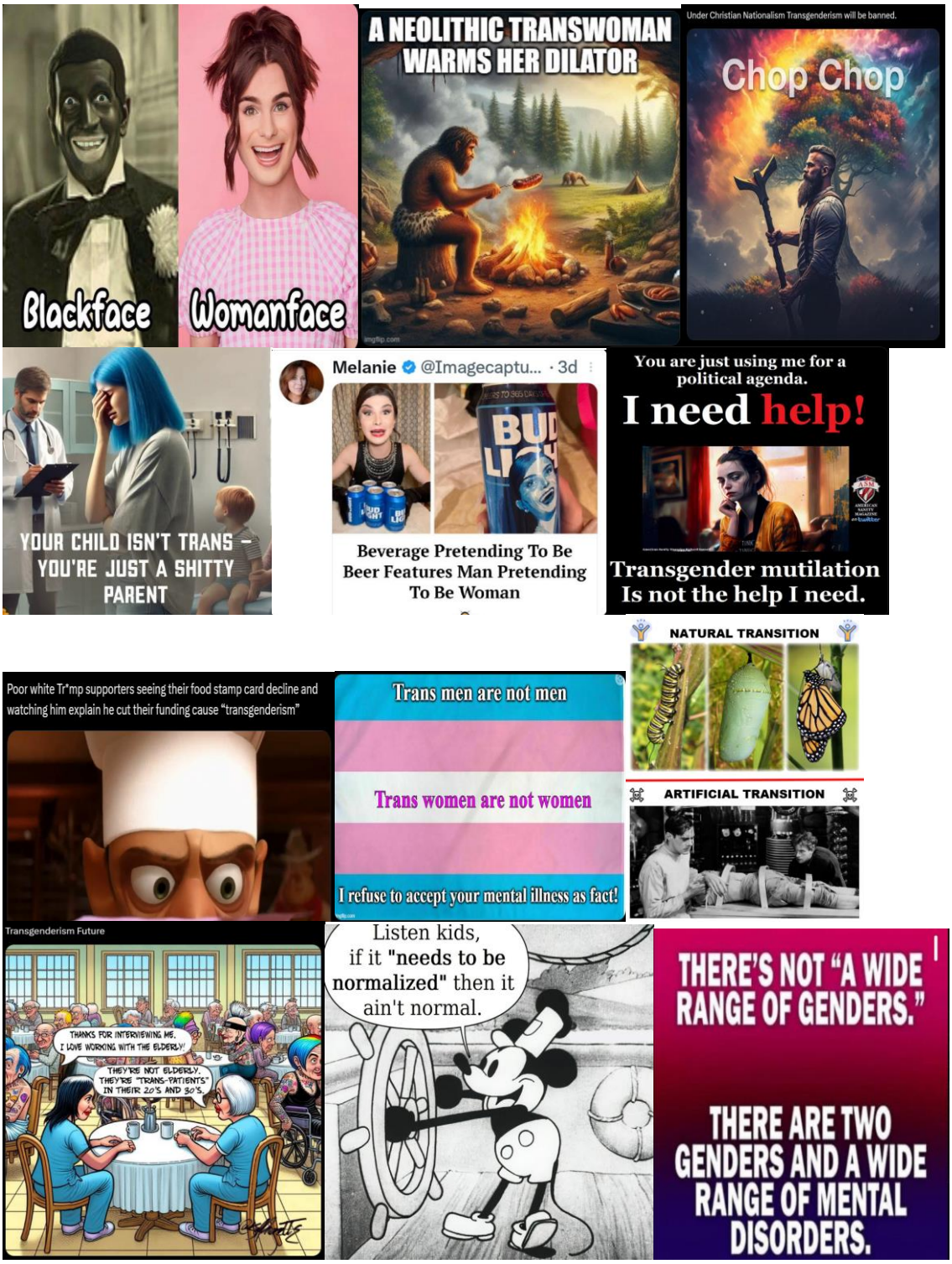
Conclusions

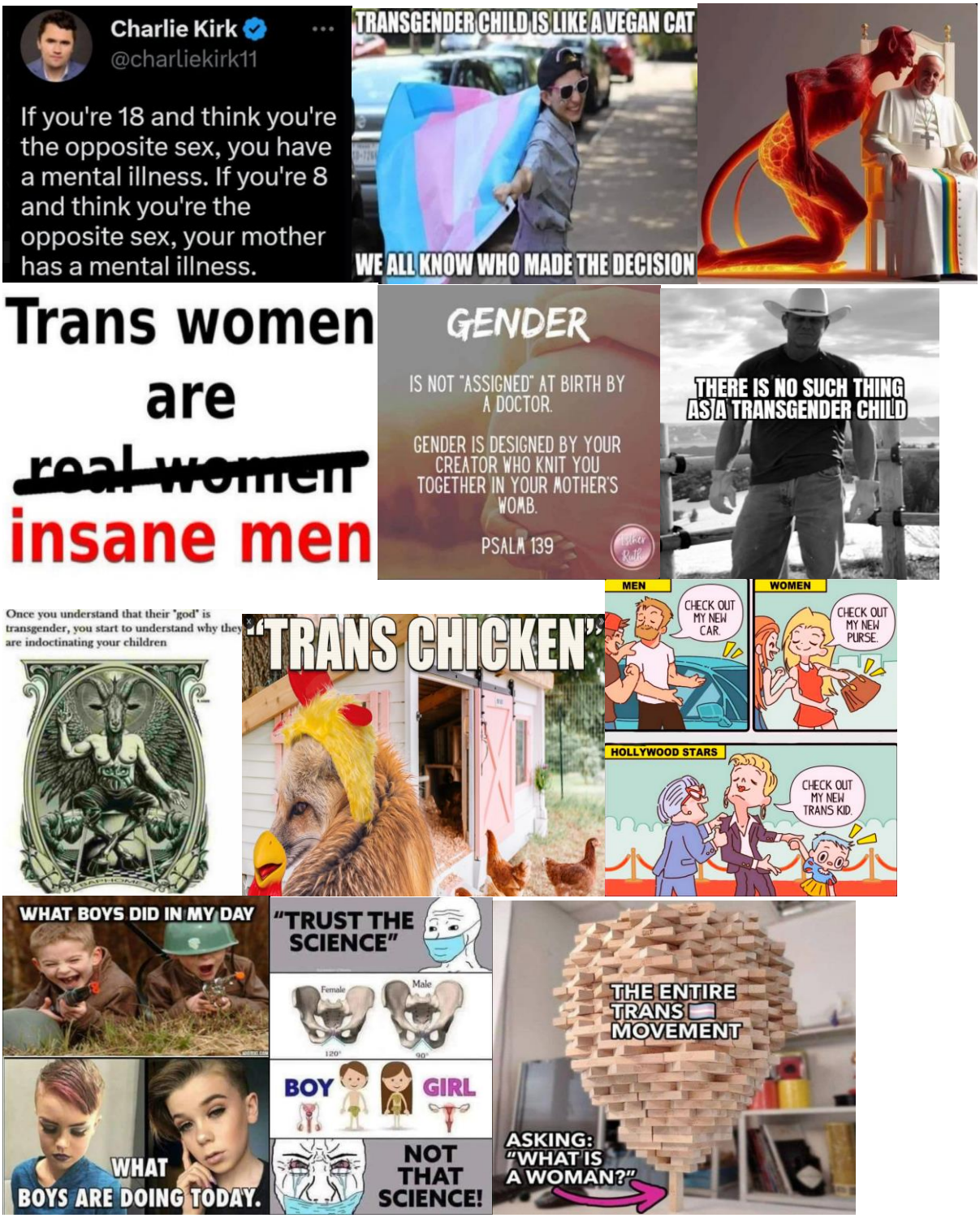
This study reveals how transphobic memes on X serve as powerful tools for spreading disinformation, manipulating context, and provoking hostility. The categorization into disinformation (46%), miscontextualization (28%), and trolling (26%) illustrates the varied yet strategic ways in which hate is packaged and circulated online. These memes are not isolated jokes; they are part of a broader ecosystem that normalizes transphobia and contributes to the dehumanization of transgender individuals. By disguising hate as humour or information, meme creators engage in a process that reinforces societal bias, fuels misinformation, and amplifies emotional harm, not only to those directly targeted but to broader trans communities witnessing this content.

The findings of this paper stress the urgent need for better public awareness about how digital hate operates. Understanding the intentions and mechanisms behind these memes is the first step in countering their impact. Media literacy must be taught, so people can counter the online hate with true critical thinking skills. Future research could explore methods to potentially disrupt these cycles of hate. Ultimately, this study highlights that online hate is not just a matter of speech, it's a matter of harm, with real-world consequences that demand collective action.

Appendix

50 memes:




Charlie Kirk
@charliekirk11
If you're 18 and think you're the opposite sex, you have a mental illness. If you're 8 and think you're the opposite sex, your mother has a mental illness.
TRANSGENDER CHILD IS LIKE A VEGAN CAT
WE ALL KNOW WHO MADE THE DECISION
Trans women are
real women
insane men
GENDER
IS NOT "ASSIGNED" AT BIRTH BY A DOCTOR.
GENDER IS DESIGNED BY YOUR CREATOR WHO KNIT YOU TOGETHER IN YOUR MOTHER'S WOMB.
PSALM 139
THERE IS NO SUCH THING AS A TRANSGENDER CHILD
Once you understand that their "god" is transgender, you start to understand why they are indoctinating your children
"TRANS CHICKEN"
MEN
CHECK OUT MY NEW CAR.
WOMEN
CHECK OUT MY NEW PURSE.
HOLLYWOOD STARS
CHECK OUT MY NEW TRANS KID.
WHAT BOYS DID IN MY DAY
WHAT BOYS ARE DOING TODAY.
"TRUST THE SCIENCE"
Female
Male
BOY
GIRL
NOT THAT SCIENCE!
THE ENTIRE TRANS MOVEMENT
ASKING: "WHAT IS A WOMAN?"

Hard headed woman
@Iamahardhead
Flood
It
Again

There was a time in America when you didn't have to worry about your parents shoving synthetic hormones down your throat & cutting your dick off.

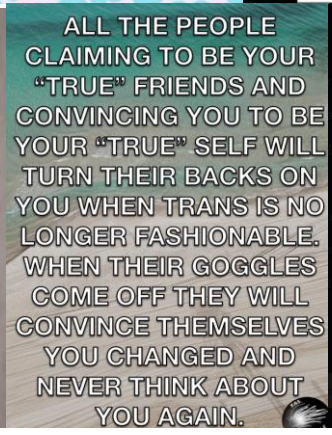
Castration Fantasies
The vast majority of men and boys who transition to women are forced to transition by their mothers.

THE SLIPPERY SLOPE
That's all we wanted. Thanks (Normal Gays
LET US GET MARRIED
BAKE OUR CAKE
USE OUR PRONOUNS
ALLOW MINORS TO DANCE FOR US IN DRAG
LET TEACHERS CHOOSE YOUR KIDS GENDER
Normalize Pedophilia

THERE IS NO SUCH THING AS A TRANS CHILD

NOTICE THE DIFFERENCE!
REAL WOMAN FAKE WOMAN

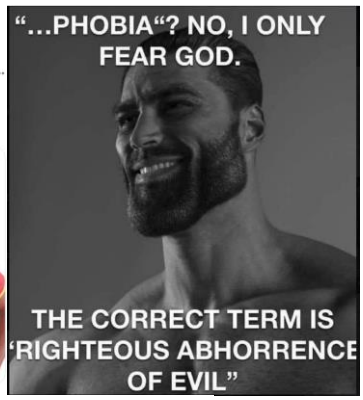
Transgender
When being a faggot just doesn't get you the attention you want.


ALL THE PEOPLE CLAIMING TO BE YOUR "TRUE" FRIENDS AND CONVINCING YOU TO BE YOUR "TRUE" SELF WILL TURN THEIR BACKS ON YOU WHEN TRANS IS NO LONGER FASHIONABLE. WHEN THEIR GOGGLES COME OFF THEY WILL CONVINCE THEMSELVES YOU CHANGED AND NEVER THINK ABOUT YOU AGAIN.

transwomen be like...
"Yes I am a real Ferrari, bigot."

Medicated and ruined for life.
Loves dressing up as a princess
Transhausen mom sees him as her daughter
Little boy playing just pretend

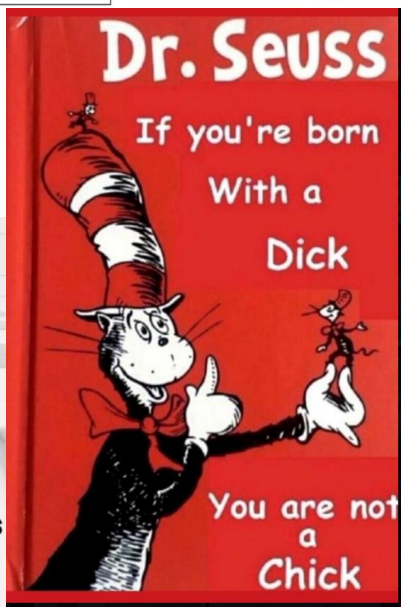
Joel Berry
@JoelWBerry
Subscribe
Women need to start refusing to play when a trans player is on the field. It's only a matter of time before a woman gets killed from this.
0:39
Santos


"...PHOBIA"? NO, I ONLY FEAR GOD.
THE CORRECT TERM IS "RIGHTEOUS ABHORRENCE OF EVIL"

How transgender ideology works
This is Sarah. She is a boy.
We know this because Sarah told us.
Sarah now needs to become a boy, even though she already is one. This will require lots of drugs, painful surgery and lifelong medication.
As a boy, she cannot be allowed to have girl-parts like breasts or a vagina.
If she doesn't transition, she will probably kill herself.
If you don't agree with this, you're an evil bigot.
This is Norman. She is a woman. A lesbian woman.
We know this because Norman told us. Frequently.
Norman does not need to do anything, because she already is a woman.
She can have boy-parts like a penis and a beard.
If other lesbians don't find Norman attractive they are evil bigots.
If you don't agree with this, you're an evil bigot too.

if you were any good at being trans, people wouldn't misgender you.

They are NOT TRANS WOMEN, GIRLS, MEN, OR BOYS!
They ARE ~TRANSVESTITES ~ Biological males & females playing dress-up.


Dr. Seuss
If you're born With a Dick
You are not a Chick

transwomen be like...
"Yes I am a real Ferrari, bigot."

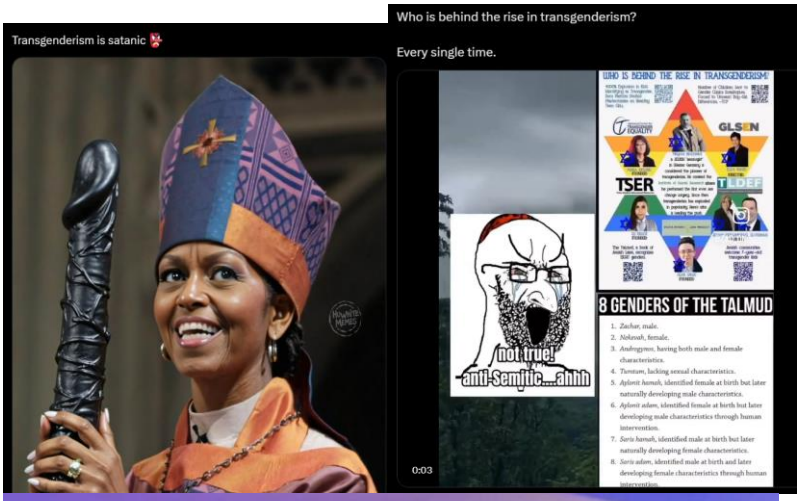
WOMEN, CHILDREN, GAY PEOPLE, PARENTS, DECENCY, SOCIETY

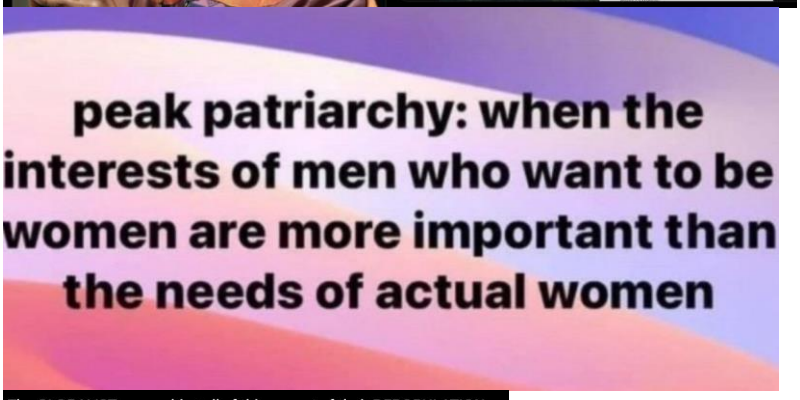
"IT STARTS WITH
PRONOUNS
AND ENDS WITH
A SIX FOOT MALE
GETTING THEIR
COCK OUT IN THE
FEMALE
CHANGING ROOM"

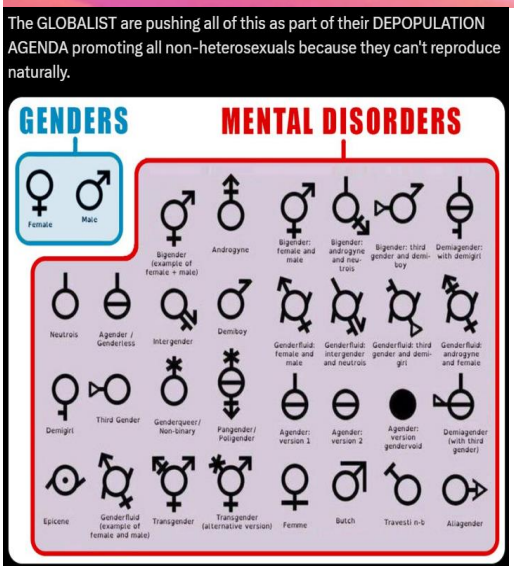
Thank you for confirming that transgenderism is a doctrine of demons.

CapitanH... @ElCapitanH... · 6h
Take that, ladies! The boys are coming in your restrooms whether you like it or not.
GIF

PIPE DOWN, TRANNY


Transgenderism is satanic
Who is behind the rise in transgenderism?
Every single time.
not true!
anti-Semitic...ahhh
0:03
WHO IS BEHIND THE RISE IN TRANSGENDERISM
GLSEN
TSER
TDEF
8 GENDERS OF THE TALMUD
1. Zachar, male.
2. Nekevah, female.
3. Androgynos, having both male and female characteristics.
4. Tumtum, lacking sexual characteristics.
5. Aylonit hamah, identified female at birth but later naturally developing male characteristics.
6. Aylonit adam, identified female at birth but later developing male characteristics through human intervention.
7. Saris hamah, identified male at birth but later naturally developing female characteristics.
8. Saris adam, identified male at birth and later developing female characteristics through human


peak patriarchy: when the interests of men who want to be women are more important than the needs of actual women


The GLOBALIST are pushing all of this as part of their DEPOPULATION AGENDA promoting all non-heterosexuals because they can't reproduce naturally.
GENDERS
MENTAL DISORDERS
Female
Male
Bigender (example of female + male)
Androgyne
Bigender: female and male
Bigender: androgyne and neutrois
Bigender: third gender and demi-boy
Demiagender: with demigirl
Neutrois
Agender / Genderless
Intergender
Demiboy
Genderfluid: female and male
Genderfluid: intergender and neutrois
Genderfluid: third gender and demi-girl
Genderfluid: androgyne and female
Demigirl
Third Gender
Genderqueer/ Non-binary
Pangender/ Polygender
Agender: version 1
Agender: version 2
Agender: version gendervoid
Demiagender (with third gender)
Epicene
Genderfluid (example of female and male)
Transgender
Transgender (alternative version)
Femme
Butch
Travesti n-b
Aliagender

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