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“PICKING MY BATTLES”: EXAMINING THE EXPERIENCES OF GENDER NON-
BINARY IDENTITIES WITHIN THE U.S.

MIKA RAYLEN RICHARDS

95 Pages

As there is limited research on non-binary individuals, researching the non-binary experience was essential to normalizing their existence. The qualitative research focuses on 12 non-binary individuals who were at different stages of being out. A thematic analysis helped in understanding multifaceted responses from the participants. The data showed that non-binary individuals experience invalidation each day. Heteronormative societies and individuals tend to only see a binary within gender identity and shape their language around it, whether it be from their refusal of learning or a lack of knowledge of the problem. This failure to acknowledge non-binary individuals influenced many of their androgynous appearances, and their communicative patterns with cisgender and transgender individuals.

KEYWORDS: Non-Binary; Gender Spectrum; Erasure; Language; U.S.; Transgender

“PICKING MY BATTLES”: EXAMINING THE EXPERIENCES OF GENDER NON-
BINARY IDENTITIES WITHIN THE U.S.

MIKA RAYLEN RICHARDS

A Thesis Submitted in Partial
Fulfillment of the Requirements
for the Degree of

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“PICKING MY BATTLES”: EXAMINING THE EXPERIENCES OF GENDER NON-
BINARY IDENTITIES WITHIN THE U.S.

MIKA RAYLEN RICHARDS

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CHAPTER I: INTRODUCTION OF PROBLEM AND REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Introduction of the Problem

Within heteronormative societies, gender tends to fall within the binary system, rather than within the spectrum. Heteronormative societies discriminate against and ostracize individuals within the transgender community, especially non-binary individuals. Recent political events, backed by religious groups, have sparked conversations based on the transgender community, such as how the Trump administration has tried to redefine gender to only be anatomical, rather than sociological or psychological. Sex and gender are different and should not be confused as synonymous. Browning (2018) states, “The Trump administration’s ongoing attacks on transgender people would radically change the legal definition of ‘gender’ to ‘a biological, immutable condition determined by genitalia at birth.’ Transgender people, therefore, would not be covered under federal law.” Redefining gender will allow insurance companies to further discriminate against these individuals by refusing to cover these individuals’ surgeries and hormone treatments.

Non-binary research is important to conduct, as it can increase recognition and understanding among the ostracized community. This research is important to me, as I identify as non-binary, which means I do not identify as either a man or a woman, but rather within the grey space. As an individual who uses “they”/“them” pronouns, I quickly discovered that people felt uncomfortable around me because they were not able to put me in a box to define who I was. While the majority of people I come across wish to respect my pronouns, there are others who have purposefully misgendered me within the binary system to make a statement that I cannot identify within the grey space. While this does happen, it can be explained by different perspectives of one’s own truth. Individuals who want to use “they”/“them” pronouns often fail,

despite their best intentions. When I am misgendered by these individuals, they immediately apologize, correct their mistake, and speak slower to insure they do not make the same mistake.

This research study aims to explain the many differences between sex and gender, discuss heteronormativity, and describe how it creates an ‘othering’ environment. There are barriers that would be beneficial for individuals to understand, as they prevent individuals from using correct pronouns directed at individuals in the transgender community. The barriers include religion, politics, media, resistance to change, and linguistic concerns including linguistic shifts and pronouns. This study will explore how non-binary individuals experience validation when using neutral pronouns, how non-binary individuals’ appearances impact pronoun usage directed at them, and how language creates a barrier to individuals who identify as non-binary. Finally, it is important to note that throughout this study, I will be referring to every author as, “they,” to avoid assuming their preferred gender pronouns.

Defining the Binary and Spectrum

Heteronormative societies tend to focus on majority norms, such as individuals whose gender identity match their anatomical sex, though these norms may lead to confusion surrounding minority groups. Sex and gender are not synonymous and should not be referred to as such. While non-binary individuals fall under the transgender category, their gender identity is less understood by heteronormative societies, since their identity does not fall under the binary male or female.

Sex versus Gender

Heteronormative societies tend to group gender and sex into the same category and use them synonymously; however, gender and sex are two different concepts. Sex is biological in nature, while gender is psychological. Sex includes an individual’s anatomy, such as male or

female genitalia, while gender includes the individual's identification of masculinity or femininity. Cisgender individuals are those whose sex and gender are equivalent (Jourian, 2015). Binary thinking is when cisgender individuals are believed to be the norm. It occurs when society thinks in exclusively masculine or negative terms, when, in fact, there is a range or variety of behaviors. Non-binary is the spectrum within the binary, where individuals may exist on a range between so-called masculinity and femininity.

Jourian (2015) explains that non-binary individuals are constantly faced with genderism/cissexism, or the belief that there are only two genders, which relate to the sex an individual was assigned at birth. Non-binary individuals also face dyadism, which is the belief that "there are only two 'natural' and 'biological' sexes, male and female" (p. 17). Within heteronormative societies, gender binary, or cisgender, is dominant, though this is restrictive for individuals whose gender identity does not match their biological sex. Mardell (2016) points out that sex is a social construct used to label individuals and reduce dissonance. While physical anatomy is not a construct, the association of male and female to body parts is. Individuals who do not fit within the binary identify with terms such as genderqueer, gender nonconforming, gender fluid, transgender, non-binary, or a series of other identities (Austin, 2016). It is important to note that gender identification is dependent on the individual's preference; therefore, it is vital to ask them what their preferred pronouns and identifications are. The gender binary is a perspective that denies the spectrum of gender identity, which results in individuals claiming that gender and sex are synonymous. Ignorance of LGBTQ issues, especially transgender and gender nonconforming matters, results in damaging stigmas (Baez et al., 2017) and puts transgender individuals in dangerous situations. Kunalanka, Weiner, Munroe, Goldberg, and Gardner (2017) state, "TGNC [transgender nonconforming] individuals are thought to

experience minority stress – the stress or state that results from being a part of a socially marginalized group—which can have an impact on psychological health” (p. 890). Society has ostracized non-binary individuals, though transgender issues have recently been receiving attention in politics and medicine (Richards et al, 2016). Gender inclusivity is necessary to reduce ostracism of individuals who fall outside of the binary.

Self-image (Smolak & Stein, 2010) is a reoccurring issue among transgender and non-binary individuals, because they are going against societal norms. When an individual is misgendered, there is a psychological toll that is difficult to combat (McLemore, 2015). Gender labels can be problematic when individuals assume they know another person’s gender. The previous author’s research on the psychological toll of being mislabeled suggests that it could decrease depression, anxiety, and stress among transgender individuals, though asking someone’s preferred pronouns is not a common occurrence within heteronormative societies. Within Duxbury’s (2014) article about cultural constructs, the author states that individuals within minority groups who go against social norms have a history of causing controversy, such as after WWII, when society ostracized against women, racial minorities, and men who did not meet the standard norm of masculinity. “Women went back to the kitchen, racial minorities were taught their place and were pretty much erased from popular culture, and any man who dared to challenge masculine norms of sexuality was, at best, suspect and probably communist” (p.158).

While studies by Jourian (2015) and Wagner, Kunkel, Compton (2016) have clearly differentiated between gender and sex, there are still definitional gaps that future research must address. Anatomy should not be the only factor to determine an individual’s sex, as there are physical changes that transgender and non-binary individuals may undergo to acquire a body that reflects their true self. For example, medical advancements provide transgender individuals

options for hormone therapy and surgeries. However, it is vital to understand that not every transgender individual can afford or even want the hormones and surgeries, which in no way invalidates their identity. It is important to differentiate between sex and gender, though it is equally necessary to understand the impact heteronormativity has on the misunderstandings between the two.

Heteronormativity

Herz and Johansson (2015) and Wagner, Kunkel, Compton (2016) describe heteronormativity as individuals viewing society in a scope of heterosexual relationships. They state that heteronormativity no longer refers just to sexuality because that scope is too small. The term new heteronormativity refers to social and cultural aspects of normativity.

Heteronormativity refers to individuals conforming with societal norms within their culture.

Heteronormativity is the societal standard that individuals assume people are or should be cisgender, heterosexual, or monogamous. Heteronormative thinking suggests that individuals should conform to the norms of society, as it proposes that those standards are morally correct.

Othering is a side-effect of heteronormativity and creates barriers for LGBTQ individuals.

Heteronormativity creates a platform for individuals to discriminate and demean those who do not identify within the heteronormative category. It is important to note that there is not a term for non-heteronormativity. This suggests that everything will be compared to heteronormativity because it is the standard for comparisons. For example, Mardell's (2016) book *ABC's of LGBT* exposes the need to educate heteronormative societies, as many heteronormative individuals do not know what each of the LGBTQ letters stood for, which results in their misinterpretation. Controversy within the LGBTQ community sparks around the term 'gender nonconforming,' as it others genderqueer and non-binary individuals by claiming

they are second to gender-conforming individuals, otherwise known as cisgender individuals. While LGBTQ members disagree on the acceptability of the term gender-nonconforming, many individuals on the spectrum do choose to identify as such. This demonstrates that heteronormativity dominates society.

Heteronormative individuals may not understand, or even consider, that transgender individuals do not always fall within the supposed dichotomy of so-called femininity and masculinity. Transgender is an umbrella term for individuals whose sex and gender do not reflect one another. Non-binary is a part of the transgender community; however, not all non-binary individuals identify as transgender. Non-binary individuals within the United States struggle gaining acceptance, resulting in higher suicide rates, higher rates of poverty, and more barriers when receiving necessary medical care (James et al., 2016; Nagoshi, Hohn, & Nagoshi, 2017; Richards et al., 2016). Additionally, even though there have been attempts to create more gender inclusive language, the dominant culture rarely utilizes it, resulting in non-binary individuals being misclassified (Darr & Kibby, 2016; McLemore, 2015).

Transgender versus Non-Binary

People within the lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender community have various categories for expressing and labeling identities. In general, LGBTQ is an umbrella term that provides a foundation for characterizing identities. Gender and sexuality are not interchangeable, just as sex and gender are not interchangeable. Labeling has become an essential part of society to reduce dissonance among individuals, even though it leads to aversive behaviors aimed toward minorities (Duxbury, 2014). This section will use LGBTQ to discuss transgender and non-binary identities. Some letters of LGBTQ, such as the L, G, and B, include sexuality, though the discussion will surround gender and expression, not sexuality.

Not everyone who exists outside of the binary will identify as non-binary (Factor & Rothblum, 2008). Labels help explain and understand, though they can be problematic when individuals mislabel another. According to Mardell (2016), some individuals in heteronormative societies use pronoun usage as a weapon against non-binary and transgender individuals. Pronouns are a major aspect of gender identification because they affirm and reinforce acceptance past the gender binary. Individuals outside of the binary may use “he”/“him,” “she”/“her,” “they”/“them,” or “ze”/“zir” pronouns; or they may substitute their pronouns for their name or their initials. While there are neutral pronouns, “none have seemed to work their way into mainstream English” (Darr & Kibby, 2016, p. 75).

As previously discussed, transgender is an umbrella term for individuals who are not cisgender. Non-binary, gender-nonconforming, and genderqueer each are labels that express disassociation from the cisgender identity (Nourafshan, 2017); however, labels are subjective to each individual in the LGBTQ community, so asking what they identify with is the only way to solidify and affirm their gender.

Ehrensaft (2012) discusses the differences between true self and false self. Transgender individuals navigate between their true self and false self to cope with their reality. Ehrensaft (2012) defines true self as an individual presenting themselves the way they identify on the inside. The author defines false self as the identity individuals showed to be perceived as more socially acceptable. The previous author found that transgender individuals constantly monitor their identity depending on the situation they are in to protect themselves from discrimination and ostracism. According to Kavalanka, Weiner, Munroe, Goldberg, and Gardner (2017), transgender individuals are more at risk for depression and suicide attempts than heteronormative individuals, so monitoring their identity based on their surroundings is necessary. According to

the previous authors, “A study of more than 6,000 trans adults reported a lifetime suicide attempt rate of 41%” (p. 889). Another statistic shows that people in the LGBTQ community are targets for both mental and physical risks because those surrounding them do not understand their identities. Gibbs and Goldbach (2015) state, “25% to 32% of transgender late adolescents and young adults have had a previous suicide attempt” (p. 472). Transgender individuals may present a false self when they face individuals with conservative, heteronormative values. In result, transgender individuals may refuse to come out as the gender they identify as, in order to appear heteronormative. Hegemonic masculinity and femininity plays a role in how society believes individuals should act, which is restricting and presents problematic standards.

Gender Fluidity or Category

Since research suggested that gender and sex were not synonymous, it allowed an opening for research on being either fluid or a category. To understand gender fluidity, research must target masculinity and femininity within heteronormative societies, as well as the stereotypes surrounding their roles. Additionally, understanding gender fluidity versus it being a category requires researchers to explore the gender spectrum.

Hegemonic Masculinity and Femininity

Hegemonic masculinity and femininity refers to the way society views gender roles. In conservative, western cultures, men must display masculinity and women femininity. Masculinity is typically viewed as dominant over femininity. Herz and Johansson (2015) discuss the concept of heteronormativity:

The concept of heteronormativity is sometimes used to describe a body of lifestyle norms as well as how people tend to reproduce distinct and complementary genders (man and woman). Like similar though more general concepts such as hegemonic masculinity

and homosociality, heteronormativity works as a tool to analyze systems of oppression and contributes to an understanding of how more general gender structures and hierarchies are constructed in society. But when it is applied directly to everyday life, there is sometimes a tendency to include more and more aspects of gender and lifestyle issues under the heading of heteronormativity. As such, the concept works as a critique not only of gender divisions and hierarchies but also of more specific ways of organizing family, sexuality, and lifestyle. (p. 1011)

In other words, there are inequalities between masculinity and femininity when it comes to family, sexuality, and lifestyle. Generally, masculinity is perceived as strong and unemotional. On the other hand, society views femininity as weak, maternal, and emotional. While there is a shift of perspectives within society in which people are more open-minded regarding gender roles, stereotypes still take place. Bendall (2014) suggests that individuals view gender roles as constraining. Society's need for men to enact masculine behaviors and women to enact feminine behaviors becomes toxic, as they keep individuals "trapped in a heteronormative mindset" (p. 261). Society's need to define individuals based on their supposed masculinity and femininity is problematic, as it puts individuals in a limited box and allows for discrimination when individuals do not enact the specified gender roles and perspectives of gender and sex classifications. Gender roles allow for toxic masculinity and femininity as they "work to reinforce stereotypes, particularly concerning the link between gender and biological sex" (p. 261). Stereotypes that "stress such relations are, in fact, far from natural" (p. 261).

Stereotyping gender identities is a problematic behavior that occurs when individuals place others into categories, based on their own understanding of the world. Generally, people assume femininity directly correlates with women, while masculinity correlates with men

(Sczesny, Spreemann, & Stahlberg, 2006). Blondeel et al. (2018) argue that western, heteronormative countries only perceive two genders, man and woman, and gender expressions, masculine and feminine, as valid. When men portray feminine characteristics, society tends to believe they are gay and when women portray masculine characteristics, society decides they are lesbians. However, such labels are rarely just labels. They are judgements of people's worth and character. False labels can be demeaning and create a harmful stigma surrounding minority groups. "This stigma is incorporated by a society and enacted by its institutions" (Sczesny et al., p. 29). Transgender individuals desire for society to perceive them as their correct gender identity. However, it is not a commonality for heteronormative individuals to ask about another's preferred pronoun usage. Additionally, heteronormative societies tend to categorize individuals on the binary spectrum. Society rarely considered individuals who fall outside of the binary, though when they are, people have trouble accepting their gender without knowing their anatomy.

Gender expression is the outward physical appearance that an individual displays (Aube, Norcliffe, & Koestner, 1995). Clothing, nonverbal behavior, accessories, and the way one speaks are each aspects of gender expression. Individuals use gender expression as a tool for understanding the gender of others. However, gender expression does not always reflect gender identification (McKittrick, 2015). While gender expression may be more masculine, feminine, or androgynous, an individual may identify with a gender that differs from their expression. When gender expression differs from gender identity, confusion occurs with individuals who do not understand gender fluidity, causing discrimination, ostracism, and marginalization (Nagoshi, Hohn, & Nagoshi, 2017). If an individual looks masculine, the person with a low experience of gender diversity may assume that the individual is either a man or a tomboy. For example, if a

person born with female anatomy has short hair and looks androgynous, an outsider will most likely try to figure out if they are either a male or female. Entertaining the idea of a gender that is different from one's biological sex is uncommon within heteronormative societies.

Non-binary individuals may struggle with hegemonic masculinity and femininity. Society tends to ostracize non-binary individuals. By doing so, there are misconceptions about masculine and feminine categories non-binary individuals must fit in. Bem (1995) states that removing the dichotomous category of masculinity and femininity is currently a goal that cannot be achieved; however, they suggest that, instead of eliminating the categories, “we let a thousand categories of sex/gender/desire begin to bloom in any and all fluid and permeable configurations and, through that very proliferation, that we thereby undo...the privileged status of the two-and-only-two that are currently treated as normal and natural” (p. 330). This suggests that, presently, every person has both masculine and feminine qualities, though society tells individuals which gender role they must fit into. It is important to note that gender is fluid and should not be categorized into only dichotomous relations, as it is a hasty generalization and is a harmful logical fallacy.

Gender identity and expression relates to acceptance of one's gender and pronoun usage. Gender identity closely ties to gender expression within heteronormative societies, and it is difficult for people to disengage from the way they were educated. Gender roles (García-Vega, Rico, & Fernández, 2017) have become a dominant part of society, which has influenced in-groups and out-groups in social situations. A lack of willingness to understand those who differ from societal norms increases discomfort of both parties during social interactions. Ignorance of gender diversity affects interactions in multiple ways, such as overcompensation or avoidance, which impacts the individual's acceptance of gender and correct pronoun usage.

Gender is Fluid

Meerwijk and Sevelius (2017) suggest that transgender individuals must be included within more current research to understand how location and demographics impact the severity of inclusion. Additionally, not all non-binary and gender-queer individuals identify as transgender, so there are tensions within research that must be resolved. Heteronormative societies, such as the United States, categorize gender into either male or female. Non-binary individuals experience discrimination in heteronormative societies, where individuals decide gender is a category, rather than being fluid (Blondeel et al., 2018). The concept of gender being a dichotomy rather than a spectrum is exclusionary and gives individuals a false sense of dualism. Mardell (2016) describes a spectrum as the gray spaces between the two ends of any binary system. Spectrums apply to both sexuality and gender, which proves there is a lot of ambiguity and misunderstandings of those who do not fall into the category of heteronormative.

Gender fluidity is more diverse than even the categories of transgender and non-binary individuals. Other individuals who fall within the binary spectrum identify as bigender, demigender, genderfluid, gender nonconforming, gender diverse, intergender, maxigender, polygender, trigender, and genderqueer (Mardell, 2016). There are multitudes of gender identities that diverge from the binary. When considering gender, it is necessary to remain aware of diversity within the gender spectrum. As discussed previously, gender and sexuality are two different topics, and not even all members of the LGBTQ community recognize individuals on the gender spectrum. With key terms defined and clarifying that gender is fluid, there are multiple barriers to non-binary inclusivity.

Barriers to Non-Binary Inclusivity

The exclusion of non-binary individuals is prevalent in today's society. Many religions reject the idea of gender fluidity; the movement towards inclusion is too often a political statement, with the media as a tool to reduce its validity; and the English language has not yet incorporated gender inclusivity. While language changes to fit the reality of current times, the shift towards singular "they" is slow changing.

Religion

While some individuals are able to maintain both their religious and sexual/gender identities simultaneously (Fuist, 2016), religion has added a barrier to overcome for LGBTQ individuals. Religion gives some individuals the safety to declare what is wrong within society based on their own comfortability. A controversial topic is whether transgender individuals should use the gender of bathrooms of the gender with which they identify. However, there is a misconception that transgender individuals are simply boys or girls pretending to the opposite gender. Dangerous misconceptions result in stigmas, narrowmindedness, and an increase of targeted violence. For example, Hayes and Nagle (2016) explain narrowmindedness as a platform for increased violence. Individuals who are egocentric and experienced little diversity will generally condemn the differences of others because it makes them uncomfortable (Hayes & Nagle, 2016; Gudykunst & Nishida, 1984). Mindfulness is necessary to develop as it increases understanding of minority groups and eliminates dominant-subordinate tensions. Without mindfulness, individuals outside of the LGBTQ community center themselves on the coming out process and claim that they are the ones to suffer the consequences of the "gay agenda."

Gender diversity has been gaining more acceptance within the postmodern world; however, many people still do not accept varying diversities (Darr & Kibbey, 2016). Such values

often relate to the political party of individuals and the agendas they wish to convey. Because of religion's strict rules of right and wrong, individuals high in religiosity often reject LGBTQ identities. The rejection of orientation diversity leads to misunderstandings of what the LGBTQ community represents.

Techakesari, Droogendyk, Wright, Louis, and Barlow (2017) found that marginalized individuals who deal with discrimination, such as LGBTQ members, form groups to combat ostracism and judgement. Forming collective groups increases individuals' support systems, reduces stigma, and makes progress towards a more inclusive society. They attribute ostracism of the LGBTQ community, in part, to religion.

Many religions refuse the LGBTQ community, and, although the U.S. has a separation of church and state, religion is a core value of many individuals and is difficult to separate from their judgement (Hayes & Nagle, 2016). There is a sense of privileged identities (McKay & Angotti, 2016) that suggest that identities that fall outside of the common, traditional ways of being creates a platform for the belittlement of the less common group. Separating the groups by values, as religion does, gives discrimination room to grow (McKay & Angotti, 2016).

Politics and its Influence on Media

Politics have reflected societal norms throughout history. In 2015, the United States legalized same-sex marriage. The formation of collected groups who fought for equality and multiple lawsuit cases assisted the success of a pro-LGBTQ Court case called Obergefell v. Hodges Supreme Court case. Ziegler (2016) states:

In the aftermath of the Supreme Court's recent decision in Obergefell v. Hodges, constitutional jurisprudence will have to more clearly define sexual orientation itself. The

Obergefell majority describes sexuality as binary and suggests that any sexual orientation is immutable, normal, and constitutive of individual identity. (p. 223)

Herz and Johansson (2015) state that there is a shift of the definition of family, which now includes homosexual relations. They state, “This shift in focus could be politically problematic as it could affect the ability for some homosexuals to organize their families” (p. 1011).

Obergefell v. Hodges protected lesbian and gay individuals from discrimination and hate acts. While the case addresses sexual orientation, society often rejects fluidity, both in terms of sexuality and gender. Additionally, while the Supreme Court protects the marriage rights of same-sex individuals, transgender individuals are left out of the conversation, and non-binary individuals were completely unrecognized. This comes to show that “our societal assumptions about gender and sexuality, not to mention our laws, have always been in tension with the ways many people actually lead their lives” (Blackburn & Pennell, 2018, p. 28).

Additionally, gender identity is a concept that has become more popular through social media (Leent & Mills, 2018), younger generations, such as millennials, grew up in the digital age with accessible information. Media channels, whether they are liberal or conservative, push a certain agenda onto their viewers based on politics. The concept of “fake news” has grown in popularity, which pits parties against one another, rather than encouraging individuals to weigh the true credibility of information. The type of media an individual invests in will influence their willingness to accept gender diversity. LGBTQ individuals often avoid and reject conservative media expressing homophobic tendencies (McLean & Mugo, 2015), while heteronormative individuals may not pay attention to the homophobia in these media or might even agree with the messages presented. Individuals’ frame of reference will shape their views on gender and

pronoun usage. Meerwijk and Sevelius (2017) address transgender awareness on the internet in a society that is not yet politically tolerant of transgender individuals:

The fact that US society is more aware of transgender issues is also reflected in public interest in the search term “transgender,” which, according to Google Trends, has steadily increased since 2011. PubMed results for the number of publications found with the search term “transgender” show a similar phenomenon, with relatively small increases since 2005, but large increases in the number of publications since 2011. (p. e5)

As religion has political influences, certain laws restrict the rights of LGBTQ individuals. Discrimination is a common occurrence and impacts transgender and gender nonconforming individuals especially, as they may require insurance aid to help cover hormones and desired surgeries to help them become comfortable in their bodies.

Resistance to Change

As transgender individuals are seemingly new to society since the coverage of transgender issues and identities has been nearly non-existent, there is resistance towards individuals who diverge from the norm. Disassociation is the act of separating one’s self from another. There are two types of disassociation according to Leary and Springer (2001), which are active and passive. Active disassociation is the act of purposefully rejecting another person because of an event that was hurtful. LGBTQ individuals are often afraid to come out to their family because they are aware of the risk for disassociation. Etengoff and Daiute (2015) give insight into fears of disassociation: “The increasing relational distance strategy was discussed in the following contexts: religious families abandoning, disowning, and rejecting the adult-child” (p. 411). In drastic situations, LGBTQ members are kicked out of their houses and become homeless upon coming out. Passive disassociation is less dramatic than active disassociation,

though still takes an emotional toll on the receiver. Passive disassociation (Leary & Springer, 2001) is the act of not including another person due to the hurt they feel, though it does not take the form of explicit denial of the individual. While the receiver of the message executes the initial active disassociation, a chain reaction could take place and result in the LGBTQ member enacting active/passive disassociation in response.

Hurt feelings reveal themselves in different ways depending on the individual, though Leary and Springer (2001) suggest crying, acting aggressively, belittling, and looking for other relationship fulfillment are the most common reactions. In a study by Etengoff and Daiute (2015), parents of LGBTQ individuals “experienced guilt and community shame” when their child diverged from heteronormative behavior (p. 406). The family members may begin to analyze the behaviors of the LGBTQ individual more closely in an attempt to devalue their relationship or control their behavior. Emotional responses surrounding the LGBTQ community result from lack of awareness and failure to enact healthy coping practices. Ehrensaft (2012) suggest that caregivers play a large role within their child’s identity acceptance. They state that the “potential for the true self to unfold is predicated on appropriate mirroring and emotional holding by the primary caretakers, in which the adults do not impose their own selves on the child’s psyche but rather allow the child’s authentic self to emerge” (p. 340). Gender inclusivity is necessary to implement, as it could promote mental stability and quality of life.

Bryan (2017) defines acceptance of gender as being inclusive of diverse gender identities and adhering to the usage of an individual’s preferred pronoun. Within a heteronormative society, males display masculine traits and females display feminine traits (Jackson, Sullivan, & Rostker, 1988). Individuals use gender expression cues to help understand the gender of another

person. However, heteronormative societies tend to associate gender with sex. A vast majority of people have a habit of prioritizing sex above gender identification.

Additionally, the place parents raise children contributes to the children's acceptance of gender diversity. Due to their smaller population than cities, rural areas may have less opportunities to become aware of gender diversity, as diversity is more limited. With less exposure to diversity comes less opportunity for understanding diversity. Individuals who are not a part of the LGBTQ community, depending on the individual, may not have met a gender nonconforming individual, so they base what they know on stereotypes (Nadal, Whitman, Davis, Erazo, & Davidoff, 2016).

Because gender diversity is only recently recognized (Dasgupta & Rivera, 2006), there are many stereotypes and negative connotations surrounding the topic. Individuals may feel uncomfortable or resistant to accepting non-binary or gender fluid individuals, whether they are in the LGBTQ community or not. Aube, Norcliffe, and Koestner (1995) define gender image as how individuals perceive gender of others or themselves. Gender image is displayed through various gender expressions, such as hairstyles, clothes, and mannerisms. Gender image is a common concern of gender fluid and gender nonconforming individuals. Individuals who have not experienced what it feels like to be gender fluid or nonconforming, may not fully understand the need for gender acceptance, though it is necessary to respect individuals not well understood or widely represented. Individuals with little to no knowledge of gender diversity contribute to the spread of stigmas that are harmful to gender equality (Baez et al, 2017). Dasgupta and Rivera, (2006) state that there are two categories that reduce discrimination when given conscious attention, which are beliefs of equality and control of behavior. Beliefs of equality reduces discrimination when heteronormative individuals recognize the inconsistencies between how

minorities, such as gender-nonconforming individuals, are treated in comparison to the majority. Control of behavior, on the other hand, reduces discrimination when heteronormative individuals remain cognizant within their thoughts and refuse to act on or say comments that belittle minorities. Without gender acceptance, gender nonconforming individuals may feel ostracized, especially if LGBTQ members do not accept or recognize gender diversity, because LGBTQ members express the need for inclusion and diversity.

Linguistic Concerns

Language is arbitrary and ambiguous, which means there is no natural meaning within any given language (Clark & Clark, 1977; Ellis, 1999; Simonds, Hunt, & Simonds, 2018). Additionally, words may have more than one meaning. Within the English language, “they” is most commonly used to refer to a group of more than one person. However, there has been a gradual language shift where “they” is beginning to be used as a singular, neutral pronoun, which Merriam-Webster (2018) announced. While the neutral pronoun usage has begun, the progress of acceptance has been slow, especially with generations older than millennials. Part of this acceptance may be due to the usual process of language change. For example, Clark and Clark (1977) mention the use of function and content words. They found that content words “carry the principal meaning of the sentence” and “name the objects, events, and characteristics that lie at the heart of the message the sentence is meant to convey” (p. 21). For example, the nouns, verbs, adjectives, and adverbs are all content words used to shape a sentence. Function words are the helping words used to make the sentence grammatically correct. Without function words, content words would lack the structure necessary to create an unambiguous meaning. Pennebaker (2011) suggests, “Function words... by themselves . . . don't have much meaning. Whereas a content word such as ‘table’ can trigger an image in everyone's mind” (para. 12). According to Clark and

Content words change more commonly than function words. For example, individual's names are commonly shortened or changed into nicknames. However, individuals tend to have little experience in changing the pronouns of others. Ellis (1999) describes how words change, leading to the creation of new words, such as through derivational morphemes, where affixes are added. The formation of new words always leads to the derivation of new *content* words, never new function words. Many, but not all, non-binary individuals undergo name changes, to distance themselves from their fake selves to feel more comfortable within their own skin. As individuals are more aware of content words, the name change is easier to adjust to, while pronouns are far more difficult and take more effort to change. Pennebaker (2011) stated that function words, "serve quieter, supporting roles - connecting, shaping and organizing the content words. They are what determines style" (para. 11). Kedar, Casasola, and Lust (2006) state, "First, functional elements are extremely frequent in speech, composed of a small set of phonemes, and often characterized by a simple (e.g., monosyllabic) lexical structure" (p. 325). Function words are used constantly and change less frequently than content words.

There have been instances when non-binary individuals were referred to as 'it,' which is demeaning and objectifying and goes against the goal of acceptance (Darr & Kibby, 2016). As functional words do not change as freely as content words, individuals from the United States find it difficult to use correct pronouns when addressing non-binary individuals.

Practice makes perfect. If individuals concentrate on using correct pronouns, it will eventually become a normative practice. Within heteronormative societies where cisgender individuals are the norm, there has not recently been a dire need to concentrate on the function words within sentences. While this may be true, non-binary individuals have become more popular through social media and public figures, such as Rain Dove and Mads Paige. With

increased recognition of pronoun usage diverging from the binary, individuals have more of an opportunity than ever to achieve cognitive ease within pronoun usage. Cognitive ease suggests the more individuals concentrate on achieving a specific goal, the easier and more natural the goal becomes. Clark and Clark (1977) discuss real-time processing, where receivers of information had a limited ability to process information the sender gave. As conversations have small gaps between turn-taking, information must be processed quickly in order to keep the flow of conversations. However, changing function words may take more time to process, which could produce misgendering a non-binary individual. As function words are engrained heavily within the English language, individuals tend to glide over pronoun usage without giving it a second thought. At times, individuals do not even realize which pronouns they use when referring to individuals on the gender spectrum. When a non-binary individual asks to be called “they”/“them,” it is the responsibility of the receiver to respect the pronouns as it is a human right, which should be respected whether it is seen as valid or not. Syntactic and semantic approaches, according to Clark and Clark (1977) explain assisted in understanding how language associated meaning and structure of sentences, which adds depth into understanding pronoun usage. As a result of the message, the listener could enact change and decide “they” should be used to describe the individual, or decide the individual is non-binary. It is important to question gendered-thinking to reduce stress of individuals who are already struggling with dysphoria.

While non-binary individuals struggle with legitimizing their identities as discussed above, a cognitive shift has begun to take place surrounding language. A language shift occurs when parts of habitual language change to reflect everchanging social norms, though the shift is not always immediate. Once a language shift takes place, it then becomes habitual and natural. Language is arbitrary and symbolic and only has meaning because the users of the language give

it meaning. A language shift in pronouns could reasonably take place as long as individuals concentrate on change to achieve cognitive ease. In fact, a language shift has already begun. Linguists have begun to recognize “they” as a singular pronoun, rather than just a plural.

Derivational morphemes, according to Clark and Clark (1977), are prefixes and affixes added to root words that change the meaning of the word. Derivational morphemes can be applied to content words, such as nouns and adjectives. Language shifts are related to derivational morphemes through gendering words. Language within the United States, though not as much as gendered languages such as France, tends to be sexist. When an individual mentions a profession such as a doctor, individuals think of men. More so, words often target gender when referring to certain professions. Mailman, like many other words, gives a misconception of who may fill the role. Language shift has begun to change the words to be more inclusive of gender. Instead of mailman, the title of mail carrier may be used more to show inclusivity.

Darr and Kibbey (2016) explained, non-binary identities could have ramifications for the English language because, “as knowledge of gender and its linguistic framing expands, the English language must reflect societal awareness of linguistic representation” (p. 74). According to Clark and Clark (1977), inflectional endings and derivational endings are necessary to consider in language shifts. Clark and Clark define inflectional endings as affixes that do not change the meaning of the word. Individuals who are not aware of the singular “they” face challenges with comprehending the correct grammar within inflectional endings, even though they are used exactly as the plural “they.” For example, the inflectional ending for a cisgender individual would include, “he walked to the store, but on the way he accidentally hurt himself,” while the inflectional ending for a non-binary individual would state, “they walked to the store,

but on the way they accidentally hurt themselves.” The reflexive ‘themselves’ has sparked confusion among cisgender individuals because the language shift has not yet grown into everyday interactions. Merriam-Webster (2018) states, “if you’re someone who has a binary gender (that is, who identifies as male or female) and you’ve never encountered the non-binary they before, it may feel a little weird. Or you may think it’s unnecessary. You may be confused by all the new terminology” (para 4).

As previously discussed, functional words are difficult to change once they were decided by an individual. As function words are implemented deeply into the English language, though not limited to just English, non-binary individuals face being misgendered on a daily basis. While there is a growing inclusivity for men and women, the conversation excludes non-binary individuals. There is a potential for language shift to include non-binary individuals, however, the process will be slow.

The Present Study

The study is unique because the topic has very limited research comparing gender identity and expression to acceptance of gender. Additionally, LGBTQ issues have been widely suppressed and transgender individuals are experiencing backlash from beginning their transition. There is a lack of understanding towards non-binary and gender fluid individuals, which causes dissonance for those not immersed within gender diversity. The study promotes inclusion by understanding how language shapes reality, as the heteronormative society rarely implements pronoun diversity and asking preferred pronouns.

The study is important to research because it could increase inclusion and reduce ostracism. Gender is misunderstood and perceived to be synonymous with sex. Research must focus on the separation of sex and gender to solidify their differences and demonstrate that

gender is fluid. It would be interesting to understand how individuals perceive gender inside and outside of the LGBTQ community.

RQ 1: How do non-binary individuals experience (in)validation in regards to their identities?

RQ 2: How do non-binary individuals' appearances influence their (dis)comfort and that of those around them?

RQ 3: How does language create barriers to individuals who identify as non-binary?

RQ 4: How do non-binary individuals respond to misgendering, specifically, how they handle it emotionally and communicatively?

Conclusion

Gender is not a category, but a spectrum that includes a vast majority of identities within the gray area. While transgender is the umbrella term for those who are not cisgender, non-binary individuals are not yet widely recognized within the United States. Heteronormativity has created an environment for othering individuals who do not fit within restrictive societal gender norms, which has created barriers to non-binary inclusivity. Several barriers to non-binary inclusivity, in terms of language, include religious, political, and linguistic considerations. In terms of linguistic considerations, language shifts take place within content and function words, which includes adjusting to non-binary individual's possible name changes and pronoun usage. As function words occur without a conscious effort, pronouns take more concentration to change and achieve cognitive ease. While language shift is possible and has already shifted to be more inclusive of women, non-binary individuals are left out of many of the considerations. However, this is not to say that language cannot also shift in terms of pronoun usage, as noted by the recent move to the generic singular "they." What we do not know much about is how misgendering

non-binary individuals impacts them, how they cope with such instances of being misgendered, and the degree to which gender expression impacts pronoun usage.

CHAPTER II: METHODS

Non-binary individuals' experiences with pronoun usage has limited research, though an understanding of these experiences is important to reduce ostracism and increase understanding. Chapter One defined key terms surrounding the idea of non-binary and also discussed barriers that non-binary individuals face within heteronormative societies, such as religion, politics, and linguistic limitations. The purpose of the present study is to interpret the experiences of various non-binary individuals, which are unknown to most heteronormative people. This chapter presents the methods describing an in-depth interview study to understand these experiences.

Participants

I recruited individuals who identified within the gender spectrum, more specifically, who identified as non-binary. The 12 non-binary individuals from this study ranged between the ages of 18 and 27 and resided in various parts of the United States. Nine of the 12 participants were White, one was South Asian, one was Anglo-Hispanic, and one was Asian and White. All of the participants said that their pronouns were “they”/“them,” though one of them stated that they also used “she”/“her” depending on their gender expression on that day. Six of the participants stated that they claim the transgender identity, two were nervous about using the term around binary transgender individuals, one stated that they only identified under the transgender umbrella and not the term itself, one participant stated they were “figuring it out,” and the remaining two solely identified as non-binary. The participants were at various stages of outwardly stating their gender identity. Participants ranged between being out as non-binary between two months to four years. Other responses included “not long.” There was no demographic target for this study apart from having to live in the U.S. and being over the age of 18.

I conducted a convenience sample as the non-binary identity is a minority, which sparked potential issues for recruitment (Lindlof and Taylor, 2011). First, I posted the social media invite (See APPENDIX D) on various Facebook non-binary groups. I also reached out to two non-binary public figures on Instagram to share the invite on their Instagram story. One of the public figures agreed and it was available for 24 hours. Individuals then reached out to the email stated on the invite. I sent the informed consent form to those who expressed interest after verifying that they met the criterion. Because non-binary individuals are difficult to come by, all of the participants who were willing to participate and met the criterion were able to. No individuals resided in the European Economic Area, due to recent restrictions there on data collection. I only closed the recruitment when I reached saturation, which Lindlof and Taylor (2011) stated was when “new data no longer add much of significance to the concepts that have been developed” (p. 117).

Data Collection

I conducted qualitative research within this study to give an in-depth understanding of the non-binary experience such as their perception of validation, how their appearances impact pronoun usage, their experiences with gendered language and language shifts, and their emotional and communicative responses to being misgendered. Lindlof and Taylor (2011) mentioned that qualitative research allows for “descriptions of events that are normally unavailable for observations” (p. 3).

Procedure

The non-binary participants took part in semi-structured, respondent interviews (Lindlof & Taylor, 2011). Lindlof and Taylor (2011) defined respondent interviews as those which “are conducted to find out how people express their views, how they construe their actions, how they

conceptualize their life world, and so forth” (p. 179). All but one of the participants opted to have the interview through a phone call. I made the participants aware that I strived to maintain confidentiality, though talking in public places posed a threat to their confidentiality that was beyond my control. Personally, I stayed in a secluded area where no individual could hear me or the participant. I recorded each interview after the participant both signed the consent forms giving me permission and to do so. Each of the interviews lasted between 30 minutes to 60 minutes, depending on the participant. The respondent interviews allowed open-ended answers, which gave the participants the opportunity to fully recall their experiences.

Interview Protocol

Before I conducted the interviews, I emailed the participants the informed consent (See APPENDIX A) so that they understood confidentiality and the potential risks when taking part in the study. Additionally, I verified that they were at least 18 years of age, not residing in the European Economic Area, were willing to participate, and were willing to be audio recorded. Each participant signed the consent form prior to the interview. While I did not end up using the waiver of signed consent, I received approval for it, as I was concerned that the participants would find that signing the form and sending it to me via email would cause them distress.

When the interviews began, I explained the signed consent form and asked once more if I could audio record their responses. Every participant agreed to those terms. I created a laid-back environment where the participant felt comfortable and their answers not forced, which Lindlof and Taylor (2011) suggested increased ease within conversations. There were five sections of within the interview protocol, plus demographic questions. The following includes one question from each of the five sections: Is there a certain community that you do not feel supported by? Can you communicate with your family about your gender identity? Why or why not? Have you

ever changed your appearance, hair, voice, or manners to be perceived in a way that reflects your gender identity? Please explain. Do you feel that your gender identity is understood by cisgender individuals? In which ways, if any? Can you recall an experience that you did not feel comfortable with stating you were non-binary? Please explain. The five sections aimed to understand non-binary individuals' experiences as a non-binary individual, what their support system looks like, how gender expression impacted pronoun usage, the impacts of being misgendered, and the participant's responses to being misgendered.

Data Analysis

After collecting data, I de-identified the audio files and stored them on my personal, password-protected computer. I then transcribed them verbatim through a computerized transcription site called *Temi* after IRB approved me to do so. While *Temi* gave a rough draft of the transcriptions, I made final edits throughout each of the transcriptions. Pseudonyms were assigned to each participant to protect their confidentiality. A thematic analysis of the repeated themes were conducted after reviewing the transcriptions, which increased my understanding of the information (Braun & Clarke, 2006). A theme took place if seven or more individuals shared an experience or belief, as it indicates more than half of the participants. However, there were rare cases in which I included outlier examples of less than four shared experiences within subthemes, as it contributed to the developmental understanding of further non-binary positions. This method combines two of Owen's (1985) criteria for thematic development—recurrence and forcefulness. To create those themes, I first coded the data, locating key ideas in the text relevant to my research questions. Next, I broke the ideas into units. Unitizing organized the information into parts that allowed me to interpret without outside or existing data (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). I then categorized the data and sorted the data into inductive categories that characterized the

participant's responses. The purpose of the study was to increase awareness of non-binary individuals' struggles and expose what heteronormative societies participate in to produce the most impactful backlashes that non-binary individuals experience.

Research question one targets how non-binary individuals experienced (in)validation in regards to their identities. Therefore, I specifically coded for research question one whenever I saw someone expressing validation or invalidation directed towards their gender identity. Research question two targets how non-binary individuals' appearances influence their (dis)comfort of those around them; therefore, I coded whenever I saw someone expressing comfort or discomfort within either the internal dialogue of the non-binary individual or the external remarks of the outside individuals. Research question three targets ways in which culture and language create a barrier to individuals who identify as non-binary. I coded whenever I saw mentioning of cultural differences, foreign languages, or difficulty with singular "they." Finally, research question four targeted how non-binary individuals respond to misgendering; thus, I coded whenever I noticed a non-binary individuals' internal emotional response to being misgendered and their vocal responses to the situation. I looked for overarching subthemes of (in)validation, (dis)comfort, culture, and responses based on the shared and continuous experiences of the participants.

Verification

Upon completing the analysis section, I performed member checks. Lincoln and Guba (1985) describe member checks as when "data, analytic categories, interpretations, and conclusions are tested with members of those stake-holding groups from whom the data were originally collected, is the most crucial technique for establishing credibility" (p. 314). Within the email in which I sent the analysis section to the participants, I notified them that they had a

week deadline to approve my inclusion of their specific comments in the final project and give their comments on my interpretations. All of the feedback suggested that I analyzed their experiences correctly. To further verify that the information reflected the participants' experiences, I analyzed the interviews as the study progressed to determine whether I had accomplished redundancy. I had redundancy after the eighth interview, though I continued to interview four more participants for validation. This higher number of interviews provided me with prolonged exposure to participants, another tool for credible analysis (Lincoln & Guba).

Conclusion

Semi-structured, respondent interviews allowed the participants to give open-ended answers that framed their experiences. Conducting qualitative research for this study was necessary since there is little representation on the struggles of the non-binary identity. The research allowed me to organize the themes to fill gaps from previous research. With the method section completed, the findings within the next chapter will analyze the participants' responses.

CHAPTER III: FINDINGS

In the previous chapter, I discussed my methods for my semi-structured, in-depth interviews. There were 12 participants total and each interview lasted between 30-60 minutes. I transcribed the interviews verbatim shortly after their recording, which allowed me to code, unitize, and categorize the data into themes, which I based around my four research questions. In this chapter, I will discuss those themes, starting with the conditions in which non-binary individuals feel understood and respected.

Conditions Influencing Non-Binary Respect and Understanding

Research question one aimed to understand the conditions in which non-binary individuals were understood within the United States, a heteronormative society. Each of the 12 participants expressed feelings of invalidation, though with varying degrees. All of the participants suggested that acts of disrespect and misunderstandings were situational. Some non-binary individuals viewed the invalidation as an unintentional ignorance and some non-binary individuals stated that it was an act of intentional “othering.” However, there was a consensus that the varying reactions to non-binary existences were situational. Such factors included shared identities, generational gaps, family, religion, politics, media representation, and microaggressions.

Shared Identities

Out of the 12 non-binary participants, six people identified as transgender, two felt that they did but did not want to claim it around binary transgender individuals, one claimed the umbrella of transgender, another stated they were “figuring it out,” and the remaining two only identified as non-binary. Orion, an individual who identifies as both non-binary and transgender stated, “My understanding of the word transgender has always been someone who identifies with

a gender that was not a gender that they were assigned at birth. And for that reason, I would identify with that term.” Every participant expressed that their non-binary identity was not overtly understood by cisgender individuals. Additionally, the majority of the participants also expressed that there was a separation between binary transgender and non-binary individuals. Mischa stated, “Well, I mean I think the trans community should include non-binary people because I think they are trans and I think to exclude them isn't accurate for the community.” After asking another participant, Mak, if they feel supported by the transgender community, they shared the importance of diverse group sessions, which was an important space for their acceptance:

Yeah, I've been going to group sessions at the LGBTQ Center near me and been going to group sessions specifically for gender nonconforming individuals. So, it features a sort of wide range of identities. I felt extremely supported there within that space. I would say that in more public settings I had some conversations with people who identify as transgender where we didn't necessarily hit it off right away in a way that like made me feel comfortable or safe. But I also think that if we'd had a bit more time to open up to each other, that would've been, that would have been possible.

Apart from binary transgender individuals, three of the 12 participants shared experiences where other cisgender members of the LGBTQ community refused to acknowledge their identity. Jaden stated, “I've had people, gay men not use my pronouns because they don't believe it's real. I tried to have a conversation about it and they're like, ‘Well, I don't, I don't believe in your gender.’” Mak experienced similar pushback from cisgender lesbians, “I will say that I have had some, in my mind, surprisingly disappointing interactions with members of the sort of older cisgender lesbian community where me talking about my pronouns.” Jaden continued to

emphasize the importance of support from surrounding communities, “If they're not being supported by the community around them. Whether that be, even if that's not their friends, like the, the teachers, the media that they're watching, the texts that they're reading in school, they feel like they're othered.” Within the theme of shared identities, participants expressed both positive and negative interactions with other LGBTQ members.

Understanding pronoun importance. While non-binary individuals struggled to be accepted within certain transgender environments, there were even more examples in which participants felt accepted and supported by the transgender community. Lynn found that transgender friends were a good support system, “I have a few friends who are also trans, so they kind of understand some of that stuff. So, it's easier to talk to them.” Jaden’s experiences with other transgender individuals reflected the overall beliefs of the other participants:

I think that anyone who has gone through any sort of thing where they've realized that the gender they were assigned is not the gender that they feel they are, or they know they are to correct myself. I think that that whole community in my experience supports each other no matter what your identity is because you've gone through similar experiences and continue to go through people not believing your identity. And telling you that or they think X, Y, and Z about you because you identify as a certain way or in a certain way. So, I feel pretty supported by the community as of yet.

Similarly, Eastyn explained, in reference to the necessity of correct pronoun usage, that “people who I know who are trans definitely understand that aspect of it. I find that the trans community is more willing to use my pronouns for the most part.”

“Not trans enough.” While the general attitude was positive toward the support from binary transgender individuals, there was also a fear of claiming the transgender identity around

spaces with binary transgender individuals. Harlem's deliberation of adopting the transgender title reflected the other participants' experiences:

So generally, I feel like there's a separation between binary trans people, like individuals that are like female to male or male to female, right? Versus individuals that identify as non-binary trans. It's like whenever I interacted with trans people that are binary, it seems like I have to compete to prove to them that I'm trans enough. Right. Because I don't want to be on testosterone. I don't want to get all of the transitional surgeries. I only want to get top surgery, for example. But it's like to them, I'm not trans enough.

Additionally, Blaine mentioned that worrying about their degree of transness was a concern that restricted their use of the term. Transgender has gained the reputation of being binary in nature, which is where Blaine's struggle made itself present:

Well, I see a lot of people out there who are saying, you know, non-binary shouldn't call themselves transgender because they're not, I guess switching from male or female to female or male. So, I honestly, I, I try to avoid using that term. I always kind of shorten it to like the trans with a little asterisk.

As research question one targeted ways in which individuals felt (in)validated, non-binary individuals felt validated when discussing their identity with a binary transgender individual or non-binary individual, as they had a shared gender identity that diverged from their sex. However, non-binary individuals felt invalidated when binary transgender individuals suggested that they should not use the transgender identity, based on perceptions that they did not experience enough dysphoria or did not transition their physical appearance to be considered as such.

Generational Gaps

Every participant explained that younger generations were more accepting of non-binary individuals, whether it be due to the age of the non-binary individuals' friend group or to large technological advancements. Blaine suggested that the willingness to accept non-binary individuals resulted from the latter:

Because [younger generations], they're going through puberty and like pivotal life changes and right now they are being exposed to sexuality as a spectrum and gender is a spectrum and there's more and more YouTubers out and, and all this stuff. So, there's so much more access to like understanding what it is, and they don't really question it. Or if they do question that they questioned it from a very innocent place where they're just like, "I don't understand. Can you explain it to me?" Whereas when you get to the older people, it starts to become either like they don't want to accept it because it makes them uncomfortable or it just makes absolutely no sense to them. So, they're like, "This is ridiculous. You young people are always trying to be special and turns into big things."

When Mischa was asked who they would rather discuss their gender identity with, their response reflected each of the participants' responses regarding communication preferences:

I would trust my friends more because a lot of my friends are more educated about that and I've heard, they said stuff about how they support trans people and they watch transmedia like ContraPoints. And I feel like I trust them a little bit more. I think it might be like a generational divide maybe. Maybe because we have more access to information now and know how to access it. We are more understanding of communities that were not as representative.

Remi suggested that communication with the goal of understanding non-binary existence was more present with generations that were younger than millennials. “I think overall they know more about trans identity and they're more willing to like engage in conversation than older folks.” Mak’s experiences lined up with Remi’s and suggested that generations beyond millennials seemed to be less receptive to the non-binary identity:

When you've lived your entire life thinking that things are a certain way and there is no other possibilities then and you get, you get to a certain age, like 40 or 50, and then you're extremely rooted in those thoughts and then you have younger people from a younger generation that it's always fun to, to bash the next people coming, you know, coming into your space. And those, those younger people are talking to you about gender identity and respecting people's pronouns. I have found, unfortunately, that the majority of those older people decide, instead of actually listening and seeing what the benefits of these conversations are, they will often meet them with ridicule and, more like condescension.

Generational gaps related to research question one, as non-binary individuals felt validation by younger generations, as they were willing to use gender-neutral language, unlike generations who were older than millennials.

Family

Familial values were a key factor that influenced the participants’ overall feeling of support. All of the 12 participants mentioned conflict with expressing their identity with their family. Lynn mentioned that they left their household because they were not in a supportive climate, which grew into an emotionally abusive reality. They stated that, “Emotionally, yeah, it's difficult not having your family support me, but they also never really supported me in the

first place.” In fact, nearly half of the participants contributed moving away from their families to be surrounded by more accepting people. Alys stated, “I grew up in a private, conservative Christian family. So, like it wasn't even that I thought was normal until I was in college, sort of thing. So now that I'm a senior in college, I've been able to kind of experiment externally more besides, you know, what am I wearing, how I feel and that's helped a lot.” On the other hand, there was an underlying desire to be able to communicate with their families. Mak described the experience and said, “I wouldn't say it is the easiest and most pleasant experience, but I do feel it is one that I want to work on and I want to have my family know who I am fully and know what's going on in my life.” Jaden expressed that familial support does not have to be grounded in constant understanding of their non-binary family member:

A parent who listens is a good parent. So, she's always listens to everything I have to say, if I'm trying to explain something, if I'm trying to explain how I feel about whatever, she's, she's always very supportive in that. She tries to ask questions when she feels like she can. Other times she's kind of just like, "Okay, whatever. You do you." And the fact that, you know, every once in a while, I do bring up like, "Hey, can you use my pronouns?" She'll try it for a little bit until she gets frustrated with it and stops.

The theme of family related to research question one regarding (in)validation because non-binary individuals felt invalidated by their families as the families had an emotional attachment to the identity they believed the non-binary individual used to project, which they were not willing to dispel.

Religion

Participants have both positive and negative experiences when coming out in religious settings. Rowan/Jordi, who uses two names to bring attention to their gender diversity, turned to their church as a place of support:

I'm planning right now, I'm in the stages of planning coming out to my entire church, which is a very liberal church. So, there's not really going to be any backlash. But I think it's also a very, like a lot of older people go, so it's going to be a lot of questions and curiosity and that type of thing. I talked to my pastor and she is, we are actually working together a little bit. Like we, on almost having like a hybrid-like coming out, but then like almost a transition ceremony thing.

On the other hand, Eastyn mentioned that religion opened a space for erasure and invalidation toward non-binary individuals:

I find that there is an issue with Christians who feel as though their faith is somehow being undermined by the 'dirty trends' and non-binary communities just existing, which is unfortunate. So, I think that religion can definitely play a factor in that way, especially if they're feeling attacked.

Jaden did not group all religions into the category of exclusive to non-binary and transgender individuals. They stated that religions could be a great supportive platform if the inclusive religions grew in popularity:

The main religions in America right now don't include people of other genders. There are religions that exist that do, but they're not particularly popular. And so, I don't think that, you know, if they were more popular, I think that would contribute to people understanding a little bit more how others identify. Just because I think that a lot of

people and their connection to their own personal god or gods, it's, it's very important to them and their scripture is very important to them. For me, I'm not a religious person, so it's not, but I think that that helps a lot of people understand the world. I think that's the whole reason why religion is to, is to help people define why things happen. So, I think that that would really help, but you know, maybe in some other part of the world that might be a little bit easier.

Religion related to research question one surrounding (in)validation, as religion was a place of validation to non-binary individuals who belonged to churches who actively supported members of the LGBTQ community. Non-binary individuals felt invalidated by religious individuals who viewed members of the LGBTQ community as sinners.

Politics

Some of the participants expressed frustration when discussing the political climate and its impacts on non-binary acceptance. Mak emphasized the point that gender acceptance is “life and death.” They described how damaging it can be when individuals refuse to consider the psychological aspect of gender identity, and instead create a political environment:

It's not just a debate. It's not just, you know, what, what side of the political spectrum do you fall on? This is actually life and death. And the fact that we as a society have not really understood that yet, that there is an epidemic is troubling. But, the fact of the matter is about 50% of people who are gender nonconforming or who don't even have the word to say that yet have, have considered suicide. And that's extremely troubling. And that's, that's an epidemic that's an, a full-on crisis, which is very new. And by new, I mean, it's part of our discourse now, but there's so much work left to be done and there's so much more that needs to be said and so we need to keep moving and we need to keep

growing, not just for ourselves, but for every other person on this earth that is feeling the same way.

While politics was not a main focus within this study, Eastyn found that politics were a heavy influencer when it came to social media interactions, and in return, contributed to non-binary individuals' acceptance within society:

Especially people who support our “wonderful” president, tend to have very reactionary ways of viewing non-binary existence, et cetera. But there's also a push in the other direction, like a positive push from media towards being more accepting of it. So, I wouldn't say it's all negative.

Jaden noted that the current political environment was damaging to non-binary and minority communities. They stated that a leader of a country who is outwardly disrespectful to any group of people creates an environment for hate and erasure:

I think in politics right now, the whole fact that our government, or not our government, specifically our president, is trying to stop opportunities for transgender people and not offer protections for people of the LGBTQ+ community is really, really damaging to the community. Because, you know, he's supposed to be a role model. He's supposed to be a leader. And role models and leaders don't try to, you know, not support the people that support them. That's not how it's supposed to work. So, I think that that's really harmful, especially for younger people. I think as you get older you realize, you know, ah, politics, I don't really care about, you know, about what a politician says about me because I'm me. But as a younger child, you might see the president as like this, you know, all powerful being and you know, that's very damaging to see said all powerful being saying, "Oh you, I don't support you."

Politics related to research question one on (in)validation as non-binary individuals perceived that the current U.S. political environment did not support transgender individuals of any kind, resulting in the invalidation of non-binary individuals.

Media Representation

Non-binary representation within media outlets are close to none. When there is representation, the identity may either be viewed as a trend or actually be used by heteronormative individuals and become a trend. If more positive representation was present within the media, non-binary individuals may become normalized.

Normalizing non-binary existence. Another theme from the conditions in which non-binary individuals felt validated was the media's presence in normalizing the existence of non-binary individuals. Eight of the 12 participants, such as Mischa, expressed the importance of media representation:

We're shaped as we grow up by the representation we see. And if the previous generations' representation was only, the only way they were able to view information about a community and that representation was kind of negative or presented in a way that is comedic, I think in a way they're less likely to accept than, when it is today. It's more of a realistic, positive representation. More people are understanding, at least some, most people I would say. I think when people see themselves also represented or people they could be, or resonate with, I think that also gives them more courage to identify with that in a positive way and makes them realize that, "Hey, I think I want to be like those people. They seem like me."

Blaine found that media representation failed to normalize non-binary individuals within everyday programs and discussions:

I think one of the biggest things, actually, at this point is representation in the media.

There really isn't any reason for people who aren't trans of any nature, there's no reason for them to think that people out there aren't just, you know, their gender isn't the same as their sex. So I mean, if you have little kids watching, I don't know, cartoons and there's a boy, a girl and somebody who's non-binary and they use all three different pronouns and stuff like that, you would have these kids growing up and understanding it because it would just, it would be innate in them at that point. But right now, there's really nothing bringing it to attention of people who aren't, you know, trans themselves.

Blaine later continued to comment on media representation, pointing out that gender discussions are misrepresented. As a minority group, transgender issues should be presented in a positive light to be seen as acceptable. Blaine stated that positive representation is not the reality of current media outlets:

And sadly, the only people I can ever like come up with is like Caitlyn Jenner and then everybody hates Caitlyn Jenner because Caitlyn Jenner is not a good human. But it's sad, like that is the, one of the biggest representations that we have, and of course people are going to look at that and be like, okay, that person has issues. So obviously anybody who "thinks" that they are trans has issues.

While no participant apart from Jaden mentioned the word "stigma" overtly, all participants mentioned that heteronormative societies have a negative connotation toward non-binary individuals because cisgender people have not experienced a disconnect between their gender or sex. Jaden explained that social media give non-binary individuals a platform to connect with similar people and receive validation:

I think, you know, with so much social media out there right now, a lot of people frame who they want to be based on, you know, the, the people that they like on social media and you know, the more, the more people with different kinds of pronouns and the more people who dress a certain way or identify a different way that they are, the less stigma there'll be around it.

“GenderTrender.” Because the non-binary identity is “abstract,” some participants stated that heteronormative individuals are not taking the identity seriously. Blaine stated, “[My family] were just kind of like, ‘Oh, you know, you young people with all your new labels about everything like this, all crazy, it's going to blow over.’” Participants expressed struggles with proving their non-binary identity as valid due to individuals’ beliefs of non-binary pronoun usage. Rowan/Jordi stated, “either invalidated or like I'm not doing a good enough job being trans or something...you know, I have, more things along the lines of GenderTrender.” They later shared an example of how heteronormative communities adopted gender trends:

There's a guy at my church, who is a guy, and I asked him about it. I'm like, "Oh, do you have any, like different gender feelings or whatever?" And [ze's] like, “no, I just want to normalize it.” And it kind of pisses me off because it's just like, “Okay, you're making this look more like a trend.”

Mischa’s experiences matched with the previous participant’s concerns. They expressed that members of their family refused to accept transgender individuals because it was a trend:

Well, I mean it depends on the people. Whenever I kind of talk about trans issues with my family, the, they kind of dismiss it or something. Like they don't really, they don't like talking about it. Like, I think they don't, they view it as just, I dunno, some modern political correct fad or something.

Media representation related to research question one on (in)validation as non-binary individuals expressed little to no normalcy of the non-binary gender within media outlets. This lack of normalization allowed others outside of the non-binary gender to view it as a trend, which was ultimately invalidating to the participants.

Microaggressions and Transphobia

There are varying forms of transphobia. The assumption that transphobia is always overt and clear is not reflective of the participants' experiences. Microaggressions are rooted in making individuals feel "othered," invalidated, and erased. The three main microaggressions that individuals experienced were individuals ignoring their pronouns and individuals over-apologizing for their pronoun mistakes. Such acts build up and negatively impact non-binary individuals' sense of acceptance. On the other hand, participants expressed experiencing "blatant transphobia" and felt targeted when expressing their gender identity.

Ignore. Harlem experienced microaggressions through their university, as the university did not consider transgender and non-binary individuals to the same degree as cisgender individuals:

I mean I feel like you could probably argue the fact that not a lot of buildings at the university have unisex restrooms or gender-neutral bathrooms. And I feel like that can be seen as a microaggression. The fact that, I mean, if I want to use a gender-neutral bathroom, I have to go to the fourth floor of my building to use it. Yeah. And I mean, granted, I'm not a lazy ass. If I want to go up there, I will. But the fact of it is like, why aren't there gender-neutral bathrooms or family bathrooms or even just single stall bathrooms available on every floor of every building. Like why hasn't that been a thing yet?

The over-apology. Apologizing for misgendering a non-binary individual in and of itself is not a microaggression, however, there are individuals who take the apology too far, which creates a distance between heteronormative individuals and non-binary individuals. Six of the 12 participants said that over-apologizing was an issue. Eastyn commented that the over-apology made the act about comforting the individual committing the act rather than the participant's validation. Eastyn stated:

There tends to be a phenomenon where it's just over the top apology that stops the conversation and makes it more about the person doing the misgendering than it is about the misgendering act itself. I prefer just like, perhaps a brief, "Oh, sorry." Or just quick correction and then moving on.

Similarly, Mischa stated that they felt uncomfortable when people who misgendered them "go overboard" such as, "Oh my God, I'm so sorry I love the trans community. Please forgive me. Please forgive me. I absolutely, I have like 15 trans friends. Please forgive me. Please forgive me.""

Blaine, whose experience with over-apologizing reflected the other participants' responses, expressed that over-apologizing makes them feel as if they have to defend their identity:

I've had people make a bigger deal about it and then it just gets awkward because then I'm put in a position to like either defend or like fight for my identity. Whereas if I'm talking to somebody or I'm in a group conversation and someone says "she" and someone else goes, "Oh, it's 'they'" and we move on. To me it makes it more validated actually. Because it's like if somebody calls a, you know, a cis girl, 'he' so much is going to be like, "Oh, 'she'" and we're gonna move on. So, it's more like normalizing the fact that non-

binary is a thing and singular “they”/“them” is okay to use, so yeah, I don't mind the quick little correction and then move on.

Coming out means being a target. Being non-binary and transgender in today's environment can be dangerous. People do not like what they do not understand. Mischa explained a time in which they were in an environment where people bashed them for outwardly expressing their non-binary gender:

There was one time when we, I went with some of my friends to LA and I took that opportunity as a time to kind of express my clothing style to more, be more, a little bit more androgynous or feminine. And we were walking down the stars on the Hollywood walk and some guy, I guess, you know, there's a lot of people out on that street that sell like a lot of, you know, like stars, maps and stuff like that. And I don't exactly remember what he said, but he like kind of made a comment directed at me as we were walking, like, "Oh, look at that guy wearing that dress." Like in a kind of, in a derogatory tone. And I said, I said something back, but I don't remember it was, but I felt I never had been really catcalled before.

Mischa continued to share their fears of being out and transitioning after their negative experience:

I took an existentialism class...I could die any day. Like life's very short. So, I feel like I should just go for it if I want to, like I dunno, transition or, or, or come out more or something. And I know there's a lot of danger and fear in that, but I think a lot of benefits would come with that. Like being more happy with myself. And how I dress and present to the world. But there's always like a fear of how people will react like that in Hollywood. Like is that going to be the new normal?

Harlem experienced a similar instance where they were targeted for presenting themselves as non-binary:

I was actually at a laundromat washing my clothing and this man kept on like staring at me and I was like, "Okay, so I'm not gonna say anything." Like I'm this little one, just doing my laundry. And I try not to like pay attention to it. But then he ended up like following me out to my car and like asking me, "What are you," and I told him, "none of your damn business" and drove away and I never went back to that laundromat again... I dunno. It's like, as much as that guy pissed me off what he's asked me what was, I, I was like, "Ha-ha I confused him."

Each participant discussed at least one instance where they either experienced hurtful language directed at them or have heard non-binary individuals receiving verbal abuse. Eastyn described a conversation they had online:

Normally if I'm having those conversations, again they'll happen online and not so much to my face and I can get in a mood where I feel like debating people. So, I don't know. Online things can get pretty nasty. I remember somebody was continually misgendering me in a conversation about, not even about non-binary, but about binary trans people not having to disclose the fact that they're trans, and they threw a bunch of slurs at me, said that they hoped that somebody who has HIV sleeps with me.

Microaggressions and transphobia, such as the non-binary identity being ignored, having others over-apologize, and being a target of discrimination ultimately resulted in the participants feeling invalidated within their non-binary identity, which was an answer to research question one on how non-binary individuals experienced (in)validation.

Non-Binary Appearances and External Reactions

Research question two aimed to understand the conditions in which non-binary individuals' appearances influenced their (dis)comfort and of those around them. In terms of gender expression, individuals gendered feminine non-binary individuals without deliberation. Individuals hesitated more often when gendering androgynous fashioned non-binary individuals, which participants who defined non-binary as a "genderfuck" aimed to achieve. Within restrooms, however, androgynous non-binary individuals experienced neither binary or non-binary language. Instead, individuals referred to the non-binary individuals as a dehumanizing "it."

Gender Expression versus Identity

All of the participants mentioned that people made hasty assumptions of their gender based on their appearance. Mads explained the difficulty of having to balance their gender identity with people's perceptions of their gender expression:

And then when I came out as non-binary, I was like, "Hey, this is me now." And a lot of people who knew me when I was younger were thinking I was making something out of nothing or didn't understand. They're like, "But you look so feminine. I don't, I don't get it." And things like that, then it's just like, "All right, let me break it down for you." But it's just, it's hard not to break things down without giving someone my life story, you know?

Eastyn found that they were perceived differently depending on who they surrounded themselves with:

I just think that people don't always think about the fact that there are varying gender identities. Like, for example, sometimes it matters who I'm around. If I'm with a group of

men, for example, sometimes I get locked in the “he”/“him” category by people. If I'm with a group of women, sometimes I get locked in to “she”/“her.” If I'm with a group of non-binary people and we all are presenting in ways that are confusing, that can be a trip. Yeah. It just, it really depends on, perhaps settings. And just the fact that people aren't thinking about the fact that there's an alternative.

Rowan/Jordi struggled with the diversity of women’s gender expression because they wanted to be seen as androgynous and more masculine, but there is so much diversity in women’s fashions that no one was noticing their attempts to “queer” the identity:

I am strangely, like in a quasi-way kind of frustrated with how socially open it is for different ways to, for women to present. Which, I think that women should be able to present however they want, but at the same time it's making me, it's making it harder for me to put up flags and it's just like, "Hey! Queer. Hey! In case you were wondering, in case you were wondering."

Gender expression versus identity related to research question two about (dis)comfort surrounding non-binary appearances as the participants stated that people automatically assumed that there were only two genders, which were determined by gender expression. This assumption was frustrating to the participants, as the assumptions caused discomfort to them, limiting the ways in which they felt that they could express themselves.

Changing Appearance for Comfort and to be Seen

Eastyn explained their dependence on validating social interactions, which reflected the other participants’ experiences. “I think that that's the biggest bit for me. I do have body dysphoria, but a lot of it is also social. So, the way that people interact with me is pretty important to my gender identity and feeling validated.”

Eastyn used their appearance to display differences between them and cisgender individuals:

The way that I dress has sort of been more of an alternative fashion and I have extremely brightly colored hair. And I think that that's my way of being able to flag myself as being a little bit different. It raises questions in people's heads, so they might stop before they go ahead and pronoun me in any sort of way.

Additionally, Eastyn continued to explain their experiences with changing their appearance to present themselves as non-binary, such as with their hair and binding. As binding is the action of compressing one's chest to present it as flat, there is a possibility for health restrictions because it squeezes the ribs together:

I have very long hair. I will occasionally put it up and hide it. I've kind of become a master at that. I have, what is the verb? I've used a binder before, but I have issues with my ribs, so that's not really a possibility for me anymore. But yeah. Yes. I have altered my appearance in order to be perceived in different ways.

After presenting androgynously for others to see them as non-binary, Jaden argued that gender expression did not influence individuals to gender them initially as non-binary, but presenting more androgynously does help with reminding others to use gender-neutral pronouns after their introduction:

I think people find it very hard to use my pronouns because I don't, I don't look gender neutral. I tried for a very long time, but for three years I had short hair and I thought like, "Oh, this will make me feel more me. And it'll also like, you know, it'll get other people to understand who I am." And it totally didn't, didn't matter at all. I was just, "Oh, that person with short hair." So I, at this point, I think that, you know, I have chosen to

express myself the way that I feel most comfortable and you know, I don't think anyone's going to ever assume that my pronouns are “they”/“them”/“theirs,” but that's okay. I'll just let them know.

Androgyny. While the participants' experiences varied, they shared a commonality of presenting ambiguously during certain interactions. Harlem defined non-binary in their terms and how an androgynous appearance helped them achieve an outer sense of their non-binary identity.

My understanding of non-binary, it's just like someone that floats within the middle of the spectrum, right. So, between male and female, there you are somewhere floating there. So I feel like that falls more into androgyny. I feel like sometimes the more androgynous you are, I guess, I don't know, like kind of like you kind of like are like a genderfuck. Like you, when someone looks at you and you're there like, "What are you?" Then that's when you are non-binary.

Remi found that they experienced pressure to present androgynously because that was how media outlets described non-binary individuals:

When I first came out as non-binary, I think I felt pressure from just like, not from anyone, mostly just like probably my own ideas of what being non-binary meant from the media and the internet, and I felt like I needed to conform to that. So, by cutting my hair short or wear[ing] women's clothing all the time, I was like, I don't want to dress like this all the time. And now I dress how I want pretty much every day, but definitely meeting new groups, new groups of people. I definitely think about like if I dress in a more masculine or androgynous way, will people take my identity more seriously. I definitely think about that when I get dressed.

Alys' experiences matched with Remi's: "I just don't feel comfortable with stereotypes surrounding my appearance. So, I want to change the stereotypes, not me. I guess it'd be the succinct way to say that."

Restrooms. As stated in the section about microaggressions, participants noted that there was a clear disregard for gender-neutral restrooms. Participants such as Orion explained that gendered restrooms are uncomfortable for non-binary individuals because they become targets for cisgender individuals:

I was in a bathroom one time. I was with my family and this one lady I was, I was standing next to my sister waiting for the rest of, we were waiting for my mom or something. And, this lady came up and looked at my sister and pointed at me and said, "Is that a girl or a boy?" As if like I wasn't there and like, I couldn't. Yeah. And, I think that was the biggest like thing that I've ever experienced. But, and my sister just kind of like, looked at her and was like, "That's my sister." And she just gave her this face and she was like, "Oh wow, okay." And walked away. And I dunno, it was really uncomfortable for my sister and, and for me because she just like talked about me like I just wasn't there at all.

Other participants, such as Alys, stated that the sense of not belonging in a gendered restroom was more uncomfortable to them than the potential for drawing attention to themselves. While there were some gender-neutral bathrooms, they were often not maintained enough to use:

But also, it's like a single stall, separated out. Generally, less used. Often there's not toilet paper because they don't think to check it as much because not as many people use it.

And it just adds like this whole other level of, and stuff. Or like, if there's a family with a baby, like if there's a dad who has a four-year-old daughter, I'm going to just like, bite the

bullet and be like, “Fine, I’ll go into the female restroom because he physically can’t for legal reasons, kind of a thing. At least I can like deal with this later on and like not cause a scene.” So that’s, that’s kind of weird. I wish that there was a more of a more of an option, like there is male and female, like both stall bathrooms, but I also realize again, I’m in the south and that’s like way far in the future.

There were instances in which Harlem explained their frustration with having to use binary restrooms:

I have been pulled out of bathrooms because of like a women’s bathroom being told I don’t belong there. And I’m like, “Well, I’m not about to go in the men’s restrooms, so where the fuck do you expect me to go?”

Non-binary individuals changing their appearances answered research question two about (dis)comfort surrounding non-binary appearances, as non-binary individuals presented androgynously to confuse outside viewers of their gender identity. This confusion increased the non-binary individuals’ comfort level but reduced the heteronormative individuals’ comfort level. However, both non-binary and heteronormative individuals’ comfort levels reduced within a restroom setting when the non-binary individual presented androgynously.

Negative Reactions of Non-Binary Usage

Research question three aimed to understand what linguistic and cultural factors influenced the negative effects of non-binary usage. The use of singular “they” was a major factor that created discomfort among heteronormative individuals. Such individuals used its supposed “grammatical incorrectness” as a reason to refuse to gender non-binary individuals properly. Additionally, culture and comfort with the English language presented themselves as themes. Individuals who understood the implications that language has on the formation of

realities tended to be more understanding toward individuals who misgendered them. However, individuals' preferences toward gendered language is a deep reality in many languages, including English, which makes the linguistic shift slow moving.

“Language Evolution”

Language is ever-changing, though its process is slow. All but one participant expressed their frustration with the pace in which individuals adopt gender-neutral language. Cisgender individuals view singular “they” pronouns as grammatically incorrect and they refuse to use neutral pronouns because they do not feel comfortable with changing their language. Remi explained that people had reservations about changing their language to use gender-neutral pronouns. “I think it's difficult for people to understand because you're taught your whole life that there's just two genders and there's two sets of pronouns and two kinds of people.” They continued to state, “So they're like, "I have to ask?" It's just, I mean, it's just such a new concept that people just don't know how to fit it into their view of the world.”

Singular “they” pronoun. A common theme throughout the interviews were that cisgender individuals tended to rebel against the singular “they” pronoun. Harlem continued to express their reasoning behind why cisgender individuals often failed to understand and consciously adopt the singular “they” pronoun into their everyday vocabulary.

I 100% feel like the reason that misgendering people is such a problem is that we automatically think that the only two options are male or female. That the default is cis and straight. So, it's like, I feel like even if you just simply like changed, like things like having more than one option, more than two options on your, on like are you male, female, trans, whatever. Like half the time you even have those options or like you don't

even have the options to use “they”/“them” or just the fact that we never even like teach people to ask pronouns.

Blaine experienced a learning curve when it came to the singular “they” pronoun. While they did have negative feelings toward the pronoun, they realized that it was grammatically correct.

I did not like the use of “they”/“them” as singular pronouns for a long time. I, all through school and through college, my writing style was criticized because I would never, I would go back and forth between using like singular and plural pronouns in my writing and I finally figured out like, I was like, my writing is very good now, I must say, and so I got upset because I'm like, “Wait a second. I spent years understanding that 'they'/'them' is for a group of people.” And I literally, that was like my only thing against those two words being used as a pronoun for a single person. I was like, “No, it's, it's multiple people.” ...I was fine with like, I think it's “ze”/[“zir”]. And those, because I was like, “Okay, well it's a new word. It doesn't have any other meaning.” And, but then I finally was like, “Wait, wait a second. It's, it's a separate use of ‘they’/‘them.’”

More than half of the participants argued that the singular “they” pronoun was used within everyday language, whether individuals were aware of its use or not. Orion gave the following example:

I think the biggest thing that I've heard is that 'they' is not a singular pronoun, so it can't be right. That's the biggest thing that I've heard. That's the biggest reason that I've heard for people not being able to understand. But yeah, but it is grammatically correct... I usually give them this example of like if someone, it's like dark outside and you see someone, you say, oh, like "They are following me." You don't say “he” or “she” is

following me. You'd say they're following you because you don't know who it is and that's still, you're still talking about a singular person. So, I usually give like an example like that. It's like telling someone that it is in fact a singular pronoun.

Refusal. Individuals who refuse to use gender-neutral pronouns are not always rebelling against the non-binary gender, though this is also a reality. Orion explained, “The history of how we've used these particular words and nouns. People are asking them, ‘Hey, now we want you to use this word in a different way,’ which is a thing that happens, and it is a natural part of language evolution. But, it's weird for people when they're first asked.”

While language change is a difficult concept to master, there are other participants, such as Lynn, who viewed the refusal to change pronouns as a way to protest against transgender individuals as a whole. “Yes, mostly [transphobia]. I'm sure there are some cases of ignorance that people don't, they have to be explained of it in a certain way. That's how it can work, but other people are just defensive on it. Even if you pull up a dictionary definition, or dictionary usage of 'they'/'them' pronouns.”

Blaine, a participant who did not approve of the singular “they” pronoun until they accepted that it was grammatically correct, argued that individuals use “plural [pronouns] kind of as an easy out for the fact that they really are uncomfortable with the idea of non-binary gender.”

Two participants used pronoun pins as a way to combat excuses to refuse to use gender-neutral pronouns. The pronoun pin is a pin that states one’s pronouns on it so others can see it and change their language to match the request of the transgender or non-binary individual. Remi found that the pins were an easy option for others to understand, which decreases excuses for misgendering and also allows individuals to avoid stating their pronouns, which is often a conversation that non-binary individuals wish to skip:

I do wear a pronoun pin a lot, especially in professional settings. So that's always there if people just looked at it. But they also have to know what that means in order to know how to use it. And I think just asking, is a great way. Certainly, paying attention to where pronouns already are. They have a pin on the end table, my email signature. If they all just pay attention, they could notice that there or if they just asked me in the introduction, then I could just tell them. So, it's pretty easy for them.

Remi, whose experiences reflect that of other participants', found that even with resources at their disposal, individuals refused to use the correct language for them.

But sometimes it feels like it is true that there are folks who aren't willing to see anything other than a woman. And so, they're like, "I see you this way. I'm going to use this language." And that's just, that's the worst I think because it feels like you're not real or valid, or worth respecting. And that's exhausting. It makes me feel pretty bad.

"Language evolution" related to research question three about the ways in which culture and language create a barrier to individuals who identify as non-binary, as the participants stated that individuals who were confused by linguistic changes, such as the singular "they," were likely to use their confusion as an excuse to refuse gender-neutral language, and ultimately, the non-binary existence. Non-binary individuals increase resources to reduce this confusion.

Cultural Impacts

The participants who studied languages, were related to an individual who spoke a different language, and/or spoke a different language themselves expressed that people's realities were deeply rooted in the languages that they spoke. Rowan/Jordi pointed out that language was deeply connected to a country's culture, "So, either you have to think that I have a weird perspective on gender in general, but either you have to think that individuals who are born in

such a way that these binary constructs are not comfortable. You have to think that those individuals are only born in cultures that have these other options.”

Mads explained that there were intercultural aspects to take into consideration:

It's much harder in other countries. My mom speaks Spanish as her first language and Spanish is gendered. And so, it's even harder to bring that topic up. And also, the country that she's from, they're known for being very sexist, very homophobic. So just like I said before, just her accepting the fact that I'm attracted to women was a long enough battle that with this, I, I don't, I don't know when she will accept it.

Eastyn's friend, whose first language was Spanish, which is a gendered language, struggled with understanding how to apply gender-neutral pronouns into their interactions:

So sometimes I have problems if English isn't somebody's first language, particularly if they come from a language where things are gendered and there is no gender-neutral pronoun. Like for example, many of my friends have Spanish as a first language and so using “they”/“them” as a singular pronoun is not natural to them at all. But other than that, particularly “they”/“them” can feel plural to people, I suppose. Although it really shouldn't be because we use singular “they”/“them” for people all the time.

Mak explained that their French roots made it difficult to see the world in anything other than binary, even though they identified as non-binary:

I'm both American and French and so I am, and French is an extremely gendered language, more so than English. I'm pretty aware of how the way that we speak in the way that we're taught to speak from a very early age impacts our view of the world and our view of others and our view of what it means to be quote unquote a girl versus a boy. And I think that those concepts are really driven into our brains and our souls and our

bodies from a very young age. And, and so even for someone who does identify as non-binary the way I do, I have so much work to do in terms of breaking down those concepts and trying to free myself of these ideas that have caused me a lot of shame and pain.

Alys mentioned that there were languages that implemented gender-neutrality within certain words and nouns. They found success in educating others by giving everyday examples of neutral language.

Plenty of other languages, there [are] non-binary nouns, sort of like an “it,” but that doesn't have that negative connotation of dehumanization...And I'm like, there's languages where if you're asking someone a question and you don't know who you're asking it about, you can ask it in a way that doesn't specify a gender. Okay, so the word “mal” in Spanish means “bad,” but you can say 'malo' for masculine or 'mala' for feminine. But there's mal, which doesn't have either. And it's still, it's still a descriptive word that means bad, that doesn't have a gender connotation attached to it. And you could use that to ask, "Are you feeling bad?" versus saying, “Are you feeling bad?” feminine or "Are you feeling bad?" masculine.

Cultural impacts related to research question three, as the participants explained that an individuals' first language shaped their beliefs of gender-neutrality, as well as their cognitive ease of adapting to neutral language.

Non-Binary Responses to Binary and Non-Binary Uses

Research question four aimed to understand the participants' emotional and communicative responses to being misgendered. Emotional themes that presented themselves were hurt, frustration, and weariness. Participants found that being misgendered, whether intentional or not, both hurt and was frustrating because the resources to learn was a Google

search away. As misgendering occurred multiple times each day for these participants, there was a sense of choosing their battles, even if they wanted the other person's approval.

Communicatively, individuals situationally avoided responding, requested the individual to change their pronoun usage to match their identity, or educated the individual about non-binary language. Participants who were not out or would not have a long interaction with the individual tended to avoid correcting others, while individuals in places of influence expressed an importance of educating others on non-binary and transgender language.

Emotional and Communicative Responses

Being misgendered is a personal experience that impacted the participants emotionally. The participants had a range of emotional responses to being misgendered, which included hurt, frustration, and weariness.

Hurt. While all of the participants expressed discomfort and hurt feelings when being misgendered, some participants, such as Eastyn, distinguished that the degree of hurt depended on who misgendered them:

It depends on the day. Sometimes I'm like more patient and okay with it than others. And it also depends on people. With strangers, it hurts me less because I understand that it can be a little bit strange trying to navigate that. But with people close to me, it affects me a lot more and can leave me feeling very upset.

Remi, whose experiences reflected those of other participants' experiences, emphasized that their level of hurt depended on who they were talking to and that person's intentionality:

I would say it makes me feel differently depending on whether the person who misgenders me should or has the resources to know that they're misgendering me. So, for example, like my grandma, you know, misgenders me all the time because I'm not out to

her in any way. And so that does hurt because it just doesn't feel like, it just feels you're talking about, "Who are you talking about? Oh yeah, that's me." So, it does feel like a part of my identity is being erased, but it doesn't, it's so unintentional, but it doesn't bother me as much. But when I am misgendered by folks who have the resources to know, like if they know my pronouns, but just don't say so. They have all these resources that have like set them up to not misgender me. That hurts more because it just feels like, "You don't see me the way that I see me. And you're, it feels like you're refusing to." Although I don't know if that's always the case.

Rowan/Jordi expressed feelings of hurt and disappointment, even when the misgendering is unintentional. When asked if they felt hurt even though the misgendering was not intentional, they replied:

Yes, unintentionally by people who don't know and that's not so much the thing that affects me as much as when people that do know, like grew up, which is an understandable thing, but it just kind of stings more when like people that I've come out to and shared this about me with them or just, like forget and are—like, my choir director who's been very sweet and I cannot turn to explain, like I will be singing in a binder that might affect things. I might have to run out of the room and change it. But he, like he said when we were leaving to me and, some women, he said like, "All right, come on ladies." It's just like cringe. Cringe.

Frustration. Each of the 12 participants expressed frustration when they are misgendered. Mischa expressed frustration from misgendering because they believed that it was information at the disposal of anyone who was willing to educate themselves about it:

Yeah, I'm frustrated. I'm frustrated. It's, yeah, like read one article on the Internet, there's literally like thousands of articles that you could just read one and if you really take in the information, it would be very easy to understand and some people just refuse to do that and it, it manifests in their policies or their, or their behavior or their language and it's just irritating.

Rowan/Jordi explained that certain binary words create more frustration than others. The meaning behind such words created hurt and discomfort:

It doesn't bother me so much when it's people that I know. But, that, and like the word 'lady' really bothers me more than any other female indicator because it's like if you're a lady, you're not, you're not just a woman but you're like a well behaved, proper woman and that's like the worst thing, the worst thing you could be.

Weary. Mak, who was both American and French, expressed their empathy toward individuals who attempted to learn gender-neutral language, as they struggled with it themselves:

I'm very aware of how that would be even more difficult for someone who's not necessarily trying to figure out their gender identity because they, you know, maybe they've never thought about it and then maybe they, they don't have to think about it because they're comfortable with their gender. So to me, I have a lot of, I dunno if it's compassion, but I have a lot of understanding when it comes through a cisgender person not understanding how all of these things that we assume are fixed things in our society, whether it's language and words and marketing and psychology and all these, the bedrock of our society, how all of these things were built on kind of a flood or at least narrow view of what life and existence is. It's a pretty kind of deep thing that not everyone is going to try and take on, on a daily basis if they don't have to.

When misgendered, Mak desired to correct others, though their reasoning was not from frustration, but love. A common theme was that individuals had respect for themselves and wished for others around them to see them for who they are, though Mak was the only participant to label the reaction as a love for the other individual:

I'd say I do it out of love. I do it out of love for myself and for them. I do it because I love myself enough to stand up for myself and I do it for them because they might not understand that they're missing, they're missing a part of me. They're missing a piece of me when they misgender me. And I'd like to believe that I, and I actually believe that most people want to be able to see you fully and to know who you are fully. And so that's why I do it out of love. Because if I love, if I love you enough to call you out, then that's a good thing. If I, if I call you out, that's because I care enough for you to actually know who I am. If I don't care about you and if I, well I won't say shit, but I'll stay totally closed to you. You don't know who I am and that's both of our losses, but it's, it's kind of like picking my battles. But, yes, if I, if I call you out, it's because I love you. It's because I care about you.

Participants used various communicative responses on being misgendered, which depended on the situation that they were in. These strategies were situational based on the environment in which they were misgendered, the knowledge of the individual, and the willingness of the individual to respect their pronouns. The responses included avoiding the comment to save their energy, asking for a change of language, and educating the other person.

Avoid. Avoiding occurred when individuals felt like they did not have to words to express their disposition, felt hesitation to come out due to their environment, and were in the presence of someone who was unwilling to listen. Blaine recalled a memory of when they tried

to come out to their family, though it was not well received, which resulted in them avoiding further communication about it:

I guess I could say like I came out to them and they kind of ignored it. The only one in my family who's very supportive about it is my younger sister, but she doesn't like to use “they”/“them” pronouns when my parents are around because my parents get upset about it. So, I just complete, like, I just, I love my family. We have a very good relationship, but when it comes to my gender, we just don't talk about it at all.

Alys avoided correcting their family on pronoun usage due to their family's potential unwillingness to accept their pronouns. “I haven't told everyone. But if someone does know and would continue to call me, ‘she.’ you know, I use ‘they,’ that would be, that's why I haven't told my family because I can't, I can't think through that concept right now. Emotionally, I'm not there.”

Rowan/Jordi expressed that there are certain situations that they would avoid correcting individuals, work being one of them: “she said, ‘I don't know you. I don't know if you want me to treat you like a man or a woman.’ And at that point I just couldn't, like I couldn't deal with answering that question, so I just walked away.” Additionally, Rowan/Jordi explained that energy levels contributed to remaining quiet and avoiding coming out to individuals. “It took a little bit of explaining on my part to be like ‘I wasn't hiding anything from you. I was simply not expressing things that I didn't—’ I think I suppressed things for a long time just because I didn't have the mental energy to deal with it.

Orion stated that they avoided correcting people's incorrect use of their pronouns because they felt like the pronouns were an inconvenience:

My reaction is usually pretty much the same. I usually don't say anything. I don't correct people just because I don't like to, I feel like I'm being like an inconvenience to them if I correct them. So, I usually don't correct anyone... I feel like, I know it's difficult for people to like know that your name is one thing and then you tell them it's something else and then they have to think about it every time they talk to you. And especially if they're not part of the community, they're probably not used to doing that to people. So, it's, I dunno, it, I've heard a lot of people say it's just difficult to remember your name and that kind of thing. So, I dunno, I feel like I'm being an inconvenience to them sometimes.

Lynn's response of correcting pronoun usage was dependent on their situation, "For the people that I am out to, I will correct like my pronouns and as for the people I'm not out to, I just don't want to take the time and effort for them. Like, it might be safe, but at the same time, it's a lot of effort."

Request. Remi found that it created a positive environment when they waited to correct the individual, then later talked to them one-on-one to change their language:

Yeah. I would say a lot of the time my response is to ignore it in the moment and then to follow up with that person later. Can be like, "Hey, just a heads up, I need you to know my pronouns are 'they'/'them'. Can you use this language for me? I would appreciate that in the future" kind of thing. I usually do that to be begin with, although with folks that I know better and had more experience with, I usually just go correct them in the moment.

Eastyn's stated that general reaction to being misgendered was through requesting that the individual change their language. "I'm pretty open about it. I, I'm a fairly vocal person, so I'll just say that I do identify as non-binary and generally if they've said something ignorant, like for

example, the pronoun statement, I'll try to, like politely clarify for them that that might not be the case."

They continued to say that their response to being misgendered was out of frustration, though they changed their response to misgendering over the three years in which they have been out at non-binary:

I think that when I first came out, I was a lot more reactionary. I, like I wanted the validation of people using my correct pronouns and perceiving me in the way that I wanted to be perceived. But over time I think I've gained some maturity enough to relax into it and realize that you catch more flies with honey.

Educate. All of the participants mentioned that they wished to educate individuals or did at one point. Over the four years that Remi has outwardly identified as non-binary, their responses to being misgendered changed from avoiding to educating:

I would just not say anything ever. And just, you know, tell people once at an introduction and then if like they didn't respect that I'd just kind of let it go. But now that I work in higher education. I feel a responsibility to the other trans people on campus and especially the trans students that my coworkers will work with. It's your responsibility to teach them to do better. And so, them messing up for me is a great way for me to teach them how to do better for our students. So that's one of my biggest motivators to change that with like wanting them to do better with other people. And I'm just more confident in my identity now, too. I'm also going to stand up for that.

Orion's experience matched with Remi's; Orion felt responsible for educating others on the issue:

I feel like there's a lot of people who were just kind of told that there's two genders, that's the way it is. And they don't necessarily know any different because they were never taught any different. And I feel like it's the responsibility of people who are educated in that way to explain and help educate other people so that everyone can be more aware.

Harlem, like the other participants, stated, "I don't want to waste my breath trying to educate someone that isn't willing to listen. So, I feel like I am more than willing to answer, but I always obviously add the caveat of I do not speak for all non-binary, trans people. But this I can only speak of my own experiences for sure."

Non-binary individuals' emotional and communicative responses to being misgendered related to research question four about how non-binary individuals respond to being misgendered, as their internal dialogue expressed hurt, frustration, and weariness. Externally, the non-binary individuals either avoided correcting the misgendering situation, requested that the individual uses neutral language, or educated the individuals as to the importance of gender inclusivity. Each of these internal dialogues and external reactions were interchangeable based on the context.

Conclusion

It was clear from the 12 participants that non-binary individuals faced erasure every day. Non-binary is a subjective term where each non-binary individual defines what it means to them, yet it is still be a valid group identity as well. Shared identities, generational gaps, family, religion, politics, media representation, and microaggressions were all conditions that contributed to non-binary individuals' acceptance. Non-binary individuals used gender expression to increase visibility of their gender identity and to reduce binary pronoun usage directed at them. The refusal of gendering non-binary individuals correctly was a common

reaction, either to show disrespect to the individual or because the binary system is so engrained in society. Within gendered restrooms, non-binary individuals who present as androgynous were dehumanized within binary restrooms because binary individuals fear gender ambiguity. Culture and understanding the English language revealed that realities of individuals are rooted in their language systems, which is why heteronormative English speakers and foreign individuals who speak gendered languages have a difficult comprehending the conscious use of singular “they,” even though it is used ambiguously every day. When misgendered, individuals emotionally experienced hurt, frustration, and weariness depending on the effort and education of the individual. Communicatively, non-binary individuals either avoided, requested a correction, or educated individuals about their misgendered pronouns. In the next chapter, I will review the emergent themes and give implications for future research.

CHAPTER IV: DISCUSSION

Discussion of Research Questions

This present study's objective was to give non-binary identities more representation, as they are under-researched. After conducting the analysis, which was discussed in the previous chapter, it was clear that heteronormative societies, at least in the United States, do not consider non-binary individuals' existence. Looking forward, there needs to be future research surrounding the interpersonal, intercultural, and linguistic aspects of the non-binary experience.

Using semi-structured, respondent interviews, I was able to explore the narratives of non-binary individuals, in which many of the 12 non-binary participants expressed the necessity of this study. Apart from needing to identify as non-binary and meeting the IRB criterion, such as being over the age of 18 and residing outside of the European Economic Area, there were no other restrictions for participating within this study. As a result, individuals from various parts of the U.S. had a voice within the research. First, I will interpret my findings, then I will discuss the strengths, limitations, and future research.

“Always Fighting for My Identity”

Non-binary individuals shared their experiences with visibility and erasure, which was the main focus of research question one. All 12 participants expressed that they struggled with cisgender individuals holding binary assumptions of their identity. The participants' experiences of microaggressions supports Dasgupta and Rivera's (2006) study, which suggests that the two categories that cause, but also can eliminate discrimination and microaggressions, are society's beliefs of non-binary equality and control of their behavior. As the non-binary gender is not well understood by majority groups as of now, binary individuals respond in ways that create a gap. 11 of the 12 participants stated that they have experienced microaggressions, which individually

manifested as purposeful misgendering and using their dead name, being told to hide their identity, being told that there were only two genders, and receiving over the top apologies. Non-binary individuals were targets of “blatant transphobia,” which involved verbal harassment both face-to-face and online. Education settings were a source of microaggressions, such as instructors refusing to use their preferred pronouns. The individual who said that they have not experienced microaggressions explained that they did not publicly identify as non-binary because they were not emotionally prepared to face potential hate directed at them. It was not only cisgender individuals committing microaggressions, but also other members of the LGBTQ community.

It is necessary to mention that it would not be accurate to say that all members of both the cisgender community and the LGBTQ community refuse to acknowledge that non-binary is a valid gender. In fact, all participants said that they had positive interactions from both communities. Understanding the non-binary experience is different than living it, which was why there was confusion surrounding the gender, though the participants mentioned that individuals, especially friend groups, were willing to increase their understanding. All of the participants mentioned that they had difficulties communicating to their parents about their non-binary identity. Orion mentioned that they were nervous about the possibility of being cut off, though they believed that they would be accepted if they were to be out to their parents. Blaine was in the process of coming out to their family and experienced backlash about the gender spectrum. Generational factors played a role in individuals’ willingness to understand and accept the non-binary identity. Each of the participants said that generations older than millennials, especially those with conservative views, were not receptive to the idea of a gender spectrum. Mak’s experiences reflected that of the other participants, in which they said that older generations

“meet them with ridicule,” which resulted in them “being tired” by the lack of willingness to understand. Unwillingness and confusion surrounding the gender spectrum was due to lack of media representation. While gender diversity is becoming more popular (Leent & Mills, 2018), participants state that there is still a lack of gender representation. Older generations had little resources to educate themselves of the gender spectrum, which explains their ignorance toward the topic. Until then gender diversity expands, the non-binary gender will continue to be viewed incorrectly as trend, and ultimately, invalidated.

“It Just Confuses Them”

Research question two focused on how the outer appearance of non-binary individuals impacted pronoun use directed at them. Non-binary individuals within this study expressed that they felt the need to change their appearance in order to “flag” to others that their gender identity was not binary. The appearance changes took the form of either growing out their hair or cutting it, depending on which look was more androgynous. While there were two participants who did not feel the need to change their appearances, one mentioned that they had anxiety over shopping in sections where people assumed they did not belong, such as the men’s section in stores. Two participants stated that they did not want to feed into a stereotype, but to be free to dress how they felt and still remain valid. Therefore, while some individuals’ gender expression does reflect their gender identity, such as dressing androgynously, this is not always the case (McKittrick, 2015). All participants shared that people assumed their gender without assuming that there were other options from the binary.

The findings suggested that, while non-binary individuals’ appearance does influence pronoun usage directed at them, such as when they present ambiguously and others find it difficult to determine a binary gender for them, they are often met with confusion and backlash,

especially within binary restrooms. Nagoshi, Hohn, and Nagoshi's (2017) study suggest that there is confusion of gender fluidity, which often takes the form of discrimination, ostracism, and marginalization. As a result of such ostracism, heteronormative individuals push back against gender fluidity and state that "there are only two genders." While this binary thinking is harmful, four participants claimed that they found validation of their non-binary existence through the confusion of these individuals because it showed that they were perceived outside of the binary.

"Language Impacts Our View of the World"

Participants expressed that there were barriers when asking others to use gender-neutral language when referring to them. Clark and Clark (1977) and Ellis (1999) suggest that language itself has no natural meaning, though cultures have formed meanings based on their collective beliefs. While societies in the U.S. proved only to consider the binary identity as valid thus far, their language reflects this belief. All participants expressed that there was pushback from individuals when asked to use the singular "they" pronoun when referring to them. All of the participants stated that some individuals said that "they" was only a plural pronoun, which they used as an excuse not to respect the wishes of the non-binary participants. Merriam-Webster (2018), however, announced that "they" was both plural and singular. In fact, the singular "they" has been used throughout literature history, as well as in everyday interactions. Participants gave multiple examples of how "they" was directed at singular individuals whose gender was not determined.

Additionally, three participants mentioned that gendered language contributed to the understanding of gender-neutral language, or lack thereof. Mads explained that cultural backgrounds impact the comprehension of gender-neutral language, which they experienced

firsthand as their mother's first language was Spanish. Mads also mentioned that cultural values influence language, and therefore, reality. As Spanish is a gendered language, there is rarely a space for gender-neutral language, which contributes to non-binary individuals' ostracism. While there are barriers that restrict non-binary language, language shift is possible, though it is slow, as society's realities must reflect the change, which supports Darr and Kibbey's (2016) study.

“How Do You Respond to Situations Like That?”

As all 12 participants expressed hurt and frustration as an emotional response to being misgendered, which influenced their behavior of avoidance, requests that the individual uses their correct pronouns, and education about non-binary language. If a stranger misgenders individuals, it still hurts, but not as badly than if a close friend or family member does it. Additionally, intentionality contributed to feeling hurt. If an individual does not have the current knowledge to know about the gender spectrum, there seemed to be less hurt because they did not intentionally misgender the non-binary individuals. However, if individuals refuse to use the proper pronouns because they do not view non-binary individuals as valid, that has a higher degree of hurt.

Frustration occurred in two situations. One was when the non-binary individual found that there was a lack of willingness to respect their identity, such as when people actively avoided using the singular “they” pronoun. The other situation was when the experience caused discomfort as the non-binary individuals found that those situations could be avoided as there were many resources at their disposal, such as a Google search. “Being weary” was also an emotional response because participants were misgendered every single day, which meant that the negative interactions piled on top of one another. There was a sense of “loss of hope” when

discussing being misgendered because non-binary individuals and the importance of gender-neutral language was not well understood.

The previous emotional responses to being misgendered impacted the behavior and response of the non-binary individuals while they were misgendered. Communicative responses to misgendering reflect Orbe's (1996) co-cultural theory, which describes interactions between marginalized and dominant groups. Orbe and Roberts' (2012) article on co-cultural theory helps explain the different strategies minority groups practiced when communicating with dominant groups. The co-cultural theory was never related directly to non-binary individuals' experiences, which allows a basis for further theoretical understandings. Orbe and Roberts provide three examples of practice that the participants used when interacting with minority groups: "averting controversy" (p. 295), "developing positive face" (p. 295), and "educating others" (p. 295). That is, non-binary individuals switched their communicative patterns when they were misgendered between avoidance, requesting, and educating. The participants' decision to avoid correcting pronoun usage fell under co-cultural theory's "averting controversy" (p. 295). Orbe and Roberts described averting controversy as the conscious act of not sharing information about one's self to avoid potential unpleasant or dangerous situations. This took place when participants were in a professional setting or if the non-binary individuals knew that they were not respected within that setting. Three participants stated that they did not want their identities to influence their work life because, even though there were laws against discrimination, they shared that it still does happen. Additionally, one participant stated that they did not want to be an inconvenience to the people around them, so they avoided correcting others when they were misgendered.

Orbe and Roberts (2012) discuss the practice of "developing positive face" (p. 295). This practice was described as the act of minority groups being polite and considerate of the dominant

individuals' stance. The participants developed positive face through requesting, which took place mostly at introductions when the participants asked them to use the singular "they." The participants were polite when requesting this pronoun correction and considered that the dominant group may not know that they should ask about pronoun usage. Requesting also occurred when individuals made a mistake with gendered language and did not correct it themselves. Requesting was a quick method that does not take away from the current conversation and allowed the participants to have a polite and understanding face to the dominant groups.

Finally, the participants enacted Orbe and Roberts' (2012) co-cultural practice of "educating others" (p. 295). This practice was defined as the phenomenon in which minority groups explain the values and norms of their culture and identity. This method was best accepted by individuals who were willing to understand such norms. All participants mentioned that they either educated individuals on the gender spectrum or wanted to. Some individuals found that it was their responsibility to educate others because of their position in higher education, where there was a lot of diversity. This co-cultural strategy was the least common response, however, because the participants had few positive interactions, besides with their friends, about their identities, so they responded in a more cautious manner, possibly in reaction to their perceptions of the situational context and the perceived costs and rewards of a more overt or even assertive response (Orbe, 1996).

Strengths, Limitations, Practical Implications, and Future Research

Strengths and Limitations

The most impactful strength of my study is that I reached saturation (Lindlof & Taylor, 2011) after eight interviews but continued to conduct four interviews after saturation. I wanted to

make sure that all non-binary voices were heard and that my research accurately reflected their experiences. Additionally, the participants resided all over the U.S., including areas that were very conservative, such as the south, and regions that were liberal, such as the east and west coast, which allowed my research to have diversity. The age of my participants varied between 18-27, which is a strength because the study showed the experiences of individuals who were both in college and outside of that age range to give more accurate results. Finally, the use of respondent interviews allowed my participants to share in-depth experiences so that I could get a better sense of understanding, which was reflected in this study.

Out of the 12 participants, nine of them were solely White, as well as those with intersectional identities. It would be beneficial to include more ethnicity and racial diversity moving forward. Additionally, it was necessary that I use a convenience sample because non-binary individuals proved to be challenging to recruit: Many participants initially were untrusting of individuals discussing their experiences, as they have either had bad experiences before, or heard of outlets producing untrue and damaging content of non-binary and transgender individuals. To increase trust and comfortability, I disclosed my non-binary identity and performed member checks to make sure that the research reflected the participants' experiences. Additionally, as a non-binary individual, I had preconceptions of what the participants may have experienced. While this might be seen as a limitation, it was a strength to my research, as I was already aware of how to respect the participants' identities. Not only did my identity help me to build trust between myself and the participants, but it also helped guide me to notice major themes and noteworthy exceptions. Many of the findings did not reflect my own experiences, but those of the participants, which established that I did reduce my own bias. After all, Malterud

(2001) stated that "preconceptions are not the same as bias, unless the researcher fails to mention them" (p. 484).

Practical Implications

The findings within this study could be used as a foundation for understanding how to incorporate non-binary individuals within society. This study shows the gaps within societal acceptance of non-binary individuals and how individuals can fill those gaps, such as understanding that the singular “they” is grammatically correct. Additionally, the study could be applied to diversity training within corporations or educational settings, such as how to ask individuals of the gender identity (i.e., what are your pronouns?). Diversity training could incorporate how non-binary individuals use emails, pronoun pins/buttons, and business cards. This study can be applied to academic writing, in which researchers can apply gender-neutral language within their papers. Instead of stating “he/she,” they should use “they” to avoid exclusion of minority groups.

It is important to remember that this study, while it is an accurate and in-depth foundation of non-binary experiences, cannot be the only one of its kind. Further research surrounding non-binary individuals must take place to normalize their existence around the world.

Future Research

As there is a huge gap in research from the lack of non-binary research, there is wide opportunity for future research. When creating the review of literature, I had difficulty finding research on non-binary individuals. Mostly, articles would be categorized under binary transgender research, which is not entirely reflective of the experiences of non-binary individuals. It would be beneficial to research the transitioning of non-binary individuals and how their sense of physical appearance directly impacts their dysphoria. Individuals mentioned

that their appearance directly impacted their sense of dysphoria, though others said that their dysphoria came from the perspective that others held of them and their identity. Additionally, there are many transgender individuals who identify as either male or female, who claim that non-binary individuals do not experience a sufficient amount of dysphoria to be considered transgender. Both the understanding of why such beliefs are held and the communication patterns between those individuals could open up a clearer understanding of the non-binary struggle.

Additionally, future research should focus on the social dangers of being non-binary. This study found that participants felt invalidated by cisgender individual, though it would be beneficial to understand the reasoning behind why cisgender individuals themselves hold these opinions, as well as their own emotions on the topic. Because non-binary individuals are not seen in general, it would be important to research how non-binary individuals cope with their ostracism, specifically their dependency on social media and their opinions of social media's representation. Non-binary individual existences and experiences on a global level have received limited to no research; therefore, future research must expand to meet the previous gaps.

Summary

The study used qualitative research to have a deeper understanding of the non-binary experience. The study allowed non-binary individuals to have a voice and normalize their existence. Participants' responses during the study also opened doors for the conduction of future research, which is equally as important.

Prior to this study, as a non-binary individual, I expected the individuals to have very similar experiences and thoughts that I held. However, it became clear from the very first interview that the non-binary identity is subjective to the individual and is unique for every

person who identifies as non-binary. What does hold true, however, is that each participant felt a lack of validation by heteronormative communities and felt that they were not seen the way that they saw themselves, which proved to be a struggle for them every day. Language, though it is ever-changing, creates barriers in the acceptance of non-binary individuals, specifically with pronoun usage and name changes. I urge other scholars to conduct further non-binary research to spread awareness and different perspectives on the topic.

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APPENDIX A: INFORMED CONSENT

Informed Consent Form

Introduction

This research study is being conducted by Mika Richards as part of their master's thesis under the direction of John R. Baldwin, in the School of Communication at Illinois State University, to determine non-binary individuals' experiences with pronoun usage. You must be over 18 years of age to participate. You are ineligible to participate if you are currently within the European Economic Area.

Procedures

If you choose to take part in this research study, you will be asked to complete an open-ended interview. This interview will take approximately 30 to 60 minutes.

Risks/Discomforts

Risks include possible psychological stress and possible loss of confidentiality and resulting loss of status or reputation. Beyond this, the risks are no more than those experienced in everyday life. To mitigate risks, audio files and transcripts will be de-identified, with no record connecting them to specific participants; all relevant documents—digital and paper—will be kept in locked locations. If you feel discomfort as a part of the interview, you may contact ISU Counseling Services (309) 438-3655 if you are an ISU student, or seek a counselor of your own at your own expense if you are not an ISU student.

Benefits

Through this study, I hope to understand non-binary individuals' experiences, as it is a field with limited research. While there are no direct benefits to participants, they could help provide useful information that is important to this area of research.

Confidentiality

All information will remain confidential and will only be reported as group data with no identifying information. Any names that you mention during the interview, including your own name and the names of others, will be changed to pseudonyms during transcription. If you choose a public location for the interview (e.g., a restaurant), I cannot guarantee that anyone overhearing the conversation will maintain confidentiality. Results will be documented in my master's thesis and submitted to the graduate school for uploading to the Milner Library thesis/dissertations database. Data may be used for poster presentations, conference papers, or possible publications.

Participation

Participating in this study is voluntary. Your professors will not know if you participate. Not participating will not affect your current standing with Illinois State University. Refusal to participate involves no penalty or loss of benefits. You may discontinue participation at any time without penalty or loss of benefits. You can also skip questions you do not feel like answering. You are ineligible to participate if you are currently within the European Economic Area.

Conflicts of Interest

There is no conflict of interest presented in this study.

Mandated Reporter

We need to make you aware that in certain research studies, it is our legal and ethical responsibility to report [situations of child abuse, child neglect, or any life-threatening situation] [illegal activity on the ISU campus, campus-controlled locations, or involving ISU students] to appropriate authorities. However, we are not seeking this type of information in our study nor will you be asked questions about these issues.

Questions about the Research

If you have any questions about the study, please contact the researcher, Mika Raylen Richards (brrich2@ilstu.edu) or the supervising instructor, John R. Baldwin (jrbaldw@ilstu.edu). If you have any questions about your rights as a participant in this research, or if you feel you have been placed at risk, you can contact the Research Ethics & Compliance Office at Illinois State University at (309) 438-5527.

You will be given a copy of this consent form for your records.

I consent to participating in the above study.

Signature _____ Date _____

I consent to being recorded. _____

APPENDIX B: INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

Interview Protocol

Have you read the informed consent form that I sent you via email? Do you understand its contents? If you feel uncomfortable or do not want to answer any questions, you can skip it or end the interview early. This is a voluntary interview. There is a chance that you can lose confidentiality, but I will do my best to avoid that from happening. I will change your name in the transcripts and protect the audio files in a private, password protected computer. Do you have any questions?

Demographic Questions

- i. Pronoun:
- ii. Gender:
- iii. How long have you outwardly identified as this gender?:
- iv. Sexual Orientation:
- v. Age:
- vi. Ethnicity:
- vii. Marital Status:

Experiences as a Non-Binary Individual

1. How would you describe yourself on the gender spectrum?
 - How do you identify regarding masculinity and femininity?
2. As a non-binary individual, do you claim the identity of transgender?
 - Why or why not?
 - Do you feel supported by the transgender community?
 - Is there a certain community that you do not feel supported by?
3. Can you recall any experiences in which you were discriminated against or experienced microaggression against you because of your gender identity?
 - If yes, in which ways?
 - What was your response?
 - Would you change your reaction?

4. Do you feel responsible for educating others of the gender spectrum?
 - If yes, how do others usually respond to your explanation?

Transition: Before we move on to the support section, is there anything that you would like to add about your experiences?

Support

5. Next, we will be discussing your support system regarding your gender identity.
 - Can you communicate with your family about your gender identity? Why or why not?
 - Can you communicate with your friends about your gender identity? Why or why not?
 - Can you communicate with your partner (if any) about your gender identity? Why or why not?
 - Who is it that you prefer to talk to about your gender identity? Why?

Transition: Before we move on to gender expression and how it impacts pronoun usage, is there anything that you would like to add about your support?

Gender Expression Impacts Pronoun Usage

6. In what ways, if any, has your gender expression (such as clothes, hair, manner) impacted others' usage of your pronoun?
7. Have you ever changed your appearance, hair, voice, or manners to be perceived in a way that reflects your gender identity? Please explain.
8. Why might neutral pronoun usage be a difficult concept for others to understand? Please explain.

Transition: Before we move on to misgendering and its impacts, is there anything that you would like to add about gender expression and how it impacts pronoun usage?

Misgendering and its Impact

9. Have you ever been misgendered?
 - Are you misgendered often?

- How does being misgendered make you feel?
- Does being misgendered cause you to experience any dysphoria?
- Does misgendering make you feel invalidated?
- How do individuals react upon gendering you? For example, do they deliberate or gender you without thinking?

10. Do you feel that your gender identity is understood by cisgender individuals? In which ways, if any?

- If yes, do you ever feel frustrated when your gender identity is not understood by cisgender individuals?

Transition: Before we move on to responses of being misgendered, is there anything that you would like to add about misgendering and its impacts?

Responses to Being Misgendered

11. What do you think contributes to being misgendered within society? For example, religion or politics. Please explain.
- Can you recall an experience where you responded to being misgendered in accordance to this possible reason?
12. Do you think that gender neutral pronoun usage is a difficult concept for others to understand? Please explain.
13. Have you experienced discomfort within gendered restrooms? Please explain.
- If so, what measures do you usually take to avoid discomfort?
14. Which age generation do you feel the most comfortable with stating your gender identity? Please explain.
15. Can you recall an experience that you did not feel comfortable with stating you were non-binary? Please explain.

16. Do you correct others when you are misgendered? Why or why not?

Is there anything else you would like to add that would help me understand your experiences?

APPENDIX C: PARTICIPANT DEMOGRAPHICS

Participant	Age	Pronouns	Transgender Identity	Out as Non-Binary	Ethnicity
Alys	22	They/She; Depends on Day	No	"Not long"	White
Lynn	18	They/Them	Yes	Nine months	South Asian
Eastyn	19	They/Them	Yes	Three years	White
Jaden	19	They/Them	No	Three/Four years	White
Mak	27	They/Them	No; "Figuring it out"	10 months	White
Mads	27	They/Them	No; Under Umbrella	Seven months	Anglo-Hispanic
Remi	25	They/Them; Ze/Hir	Internally, yes	Four years	White
Mischa	21	They/Them	Yes	Four years	White
Blaine	21	They/Them	Trans*	Six months	White
Orion	19	They/Them	Yes	Five months	Asian and White
Harlem	24	They/Them	Yes	Three years	White
Rowan/Jordi	25	They/Them	Yes	Two months	White

APPENDIX D: SOCIAL MEDIA INVITE TO PROSPECTIVE PARTICIPANTS

Recruiting for Popular Media Platforms:

To Whom This May Concern,

I am a graduate student from Illinois State University's School of Communication conducting research on pronoun usage and its influence on the experiences of those who identify as non-binary.

I will be conducting open-ended interviews, which will last approximately 30-60 minutes. Your participation is completely voluntary. You may decide not to answer any question. To participate, you must be at least 18-years-old, reside within the United States, and identify as non-binary.

Please direct any questions and/or comments to Dr. John Baldwin (jrbaldw@ilstu.edu) or any of the researchers. If you have any questions about your rights as a subject/participant in this research, or if you feel you have been placed at risk, you can contact the Research Ethics & Compliance Office at Illinois State University at (309) 438-2529.

If you are interested, please email the researcher with the subject line "Non-binary" at brrich2@ilstu.edu.

Sincerely,

Mika Raylen Richards

School of Communication

Graduate Student