Dismantling the Single Story: A Collection of Non-Cisgender Experiences

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Abstract

The limited research done on the non-cisgender community (i.e., those whose gender identity is different from the sex assigned at birth) has caused a lack of understanding of this community's experiences and potentially dangerous single-story narratives. Utilizing a feminist perspective, this thesis demonstrates the importance of highlighting non-cisgender experiences through fifteen qualitative interviews and emphasizing the importance of storytelling. Throughout the research, two main themes were explored: community and social support systems, and gender perception and performance. Through these topics, interviewees discussed a vast range of experiences, displaying the complexities and varied experiences that one may encounter due to their gender identity. This study displays the diverse experiences of non-cisgender identities, increasing the narrative of what it means to be non-cisgender.

Key Words: Non-cisgender, non-cisgender experiences, gender presentation, queer communities, non-cisgender communities, one-story narratives.

Dismantling the Single Story: A Collection of Non-Cisgender Experiences

Representation is at the backbone of inclusion. Not being able to see oneself in media, research, and literature causes intense isolation and confusion around one's identity (Abbott, 2022). When representation is limited or biased it can also lead to the creation of negative stereotypes about a community. Overall, this causes stories not to be told, ignoring both the individual and the community's experiences and devaluing them. This often happens to communities that are disregarded, marginalized, stigmatized, and discriminated against, causing their histories and stories to be erased from our mainstream narrative. One such community includes those who identify as non-cisgender (i.e., those whose gender identity is different from the sex assigned at birth). They have continued to be underrepresented and have had their stories silenced. If we cannot learn and hear about these stories, then we cannot see their importance.

The limited research that has been done on this community has been tainted with homophobic and transphobic language, which contributes to the othering of the non-cisgender community (Balakrishnan & Mohapatra, 2022). This was displayed in 1980 when the DSM-III (Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders) incorporated “gender identity disorder” as a mental disorder; thus creating an association between being “mentally ill” and identifying as non-cisgender. In 2013, gender identity disorder was taken out of the DSM, and replaced with gender dysphoria. The goal of this change was to decrease discrimination against the non-cisgender community as it “makes it a code instead of a diagnosis,” as well as shifting the “emphasis in treatment from fixing a disorder to resolving distress over the mismatch” (Russo, 2017). This followed a surge in inclusive research surrounding non-cisgender identities; however, this research is still limited (Twist et. al, 2020). In turn, this inaccessibility causes the media to become a primary purveyor of stories and representation. Books, TV shows, movies,

social media, etc. have become the only widely accessible way to portray non-cisgender experiences. These forms of media commonly display tropes that stereotype non-cisgender experiences into one scripted idea of how this community relates to their gender identity. Sam Feder's 2020 documentary, "Disclosure," displays these stereotypes found in media and highlights the traumatic ways transgender individuals have been presented, as well as, the limited media that displays nonbinary[1] and trans-masc[2] experiences (Feder, 2020). For example, many depictions of transgender individuals in film are displayed as deceiving the cisgender characters like in *Ace Ventura: Pet Detective* (1994), or are viewed as mentally ill as seen in *Silence of the Lambs* (1991) (Feder, 2020). Although more recent movies have tried to increase positive representation, they tend to follow common tropes and do not include transgender perspectives in their creation like *The Danish Girl* (2015) and *Boys Don't Cry* (1999), which both hired cisgender actors and were created by cisgender directors (Feder, 2020). It is due to the existence of limited positive portrayals of the non-cisgender community, that the media continues writing a story of isolation and erasure of this community's experiences.

Although the history of non-cisgender experiences has been limited in media and academia, it has thrived in oral histories (Twist et. al, 2020). The telling of personal stories has been the only way to diversify and portray non-stereotypical experiences regarding gender (Twist et. al, 2020). In this thesis, I seek to provide an outlet for these stories, to emerge and create an increased archival for these experiences. To do this, I have conducted 15, 60-minute qualitative

[1] Nonbinary is defined as those who exist outside the binary of woman and man (Human Rights Campaign, 2023). All terms are described in the "language use in text" section.
[2] Trans-masc refers to those whose gender identity is masculine but were assigned female at birth (AFAB) ("Glossary of Terms," 2023). All terms are described in the "language use in text" section.

interviews with individuals ranging from the ages of 18-28 who identify as non-cisgender[3]. Throughout these interviews, I asked a series of questions regarding how one's gender identity affects life experiences, including schooling, family relationships, platonic and romantic relationships, community building, emotionality, intersecting identities, self-performance, self-expression, and sense of self. This has led to a collection of diverse experiences within the non-cisgender community. To start this thesis, I will discuss the history of non-cisgender representation, new research, and how these past and present styles have impacted stigmatization and one-story narratives around this community. I will then move into my methods for this research, why I chose my interview questions, and how these methods align with values within Women and Gender Studies and feminist research. I will continue this discussion by gathering these varied experiences and how they differ from the larger narrative of non-cisgender experiences commonly displayed within media and research by analyzing the impact of communities and gender presentation of the participants. These experiences will be divided into two subtopics: community and support systems, and gender perception and performance. I will then conclude this paper with a description of the importance of this work and changes that can be made for future research.

Background

History of Gender

Gender, in itself, is a laden word due to its long history of constantly being constructed and reconstructed (Gilley & Masullo, 2022). Within different cultures, gender has been manufactured differently from understanding gender as institutionalized stagnant roles to a fluid spectrum. Today, Western understanding of gender dominates the narrative of what consists of

[3] This includes anyone whose gender identity is different then sex assigned at birth. Participants used gender identity labels of trans-women, trans-man, nonbinary, gender fluid, and unknown. All terms are described in the "language use in text" section.

societally correct and incorrect perceptions of gender (Balakrishnan & Mohapatra, 2022). This understanding predominantly focuses on gender roles constructed within the gender binary of female and male. These roles reflect a patriarchal system as they place power on masculinity and limit the power of femininity while ignoring anyone outside of this binary power system. Western colonial legacy entails violently forcing these ideals of a gender binary upon other cultures[4]. However, this does not mean that this Western perception is the only understanding of gender identity; although less dominating, there are still pronounced views of gender that differ from this overpowering interpretation. This includes Two Spirt Indigenous gender identities, Kumu Hina in Polynesian cultures, Muxhe (Zapotec of Oaxaca) in Mexican cultures, and many others (O'Daniel, 2015). All of these expand the understanding of gender identity beyond the binary and allow for the crossing of these boundaries without judgment (O'Daniel, 2015). This differs from the dominant Western construction, which reinforces power dynamics and institutionalizes an ideal of a gender binary that consists of two genders: "women/female" (those assigned as female at birth) and "men/male" (those assigned male at birth) (Balakrishnan & Mohapatra, 2022). Even within this ostracizing set of guidelines, there are rules within this binary. Both genders must be cisgender and they must act within the constraints of their assigned gender (Adomaitis, 2024). These constraints become institutionalized as each society folds them into their values and expectations of how each gender should act. Historically, in the United States "women" play a submissive caregiving role that predominantly takes place in the private sphere (Kerber, 1988). Comparably, "men" play a dominant role in the public sphere, which focuses on providing and protecting the family (Kerber, 1988). These roles and expectations

[4] Within this paper, I will be focusing primarily on this Western understanding of gender, with a dominate focus on the United States.

change depending on cultures, regions, and family values, causing many different productions of gender and gender performance on a global scale.

Although gender has been a prevalent and enforced norm in Western societies, it has historically been ignored within research and continues to be ignored for those outside the gender binary. As the modern women's movement gained traction in the 1970s, so did an advanced understanding of gender (Stryker, 2009). Gender within the binary started to become incorporated into a majority of research projects and demographic variables, at the same time the roles established within gender started to be critiqued (Balakrishnan & Mohapatra, 2022). Researchers started to analyze gender through social, psychological, and behavioral lenses, displaying a critical understanding of gender beyond the simple biological construction (Balakrishnan & Mohapatra, 2022). However, the understanding of gender stayed focused on the established and unchallenged binary of women and men. Feminist researchers focused their work on trying to display how the binary is assembled through biological, psychological, sociological, and philosophy-based research (Balakrishnan & Mohapatra, 2022). Throughout all of this, there was still an ignorance and erasure of experiences outside of this female/male in-group.

In the 1980s, there was an increase in LGBTQ+ organizations and protests due to the HIV and AIDS pandemic. Due to this, rights-based organizations like ACT UP and the Gay and Lesbian movement began to highlight concerns relating to the queer population (Morris, 2017). Even though these organizations included many transgender voices, transgender and non-cisgender rights were often ignored or overlooked by gay men and lesbian women (Stryker, 2009). At the same time, many non-cisgender protesters stood at the front lines of these protests and organizations; however, similarly, they were overlooked and erased from this history, including Sylvia Riveria and Marsha P. Johnson who participated in Stonewall and continuously

fought for transgender rights (Feder, 2020). It's important here to note that transgender[5] activists have tried to bring transgender rights to light for the last 40 years; however, due to the ostracization of queer rights-based groups and feminist movements, the non-cisgender community has constantly been ignored and dehumanized (Devor & Haefele-Thomas, 2019). This has happened by discussion of trans-rights being pushed back from these movements and devalued within their movement and experiences of direct discrimination and harassment from these activist groups (Stryker, 2009).

Academia mirrored this similar ostracization as there has been limited research pertaining to non-cisgender experiences, continuing this cycle of erasure. It's important to note that the term "transgender" regarding gender, was not first seen until the 1960s; instead, terms like "cross-dressing," "transvestite," "transexual," and "hermaphrodite" were used when addressing transgender individuals[6] (Benson, 2019). Early research used this oppressive and discriminatory language to alienate the non-cisgender communities, which allowed for the justification of violence and harassment against non-cisgender folks. At the same time, these studies focused solely on the negative experiences of the non-cisgender community (Balakrishnan & Mohapatra, 2022). Research focused on this community primarily highlighted experiences of harassment, discrimination, isolation, and negative emotionality. Most studies consisted of research on the negative experiences of this community. For example, study titles consisted of keywords like "harassment," "abuse," "mental health hardships," "loss of community," "suicide," and "discrimination." All inferring that being non-cisgender will lead to hardships in their lives.

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[5] Transgender has become an umbrella term for all those who identify differently than their sex assigned at birth. This can include non-binary, gender queer, agender, and other gender nonconforming individuals ("Glossary of Terms"). All terms are described in the "language use in text" section.

[6] These terms are now outdated and offensive, as they have been used to oppress the non-cisgender community.

Although it is more likely that the non-cisgender community will experience harassment, discrimination, and violence compared to the cisgender community it is not the only unique experience that this community has. Instead, there needs to be an archival of data that displays the reality of a non-cisgender person's life including both the negative and positive experiences. It is this limited single-story narrative that this thesis assists with dismantling.

The Violence of a Single Story

The continued ostracization of non-cisgender narratives within a heteronormative cisgender-focused society creates a violent one-story narrative as these stories become strewed to fit dominant ideals. In a 2009 TED Talk by Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, she explains that a one-story narrative creates dangerous assumptions about the community and leads to a lack of representation of diverse experiences (Adichie, 2009). This creates even more isolation as those who have not experienced aspects of the one-story narrative are left feeling alone and different. The 2020 documentary *Disclosure* focuses on the danger of the one-story narrative created by the media (Feder, 2020). The limited media representation that centers on the non-cisgender community primarily highlights the trauma and negative experiences that these individuals may have (Balakrishnan & Mohapatra, 2022). This is shown through movies like *Bohemian Rhapsody* (2018), *Boys Don't Cry* (1999), and a variety of criminal and medical dramas TV shows including *Grey's Anatomy* (2005-present), and *Criminal Minds* (2005-present). From a focus on HIV/AIDS, isolation, ostracization, harassment, and illnesses created by transitioning, a majority of these narratives focus solely on negative events in one's life. Eventually, this single story leads to research continuing these narratives as these studies focus on these negative events. Research on loss of community, dysphoria, harassment, and discrimination dominates research on the non-cisgender population. This creates extreme harm as the LGBTQ+ community becomes

engulfed in negative experiences creating an expectation that queer/transgender individuals only have negative experiences when coming out. However, this research found that the complexities of coming out include more than just negative experiences, going against this common trope. A study researching the impacts of negative representation of the transgender community found that frequent exposure to negative depictions of one's own community causes increased health issues due to high rates of stress and anxiety (Hughto et al, 2021). Therefore this negative representation not only creates a violent single-story narrative, but also leads to serious physical impacts on the community itself. It becomes important to archive these diverse stories to break the cycle of creating a negative one-story narrative. In the last decade, there has been an increase in these narratives; however, they are still very limited. Therefore, this paper will address the complexities of non-cisgender experiences to combat this single-story narrative.

Ethics of Research

As explained, research on the non-cisgender community has been filled with discrimination and isolation; unfortunately, this is an all too common theme in human-based research. Research has been a way to justify the oppression of marginalized communities as it creates a dichotomy between the powerful and the powerless. Historically, colonizer groups would go into colonized communities and make assumptions and assessments about that community which aligned with their Western prejudices (Tamale, 2011). Research, although often identified as non-objective, has continued to use previous biases and dangerous assumptions. It takes the stories of others and uses them for its own benefit (Richards et. al, 2017). This is done by creating a power dynamic between the researcher and the interviewee; allowing the researcher to justify taking ownership of these stories (Tamale, 2011). This research process has continuously been repeated within academia, leading to these populations being

suppressed and exploited. Women and Gender Studies and Ethnic Studies have created research frameworks that combine this entanglement with colonialism. This is done by understanding the historical impacts of research, focusing work on intersectionality, and using research to support social transformation (Hesse-Biber, 2014). Therefore, this study was focused on combating this power dynamic and using feminist research frameworks to give back power to the participant. This will be discussed more within the methods section of this thesis.

Research conducted at Michigan State University describes a research process that breaks this cycle of exploitation (Campbell et. al, 2023). This study explains that to conduct ethical research surrounding sensitive topics, in this case, research involving sexual assault survivors, it is important to understand why the individual wanted to be a part of this study and to incorporate their hopes for the research outcome (Campbell et. al, 2023). The researcher recommended asking what the interviewees would like to get out of this interview and why they decided to participate (Campbell et. al, 2023). Doing this makes it the researcher's responsibility to help those hopes flourish. Based on these findings, this research also incorporated a question dedicated to understanding the participant's hopes for the research to break down the power dynamic within this study, which will be further explained in the methods chapter.

Language Use in Text

Throughout this paper, I will use a large extent of contemporary language revolving around the LGBTQ+ community. As a study conducted by Benson displayed, terms around gender fluctuate based on the individual (Benson, 2019). These terms may be defined differently by the many different interviewees (Benson, 2019). However, here I will state the most frequently used definition of these terms, and throughout the thesis when a term is used differently than this definition, I will explain what the participant meant by its different usage.

Gender Identity

In the United States, gender is assumed to be the same as one's sex assigned at birth; however, sex and gender identity are separated and need to be understood in this light. *Sex* is defined as a label commonly put on birth certificates that are based on one's genitals and chromosomes. *Gender identity*, in contrast, is much more complex as it is impacted by one's personal identity, performance of one's identity, and gender roles constructed by societal ideals. Gender identity within the United States is then split into two categories based on one being seen as normal (cisgender) and the other as abnormal (transgender) (Adomaitis, 2024). Those who identify as *cisgender* have the same gender identity as their biological sex assigned at birth. If their gender identity differs from the biological sex assigned at birth, then they are categorized under the umbrella term *transgender*. It is important to note, that those assigned as *intersex* at birth are not usually defined under the term cisgender or transgender, and instead fall under their own sex and gender identity. Within the transgender/non-cisgender umbrella, there are many other terms. Those who identify with the opposite gender than their assigned sex may use the terms *trans-man* or *trans-woman*. This may also be displayed in terms like *AFAB (Assigned Female at Birth)* or *AMAB (Assigned Male at Birth)* when describing sex assigned at birth. Those who do not fall into this gender binary may use terms like *non-binary*, which refer to those who exist outside the binary. Recently, this term has become an umbrella term to describe all gender identities that fit outside the gender binary (Human Rights Campaign, 2023). *Gender fluid* is also one of the terms under this umbrella defined as individuals who fluctuate between gender identities, and are beyond a single gender. These individuals usually view gender as something that can be fluid and change. *Gender non-conforming*, also under the non-binary umbrella, are those who do not behave in the traditional aspect of their assigned gender or do not fit into that

category. Lastly, *genderqueer*, are those who reject the traditional understandings of gender and instead embrace the fluidity of gender (Human Rights Campaign, 2023). *Gender expression* also influences gender identity as it becomes a way that an individual may perform one's gender identity; however, it does not need to align with their gender identity. Terms that are used to describe this gender expression are terms like *masc*: when a person displays stereotypically masculine traits, *femme:* when someone displays stereotypical feminine traits, and *androgynous*: when someone displays traits that do not fit within this binary. Pronouns that the individual may use can also change depending on the gender identity and gender expression, although some will use pronouns that may not align with this identity. Pronouns used in the following analysis will include the following they/them, she/her, he/him, she/they, he/they, he/she/they, as well as neo pronouns[7] like ze/zir.

Sexual Orientation

Although my paper primarily focuses on gender identity, sexual orientation became an important conversation. *Sexual orientation* is described as one's sexual, emotional, and/or romantic attraction to another. Similarly to gender, these terms have been constructed and categorized as normal (heterosexual) and abnormal (homosexual). The term *heterosexual* (also known as *straight*) is used as those who are attracted to those of the opposite gender identity. *Homosexual* is defined as those who are attracted to those of the same gender identity. Those who identify as a man and are attracted to other men may use the term *gay.* This term has also become an umbrella term for those whose sexual orientation is constructed as abnormal similarly to homosexual. *Lesbian* is commonly defined as a woman who is attracted to other women. The term lesbian may often coexist with the term sapphic. *Sapphic* includes those who identify as

[7] Neo-pronouns are used by those whose gender identity may be outside the binary realm. These pronouns are often new words that are not historically used for pronouns. This includes a wide range of pronouns, allowing for the freedom of gender expression.

lesbian, bisexual, pansexual, trans-femme, trans-masc, nonbinary and cis women who are attracted to women. In its official definition, *Pansexual* is used in regards to those who are attracted to all those under the non-cisgender and cisgender label, this attraction more likely forms through personal attributes rather than attraction to gendered traits. *Bisexual* is defined as being attracted to both men and women. This term can differ for each person, including those outside of the gender binary. Regarding sexuality, *queer* is used for those who do not fit the heteronormative relationship style. *Asexual* is used for those who do not have a sexual attraction or who lack interest in sexual activity. Some individuals may refer to themselves as *ace flux*, meaning that they may have periods where they are not attracted to someone sexually and/or have no interest in sexual activity.

Conclusion

It is important to note the way that historical events and the use of research have impacted the non-cisgender community by ostracizing them from research and creating one-story narratives through biased research and ignorant media. Overall, this causes a limited discussion of the non-cisgender community and limited research on these experiences. Therefore, within this study, I hope to describe the complexities within the non-cisgender experience and break this one-story narrative. In the following chapters, I will discuss my research methods and how I used feminist research to create an ethical study that prioritizes the participants. I will also note the complex ways that communities and gender presentation influence the diverse lives of the non-cisgender community and conclude with a discussion on why this information is important to breaking down the one-story narrative.

Methods

Introduction

This chapter will start by discussing the recruitment process for the study, its use of quantitative surveys and qualitative interviews, as well as how the researcher focused on ethical data collection. It will then continue by discussing the reasons behind using qualitative interviews as its main source of information, the coding process, and an interpretation of the qualitative data. Finally, this section will conclude with the researcher's emphasis on feminist methodology and the researcher's positionality.

Recruitment Process

To recruit participants for this study, posters were distributed on the University of Colorado Boulder's campus and promoted in different queer-based organizations, such as the Gender Sexuality Alliance Club, the University of Colorado Boulder's Pride Office, Rocky Mountain Equality (formally Out Boulder), as well as within college courses that covered LGBTQ+ topics on the University of Colorado Boulder's campus. The posters were also available and distributed digitally on the researcher's social media platforms such as Instagram, Facebook, Discord, and Snapchat. During the interviews, the researcher also utilized snowballing tactics by asking the participants if they recommended anyone else for this study or knew anyone who would be interested in participating. The posters included a QR code which led to a quantitative application to make sure the participant met the following criteria. The criteria included identifying as non-cisgender, being 18 or older, and being willing to share their experiences about their non-cisgender identity. This application also included additional questions regarding race, ethnicity, pronouns, and sex assigned at birth, as well as contact

information for the researcher. By the end of the initial application process, there were a total of 24 eligible participants.

The researcher then contacted applicants that were eligible; all contact information was stored securely on a VPN and destroyed after the interview was concluded. When following up with the applicant, the researcher used a scripted email that stated "Thank you for filling out the participation form for my research study on non-cisgender experiences. Would there be a time you would be able to meet to do the interview? The interview should last around an hour and can be in a public or private space. If you would prefer to do the interview privately, I will book a room at the University of Colorado's Norlin Library. Please let me know if you have a preference or any questions about the study." Out of the 24 applicants, 18 responded to the email and scheduled an interview. Three applicants then canceled their interview before it commenced and were unable to reschedule a follow-up interview. Overall this study included 15 qualitative interviews.

Research Process and Questions

After the participants had been contacted, they were given the option of a public or private location to conduct the interview. All private interviews were held in private study rooms within the University of Colorado's Norlin Library. All interviewees were told that the interview was approximately an hour long. A majority of the applicants took the whole hour for the interview. All interviewees consented to their interview being recorded and transcribed via Zoom. Once the interview ended, the applicant was given the option to create their own fake name for the study. Interviews were then stored on a secure VPN to keep information private. After transcription, all identifying information was removed, the recording was destroyed and the transcription was put under the participant's fake name. Due to the researcher's on-campus job at

the University of Colorado Boulder, they were considered a mandatory reporter in all cases of discrimination, harassment, sexual harassment, or related forms of retaliation against any protected class[8]. Therefore, the interviewee was notified of this information at the beginning of the interview and told that if they disclose any information regarding experiences of discrimination, harassment, sexual harassment, or related forms of retaliation against their gender identity or other identities at the University of Colorado Boulder or by anyone affiliated with the University of Colorado Boulder, the researcher would need to report this information to the Office of Institutional Equity and Compliance (OIEC). To combat this constraint from impacting the information that the interviewee was willing to discuss, they were given an optional anonymous survey where they could disclose any instances of harassment, discrimination or any other information that they did not include in the initial interview. Five participants responded, primarily discussing instances of discrimination on campus.

During the interview, the participant was asked a series of questions divided into eight different sections, with each section having a series of open-ended qualitative questions. These sections included Personal Definitions/Demographics, Understanding Your Gender, Experiences Throughout Life, Experiences at School, Experiences at Work, Other Relationships, Emotions of Gender Identity, and Other Experiences. Throughout the interview, the researcher also had an outline of questions which included follow-up questions and allowed for the researcher to take the interview in a different order depending on the participant's answers. Reference qualitative interview in appendix for list of interview questions.

[8] Protective classes include Race, Color, National Origin, Sex, Pregnancy, Age, Political Affiliation, Disability, Creed, Religion, Sexual orientation, Gender identity, Gender expression, Political Philosophy, Veteran status.

Participants

Participants from this study were asked a series of demographic questions, all answers are listed in Table 1. The study's sample fell between the range of 18 to 28 years old with a majority being 21 (Figure 1). The majority of the population (86.7%) were undergraduate students with two exceptions, one being in graduate school and the other dropping out, yet hoping to pursue an undergraduate degree in the following year (Figure 2). The race/ethnicity of the participants also had limited variability as thirteen participants (86.7%) identifying as white or caucasian, one participant identifying as biracial, and one participant identifying as Black and African American (Figure 3). The other smallest variability of participants was those who were AMAB with only two participants recording being AMAB and 13 participants reporting being AFAB (Figure 4). Out of 15 participants, four participants identified as non-binary, two identified as gender fluid, one as a transwoman, two as transmen, two recorded as unknown and/or complicated, and four identified as a mix of multiple gender identities. Within this, four used she/they pronouns, two used he/they pronouns, two used he/him pronouns, one used she/her pronouns, four used they/they pronouns, and four used any pronouns. Sexual orientation also became an important discussion in this study as two participants described themselves as bisexual, three were pansexual, two were ace, four were queer, two answered as complicated, and two were unknown (Figure 7). It's important to note that although these participants may identify with a certain gender identity, pronouns, and sexuality, these terms, although similar, may mean different things to each participant. The demographics table can be referenced as *Table 1* in the appendix section.

Interpretation of Qualitative Data

After all interviews had been concluded and transcripts of interviews were completed, the researcher created a coding system to find patterns between the interviewees. The researcher

noted any repeating themes throughout the interviews, recording the number of times these themes occurred throughout the 15 interviews (Table 2). Communities and gender performance were noted as the most common topics brought up by the interviewees and will be discussed more deeply in the analysis section of this text. By using this coding process, the researcher hoped to avoid enabling one-story narratives, allowing the interviewees to discuss what was most important to them. By using broad themes, it allows for a more diverse understanding of the way gender influences one's own emotions, relationships, gender roles, intersection of experiences, and perception of self and others. All codes can be referenced in *Table 2* within the appendix.

I decided to predominantly use qualitative interviews when conducting this research due to the way that it allows for more complex elongated responses than a quantitative survey allows. A study done by Beethan and Demetriades, explains that quantitative data dominates the world of research, but often misses important variables such as gender relations; however, qualitative data allows for an in-depth discussion and displays nuances that are often missed in quantitative data (Beetham & Demetriades, 2007). By also conducting the interview in person or over Zoom[9] it allowed me to gain trust with the participants and for them to feel comfortable sharing these vulnerable parts of their identity. Nielsen's text explains that qualitative research builds trust between the researcher and the participant as it engages in a free discourse "resulting conversation is potentially very constructive, creative, and somewhat indeterminate" (Nielsen, 2018, p. 29). By using a qualitative research method it builds trust that ultimately leads to a more in-depth and truthful discussion. While engaging in this discourse it became very important to build this trust, as these experiences could be extremely vulnerable to share and may have not

[9] Only one participant met over zoom. Interview was recorded and stored in a secure file on a VPN. The interviewee verbally consented to the interview. Once the transcription was completed the interview was immediately destroyed.

been shared before (especially with participants who are not publicly out[10] about their gender identity). Therefore, it was really important for me to conduct this study through qualitative interviews.

Methodology and Ethical Research

As a feminist researcher conducting this thesis under the Women and Gender Studies program, I wanted to guarantee that my study was ethical and kept in mind the way identities and historical backgrounds may influence and be rooted within my research. As previously stated in my background, research has colonialist roots as it creates a power structure benefiting the researcher and disadvantaging the participant (Tamale, 2011). Therefore, while conducting this research, it became important for me as the researcher to combat this colonialist power structure. To do this, I took influence from a research study conducted on sexual assault survivors' comfortability telling their stories (Campbell et. al, 2023). Within this study, the researchers found that sexual assault survivors felt more comfortable telling their stories if they felt included in the research process and knew what was going to happen with their information (Campbell et. al, 2023). To create this sense of inclusion, the researchers told the participants exactly what was happening with their information, how it was being stored, and the goal of the study (Campbell et. al, 2023). I decided to follow this procedure by explaining to my participants the goal of my study (to gather an archival of non-cisgender experience and break the one-story narrative), what my role as a researcher entails (collecting these stories, analyzing similarities and differences), and how their information will be kept secure until transcription when it will then be destroyed (all interviews kept on a secure file in a VPN and destroyed once transcripted). I also used this study's question “What do you hope this interview does?” as a way to include the interviewee in

[10] Coming out is a term used to define the process of telling another person(s) about their gender identity or sexual orientation. (“Glossary of Terms,” 2023)

the research process (Campbell et. al, 2023, p. 58). This question is used to acknowledge why the interviewee wanted to be a part of this research and display the importance of doing this research. Answers to this question will be provided during the conclusion chapter of this thesis. I also included the question, "Were there any questions that you believed were not necessary or any questions you wish were asked during this interview?" I incorporated this question because I believe that to diversify the archival of non-cisgender experiences it cannot be done with questions solely based on previous research; instead, these questions must be based on those who have their own experiences with being non-cisgender. Only then can the single-story narrative be broken and these stories can be diversified (Adichie, 2009). When incorporating this question in the interview there were two responses which led to the addition of two interview questions: "Has your gender identity affected your future prospects for the future?" and "How has your gender identity affected what clothes you wear?" I decided to add these questions due to these themes of future prospects and clothing continuously being noted by the participants, and due to how the interviewees that recommended these questions discussed how these themes impacted their experiences of being non-cisgender.

Positionality

When doing any research, especially under a feminist lens, it is important to note the ways in which my own identities have impacted the collection of this data. To start, my own identity and experiences are what led me to research this topic. Identifying as queer, I have been involved in many queer-based and LGBTQ+ focused organizations. Here I have gained a large community within this identity, including those who identify as non-cisgender. These communities often become a place for discourse, as we explain our own experiences identifying under this label. Throughout these conversations, there are many discussions of the lack of

representation and stories of individuals who identify as non-cisgender. Due to this, I became passionate about finding ways to highlight these many diverse experiences of non-cisgender identities. While doing this research, it was also my queer identity that helped me be welcomed into these queer communities and promote my research. When starting my interviews, I explained to the participant my own identity; sharing my pronouns and creating a space of discussion for the participant to ask questions about me and my research. By sharing my identity before the interview, it first allowed for connection and an understanding that an outside researcher may lack. Nielsen explains, when the researcher's identity is outside of the primary population's identity it can create a power dynamic of the "subject" and the "object," which causes an objectification of the participant and a loss of autonomy (Nielson, 2018, p. 61). Only by having that population as the "subject" can it break this separation (Nielson, 2018, p. 61). Therefore, by identifying as queer, I was able to break down this separation and connect with my participant in a way that another researcher may lack. During the interviews, my queer identity also led interviewees to feel more comfortable talking about their experiences, as they felt like we could connect over similar experiences and understandings.

Although my queer identity helped me gain participants, my other identities could have also limited my access to other populations. With a majority of my participants located in Boulder, race already became a very limited component of my research, as most of my research population consisted of white interviewees (Figure 3). Boulder's population consists of 78% of the population identifying as white and non-hispanic, 5% identifying as Asian American, 5% identifying as Hispanic, and 3.5% as multi-racial (Data USA, 2022). Being a white researcher, I then added another barrier for marginalized racial or ethnic communities to feel comfortable

joining this research. Therefore, this could have influenced the demographic of my research sample.

Another important part of my identity that could have swayed my research is my age and education status. Having easy access to promote my research on the University of Colorado Boulder's campus, led to all my participants being between the ages of 18 to 28. This meant that a majority of my participants were a similar age to me (20 to 21 years old while conducting research). Overall, I believe this had a positive impact on my research, as interviewees felt more comfortable sharing their experiences due to seeing me as a peer. However, in a few instances, I would have to remind the participants of my role as a researcher to make sure they were consenting to everything they said being on record. There were a few instances that due to me being seen as a peer, an interviewee would share very personal information; therefore, I would check in throughout their conversation to make sure they were consenting to this personal narrative being transcripted. Only one individual revoked a statement that they said during the interview. However, overall, my age and education level became a helpful identity when conducting this research.

Conclusion

This chapter describes the frameworks used throughout this study, as well as important information on ways the researcher tried to make the research as ethical and objective as possible. Important information regarding participants and the coding process was also included throughout this chapter and will continue to be referenced throughout the rest of this study.

Community and Support Systems

Introduction

While conducting these interviews I noted common patterns that were found between the interviewees. Through a coding process, *community* and *gender performance* became the two most common themes with community being mentioned 123 times and gender performance being noted 63 times (Table 2.). These topics, being prominent throughout these interviews, displays a clear indication of the impact community and gender performance have on these individuals' lives. In the next two chapters, I will explain in-depth, why these two topics became an important part of these individuals' experiences within their gender identity, as well as note the many differences and similarities of these experiences, breaking the one-story narrative.

Loss of community and support systems have been a common single-story narrative of the non-cisgender community in both research and media (Feder, 2020). Films focused around LGBTQ+ stories tend to include the trope of losing a community through depictions of discrimination and harassment by family, friends, organizations and the workplace and through the over representation of death and illnesses of the LGBTQ+ character's friends and/or family (Feder, 2020). For example popular films like Oscar winning *Brokeback Mountain* (2005), and *Boys Don't Cry* (1999) display this loss of community (Feder, 2020). Similarly, research on the non-cisigender community continues this single-story narrative by solely researching and noting the loss of community to LGBTQ+ individuals (Cordoba, 2023). In the last decade, there has been a large increase on the impact loss of community has on health issues and how these health issues predominantly hurt the non-cisgender community (Hughto et al, 2021). Although this is very important research to have, when it is the only narrative it creates a single story that has a

large impact on the non-cisgender community. Therefore, it becomes even more important to explore the complex aspects community has on these experiences.

Research conducted at Texas Tech University explains the importance of community for marginalized individuals, describing that when this is lost, individuals tend to have larger negative emotionality leading to depression and suicide, as well as long-term health risks (Kaufman et. al, 2023). Similarly, throughout these interviews, conversations around community was an important theme for many. The LGBTQ+ community has higher rates of loss of support systems due to homophobic and transphobic cultures (Kaufman et. al, 2023). This has also caused higher rates of depression and suicide in the LGBTQ+ community than in cisgender and straight populations (Kaufman et. al, 2023). Importantly, LGBTQ+ communities can save lives as they create strong support systems and safe spaces to talk about experiences (Kaufman et. al, 2023). While interviewees described how communities impacted them, they explained a few different themes: communities' influence on labeling their gender identity, their coming out process, the significance of other online and interest-based communities, queer-focused/dominant communities, and isolating and non-existing communities. They also mentioned different support systems from friends, family, organizations, clubs, workforce, and online communities.

Understanding Self Through Community

Upon being asked, “When did you first realize that your gender identity is different from the sex you were assigned at birth,” six out of the fifteen interviewees described how their community helped them come to this realization. Cory explained that their school's Gender Sexuality Alliance (GSA) club in high school was where they were first introduced to terminology regarding being non-cisgender. Cory continued by saying, when they went to their

school's GSA, they were introduced to other trans folks, which caused them to come to a realization about their own identity. In the interview, Cory stated, "I realized there was a trans-person there, and I got excited like 'I can do that?!'" Additionally, other participants described how their friends were the ones who first introduced them to the non-cisgender label. Six of the fifteen participants described learning about the non-cisgender label from a friend or close acquaintance. Three explained that they learned the language when they watched another one of their friends transition. It was through watching this that they could have transparent conversations leading to their own realization of their gender identity being different from the sex assigned at birth. Tuesday described that,

> One of my friends at that time (9th grade) came out as trans masc, so I ended up asking him what it was like. He started describing the feeling of dysmorphia[11] and I realized that this is how I felt every day.

Similarly, because these participants' friends had an understanding of this community, all six participants explained that it made their transition process easier. This was due to the affirmation created by having a person who was supportive of their identity, willing to answer questions and help them understand how their gender identity has impacted them. One participant, Kitt, explained that their partner helped them come to the term non-binary and since then has continued to support them with the coming out process by constantly checking in, and "workshopping" their gender identity with them. Their partner would check in by asking questions such as "Are there pronouns you would like to use? Are there ones you like more than the other? What pronouns do you want to use today?" Kitt explained that these interactions were so important because they displayed support for their gender identity, and they were able to have a safe space to question their gender without judgment.

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[11] DSM-5 defines dysmorphia as "Preoccupation with one or more perceived defects or flaws in physical appearance that are not observable or appear slight to others."

Coming Out[12] to their Community

Communities also became very important as interviewees described how they came out (sexual orientation and/or gender identity) and who they came out to. All fifteen participants reported that they first came out to their friends. A majority of the interviewees explained that they felt more comfortable coming out to friends before anyone else due to the support they felt in this community. Two interviewees described how they came out to their online communities first. Robin (he/they) explained that this was the community they felt most comfortable coming out to because they knew the language around queer identity and that he had seen a positive reaction when others came out on the same platform. Thirteen interviewees explained that when they came out to their friends there were positive reactions. This positive interaction became very important to them, as it reassured them of their identity and led to positive affirmations and greater self-love and expression. However, those who had poor reactions were led to different outcomes. One interviewee, Anais (she/they), explained that when coming out to their friends she experienced backlash and questioning. This caused them to feel negative emotions such as anxiety, confusion, and anger. She also left feeling isolated and abandoned by their community of friends.

All participants described instances where they had negative experiences once coming out to their communities. A majority of these negative experiences occurred when the interviewees came out to their families, as seven interviewees displayed experiencing negative reactions coming out to their immediate family. One of these negative reactions occurred to Cory (he/him) and eventually caused him to move away from his family due to the limited support

[12] Coming out is the process of telling another person(s) about their gender identity or sexual orientation. Due to the normalization of heterosexual and cisgender identities, this community does not go through the process of coming out. Instead, it is those that defy this norm, that are assumed as needing to come out to others (“Glossary of Terms,” 2023).

they provided. Cory explained that when he first came out, he was met with disregard, stating "I did come out to them (parents), but they ignored it. They just pretended that it never happened, which hurt." Cory continued to experience this disregard as his parents used the wrong pronouns when addressing him and continued to use his deadname[13]. After moving to a different state, he made a decision to not visit his mom again, due to the constant backlash he received when talking to her. She would tell Cory that the media is what made him "think" he was trans and tell him that she did not "support" his decision. These negative reactions caused by Cory's mom eventually caused Cory to have increased mental health issues, leading him to attempt suicide. By not receiving support from his family, Cory experienced negative mental health issues and a lack of sense of belonging. This overall displays the importance a community and support system can have on an individual.

Similarly, two participants reported not coming out to their immediate and extended families due to fear of negative or non-affirming responses. Sinclaire (she/they) explained that they believed it was not worth coming out to her mom because their "mom doesn't understand they/them concept" and they don't want to have to teach her what being non-binary means. This act of having to teach someone the term for their identity to receive affirmation becomes a large reason why many individuals reported not coming out to others. Nine participants described fear that the individual they were going to come out to would not know the correct terms causing the participant to describe their identity to the individual. When asked in the interview if Mason (they/them) told their parents about their gender identity, they responded with "yes" but explained that they believed that their mom did not understand what nonbinary meant which

[13] Name assigned at birth that is no longer used to address the individual. The act of deadnaming is defined as saying someones assigned name that was used prior to transiting. When being deadnamed an individual may feel disrespected and not affirmed within their gender identity and sense of self.

really impacted them, stating “I think it made me upset for a while because I don’t want to have to explain myself. I just want people to understand the complexities of gender before I come out to them.” Although Mason's mom was supportive of their identity, having to continue to correct and explain themselves to their mom caused Mason to feel unaffirmed within their identity.

When coming out and receiving negative responses, interviewees described feelings of isolation, anger, and confusion. However, not every interviewee had this experience with family as five participants described positive experiences when coming out to their immediate family and/or extended family. Those who had positive experiences displayed a greater sense of self-acceptance and felt more supported than those with negative experiences. Finn (he/they) explained that once he came out to his mom, they were met with support and affirmation. This eventually caused Finn to feel more comfortable coming out to others. It also gave him a safe space to go to when he received negative reactions due to coming out. Finn explained that when they came out to their dad, they were not met with a good reaction, but by having a support system with their mom, Finn was able to process this experience with his mom and feel supported within his identity. When receiving support after coming out, many participants also described being more willing to question their gender identity and play[14] with different gender identities. Scarlett (he/she/they) explained that their parents were highly supportive of her gender identity allowing him to feel more comfortable experimenting with their gender identity and gender performance[15]. Overall, positive experiences when coming out to family became very important in the participants' lives, causing them to feel more affirmation of their gender identity and allowing them to have space and support to explore their gender identities.

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[14] Term used later in the thesis to describe looking at gender with a playful attitude, usually see gender with more fluidity.

[15] Term coined by Judith Butler to describe the way gender is performed through actions, behaviors and clothing. Topic explained more in the following chapter. (Butler, 2006)

Extensive Communities and Their Impact

Although the participant's friends and families dominated the interviews, they also discussed many different communities that impacted their experiences with their gender identity. When asked about the potential repercussions of one's gender identity on jobs and work, five participants explained that it was an important part of their gender experience, noting that coworkers, managers, work atmosphere, and customers contributed to their sense of safety and self within their workplace and their gender identity. One interviewee, Scarlett (he/she/they), discussed their job became a place of euphoria[16] towards his gender due to the way her co-workers continued to reaffirm their gender identity. Scarlett's co-workers did this by using the correct pronouns, correcting others when they used the wrong pronouns, and creating a space where Scarlett felt comfortable in their queer identity and gender performance. Another interviewee, Lilith (she/they), explained that her gender identity impacted her work due to the customers they served. She said, "It was like a 50/50 chance of them gendering me correctly or incorrectly." Although they wanted these interactions to not matter, it would cause an increase in dysphoria when misgendered, often leading her to try to change their physical appearance at work to be addressed correctly. Lilith did this by wearing a bra, a baggy shirt, and a long-sleeved shirt to try to hide parts of her body that made them uncomfortable. Another participant, Robin (he/they) explained that their job had a negative impact on his gender identity as their boss would continuously misgender him and talk about him negatively to other employees. This caused Robin to feel unsafe or disrespected within his workplace which eventually led them to quit. Overall, three participants described positive gender experiences within their place of

[16] Gender euphoria is defined as experiencing satisfaction and joy from having their gender presentation match with their gender identity ("Glossary of Terms," 2023).

employment and two participants described negative past or current experiences within their workplace.

Similarly, thirteen participants described the way organizations such as clubs and interest-based groups impacted their experiences. Some of these groups included academic clubs such as GSA, theater and sports groups, as well as interest-based groups such as role-playing and LARPing groups (Live Action Role Play), musical bands, and outside sports groups. Participants explained that these organizations were very important as they became spaces of inclusivity by reaffirming the individual's gender expression, allowing for room to express gender identity, and creating a group for social support. Others described that these groups were important to them because their gender identity wasn't the center of attention. One participant, Erin (any), described, "There was this weird separation between swimming and my gender. Like it had nothing to do with my gender." This allowed Erin to have a space where they did not need to worry or think about their gender identity. For Erin this was very important due to her gender identity becoming a source of anxiety as they did not want to be misgendered; so having a space to separate his gender and his hobbies became a balancing tool.

Two interviewees explained that their role-playing/LARPing clubs became important in their gender experiences. Kitt described their own experience in LARPing groups as a place where they felt comfortable in their gender identity:

> The LARPing groups I am in are very inclusive. People get to pick their own costumes, pronouns, and where they are from. Changing your pronouns also was seen as totally okay. So I view gender the same way, where I can change it, but I feel most comfortable in gender as a larping or DnD (Dungeon & Dragons) situation.

It was through these groups that Kitt was able to feel fully accepted within their gender identity due to the space provided to play with their gender expression safely. In these

groups, it is seen as acceptable to "play" with gender, allowing for gender-euphoric experiences in a safe environment. Overall, having these organizations and clubs allowed the participant to have a safe space to express their gender identity without fear of backlash.

Queer and Non-Cisgender Communities

As communities became a prevalent discussion in these interviews, fourteen participants described the importance of having queer and non-cisgender communities. Out of those fourteen, all of them described being involved in queer communities (communities that include or are focused on LGBTQ+ populations). Within these spaces, most participants explained feeling positive emotions such as euphoria, support, affirmations, and mutual understanding. One participant, Robin (he/they), described that having a queer community is important because it becomes a space where there are "a lot of people who know how to support and acknowledge queer joy." Another interviewee, Mason (they/them), explained that it can be isolating to engage with groups that lack queer identities, as they continuously have to defend and explain their gender. Instead, by having a community that understands their identity, they can immediately feel affirmed and understood, which contrasts with the constant battle of having to make space for their gender identity.

Breaking into Spaces

Although fourteen of the interviewees described positive support systems, they all also noted feeling isolated from many spaces; encompassing communities such as family, friends, clubs, organizations, and the workplace including other communities that the interviewee felt not welcome in. This seclusion is created due to the lack of safe spaces and non-cisgender representation (Kaufman et. al, 2023). Similarly, this influenced the interviewees as they

described feeling disconnected and isolated from these communities. One interviewee, Johnny (they/them), described their own experiences with being excluded from these communities:

> There is a loneliness that kind of ebbs and flows when identifying with any marginalized label. The further you are into it the more you realize the number of things that are not built for you. These communities won't explicitly say that you can't come in, but they will make it clear that you are here by chance and the rest of them are here because it was built in for them to belong. It makes for a fairly isolating experience.

Johnny continued by explaining that the only way for queer individuals to have communities is if they build ones for themselves.

> You just get good at building a community by myself which I guess is a great skill to have. I'm glad I have it, but you are constantly having to build yourself up because other people won't. At the end of it all, you have to carve out space for yourself because other people won't.

Three other interviewees described a similar process of having to build their own communities as they became isolated from others. These individuals created these communities by leaving those that secluded them, finding other identity-based communities, or creating their own through clubs, friends, and workplaces. Cory (he/him) explained that after leaving his family due to the limited support he was receiving, he was able to build a community of queer individuals in his new hometown. There he was able to feel accepted within a community that affirmed his gender identity. Similarly, Mason (they/them), explained that they were able to build a community through drag. This community has created a space where Mason feels comfortable to express their gender identity and feel supported. It is through these built communities that these individuals were able to find safe spaces that affirm their own identity within a society that limits these communities to non-cisgender individuals.

Conclusion

Overall, communities and support systems became a major discussion point throughout these interviews, displaying the importance of a supportive community for the non-cisgender population, as well as the consequences of not having these support systems. Without these communities, individuals feel isolated and can experience increased dysmorphia, and increased mental health issues. However, by having support systems and reassuring communities, individuals have spaces where they can freely express themselves, be affirmed within their gender identity, and have a place to discuss their emotions and questions caused by their gender identity. Supportive communities for non-cisgender individuals are not only important but vital, as they can decrease this intense stress in an individual's life, making it an important topic to be discussed and researched within the non-cisgender community. Only with continued research on the impacts of community can there be an accurate description of the non-cisgender experience that breaks the single-story narrative.

Gender Perception and Performance

Introduction

While discussing gender within this study, many interviewees described the complexity of gender through their understanding of gender roles and gender performance. Judith Butler's text, Gender Trouble (2006), discusses the complexity of gender outside of the normalized binary as she explains gender through three different components "anatomical sex, gender identity, and gender performance" (p. 187). As the interviewees discussed gender, these three different components were identifiable within the interviews participants described gender roles of both their assigned sex and their gender identity, gender performance through clothing and presentation of their gender, as well as the complexities of gender as both fluid and playful.

Gender Roles

Gender roles are constructed on both the societal and individual levels through interactions, expectations, and shared beliefs that become institutionalized (Balakrishnan et. al, 2022). Through this, gender roles create social scripts that enforce specific behavior based on gender identity, primarily enforcing patriarchal beliefs of the power of masculinity and the weakness of femininity (Balakrishnan et. al, 2022). These constructions of gender lead to many individuals being unable to fit within this box, causing intense ostracization and pushback. This wide range impact led to gender roles being referenced 63 times throughout the fifteen interviews. Due to gender roles' significance on these individuals, it became an important discussion within this study. When asked “Did your gender identity affect any parts of your childhood?” many of the interviewees discussed how throughout their childhood they always felt a little different by being unable to fit into the gender roles of their assigned sex. Johnny (they/them) explains “When you are diagnosed as a woman or born as a woman, you start to realize that you are really bad at being a woman.” Johnny continued to reason that the many constraints within this gender caused them to constantly “fail” at being a woman. They discussed that there are certain ways to dress, and act, as well as expectations of what you should want; however, when their experience differed from these expectations their peers looked down upon them. These same individuals then use terms to describe how poorly they are at being a woman. One of these terms was “tomboy” which was reported by nine AFAB interviewees within this study as a way others described their younger self. Many explained that they were labeled as a tomboy due to the way they dressed or how they wanted to play with the boys rather than the girls. Tuesday (they/them) explains that due to this description “people respect (them) way less.”

Unable to fit into these gender roles, many of the individuals explained a heightened awareness of others' perceptions of them and an increased confusion about their own identity.

One's own sex assigned at birth and gender identity are constantly influenced by gender expectations as roles are placed upon gender identities. Allen (he/him) explained that after transitioning he noticed that he would be asked to help with tasks more commonly associated with men, saying "Once you transition, suddenly when something's broken on their car, you're supposed to know the answers. Or the trash is too heavy, so you're the one that's supposed to carry it. You're the man in the relationship." However, others explained that even when transitioning they were unable to fit these gender roles of their gender identity. Johnny (they/them) discussed that "even if I was a trans-man, I wouldn't be good at being a man" due to the way that society constructs masculinity, which outcasts non-cisgender identities. Tuesday (they/them) explained, "if you are not cis but you enjoy some things that match up with your assigned sex at birth… then people respect you way less." These gender roles become so constrictive that they don't allow for the inclusion of the transgender community, and especially isolate the non-binary and gender non-conforming community.

Not being included within these gender roles also led folks to describe the confusion that they have had in social roles, especially with their sex lives. In Jane Ward's text Tragedy of Heterosexuality (2020), she describes that heteronormative sex is structured around gender roles, commonly creating a script of how each gender[17] must act (p. 138-142). This "script" also influenced roles within romantic relationships commonly connecting masculinity with dominance and femininity with submissive behaviors (Ward, 2020. p.138-142). This script becomes normalized within Western society; however, when individuals do not fit into this

[17] By "each gender" Ward is specifying between the binary cisgenders: man and woman (Ward, 2020).

construction they are left without a script. Sinclaire (she/they) explained that both she and their partner are non-binary, which has caused them to disregard gendered assumptions about roles when dating. They continued by describing the positions they take within her relationship, stating “Dating someone who is also non-binary has both helped and not helped with defining gender roles. We both will build a shelf and cook you a meal.” Without these gender roles, Sinclaire explains that in the beginning, it caused more confusion, but eventually, it led to a more affirming and balanced sex life without the constraints of gendered roles. Allen (he/him) explains that after transitioning, his role and assumptions also changed for sex. For Allen, he went from identifying as a lesbian in a lesbian relationship to identifying as a transman. Due to this change he explains, “I stopped being comfortable with my partner being dominant.” Overall, gender roles became a very important factor in the interviewee's sex life, as five interviewees explained similar situations as Sinclaire and Allen when analyzing how their gender played a role within sex.

When a person is outside these gender roles, they are then met with confusion and fear from those who fit in within these constraints. Studies done on violence in the non-cisgender community have found that participants who were non-binary and gender non-conforming experienced higher amounts of violence than their binary transgender counterparts (Cordoba, 2023). Cordoba explains that this increased violence to this population is “due to a lack of societal understanding and the rejection of gender-diverse people” (Cordoba, 2023, p. 17). This violence caused by a lack of understanding was found throughout the interviews, as participant Erin (any) explained “People get a little confused or stressed on what pronouns to use for me” due to the way they defy the normalized gender expectation. Erin then continued by explaining that he had experienced harassment and invasive questions about her gender identity due to this

confusion. This fear can lead to judgment and put pressure on the individual to change or fit into a category. Often, confusion can also lead to anger and fear as these individuals are not only unable to know how to process something different but are also influenced by conservative media focused on hatred about the non-cisgender community. Sadly, this can often lead to acts of violence against this community; as all fifteen of the participants experienced a form of harassment and/or direct violence from peers or strangers. This reflects the larger national violence against the non-cisgender community as hate crimes against gender non-conforming people have increased by 32% since 2022 (Luneau, 2023). Within the anonymous survey, one participant responded with:

> While I was living in student housing at CU Boulder, I entered an elevator with a group of two men that I did not know. They were inebriated and began to hit on me rather uncomfortably. However, when I spoke to tell them to leave me alone, it made the situation worse. My appearance can be passing[18] but my voice is not. Once they realized I was trans, they suddenly acted repulsed and threw a few insults at me.

This act of violence was not the only situation reported, as Robin (he/they) described a time when they went shopping for clothes and a man started following them:

> There was this guy who was eyeing me and following me around as I went from section to section. He would mutter under his breath "You can't tell who people are these days. There are men or there are women you can't pick both."

This terrifying experience describes one of the many instances of individuals acting with violence due to their own fear and biases rooted in homophobia and transphobia. It is due to this that many of the interviewees described using labels and dressing in certain ways (predominantly dressing in the way that fits heteronormative ideals) for safety. Anais (she/they) explained that they decided to label herself non-binary for others. Anais described constantly being asked by

[18] Passing is a term used by marginalized communities to describe the action of being accepted or "fitting into" societal expectations.

others to identify their gender identity causing her to pick this label. Overall, Anais discussed, “I feel like the label didn’t change my life, it more just changed what people expect from me.” Now with this label, others can put her in a category, even if Anais didn’t entirely want this categorization, but once she is forced into the gendered box they then have to fit the constraints of this identity. Anais is told by society that she must act a certain way due to this label. They described trying to dress more androgynous to fit the non-binary categorization. Therefore, Anais’s story demonstrates how there is pressure to fit into a gender role to avoid potential violence and backlash.

Gender Performance

When discussing gender performance, Judith Butler (2006) explains “Gender proves to be performance— that is, constituting the identity it is purported to be. In this sense, gender is always a doing, though not a doing by a subject who might be said to pre-exist the deed” (p. 34). She describes gender as an action of “doing” through gender roles, gender presentation, and gendered actions. When describing the importance of gender identity within these interviewees' experiences, all described how gender performance has impacted them. These interviewees explained that gender performance served as multiple tools: a way to combat dysmorphia, a way to affirm their gender identity, and a playful tool of self-expression.

Dysmorphia is a common but not universal experience for non-cisgender individuals, as twelve out of the fifteen interviewees described experiencing some type of dysmorphia. When asked about each interviewee's experience going through puberty, many explained how this period of time was when they first experienced body dysmorphia. Seven AFAB participants explained that growing breasts prompted their body dysmorphia. Allen (he/him) described how the dysphoria caused by his breasts would affect him all the time:

> I was unable to look at myself in the mirror. I would go to shower and I could not look down. I would have to start turning around. There were times when I would forget to bind and rush to work. I would be about to start my shift and I would have a full mental breakdown because I couldn't look down, and I was not about to work a shift like that. It got more intense gradually.

For Allen, top surgery became the only way to end this dysmorphia, allowing him to have the opportunity to perform his gender identity. He can now wear tight t-shirts allowing him to gain euphoria and affirmation of his gender identity. Other interviewees tried to find other ways to express their gender identity within the constraints of their sex assigned at birth As noted above, nine AFAB participants described dressing like a "tomboy" by not wearing dresses and instead wearing t-shirts and pants. It is through gender stereotypes of performance that many realized their assigned sex at birth did not match their gender identity, as they were unable to fit the binary cisgender norm. Four AFAB participants described tucking their hair in a hat to hide their long hair; three AFAB described growing out body hair like leg hair and armpit hair, and two AMAB participants described shaving body hair. These performances became a way to combat the dysmorphia and expected gender roles that these individuals experience. Similarly, cutting hair short became very important for AFAB interviewees as it became a way to express their gender identity and end the dysmorphia caused by having long hair. Erin (any) explained that their hair was the only thing that caused them dysmorphia, so cutting it short allowed him to feel more comfortable in her body. However, Kitt (they/them) explained that when they cut their hair, their hairdresser decided to still give them a stereotypical female haircut, "I wanted the stereotypical K-pop boy haircut. The hairstylist thought she knew better and gave me that stereotypical pixie, which in fact was very cute, but it was also not what I asked for." Due to this being against their gender identity, their hair continued to act as a source of dysmorphia, even when cut. Kitt was unable to combat dysmorphia due to the gender roles and assumptions

associated with their sex assigned at birth. Overall, finding ways to express gender performance under the label of their assigned sex became a tool of survival.

Somewhat unexpectedly, four interviewees described going into a stage where they tried to perform their assigned sex, describing it as a femme or masc stage. Allen (he/him), explained that in high school he went through a "super femme stage" where he would only wear "tight crop tops and skinny jeans, makeup, and curly hair." He continued by explaining that he went through this stage believing that if he did femininity "correctly" (by acting within the gender expectations of his assigned sex) then his dysmorphia would disappear. Johnny (they/them) explained a similar situation when describing how they believed that they could be feminine even saying to themself "'I can do it, and I can do it better' it [presenting as their sex assigned at birth] will work this time" and it never does." Lilith (she/they) continued this pattern by saying "I believed that if I grew out a massive beard that would be very manly, then I would stop feeling weird about my body." The hyper-performance stage became a way to try to fit into the boxes created by the participant's assigned sex at birth in the hope of feeling affirmed by this normalization; however, instead, these participants described feeling even more dysmorphia and discomfort in their bodies. Lilith continued by explaining that instead of feeling gratification she experienced numbing as they became disconnected from her body.

Interviewees also explained that gender performance led to them being misgendered less by peers and strangers. Allen (he/him) explained that when he performed his gender in a traditionally masculine way, his dad would use the correct pronouns when addressing him, explaining "He hasn't misgendered me, mainly since having top surgery and growing a beard. Once the physical characteristics started changing, he believed that it made sense now, because he wasn't going to look dumb in public by using these pronouns." This became a pattern within

this study as six individuals noted that when their gender identity matched their gender performance they were less likely to be misgendered and more likely to be affirmed by others.

While discussing gender performance, all interviewees explained ways that they perform their gender identity in a way that causes affirmation and self-confidence within their gender. Most interviewees discussed the importance of clothing as a way of gender expression. Most notably mentioning wearing baggy clothing for those who identified as non-binary, gender fluid, and gender non-conforming. As previously stated, hair became an important tool of self-expression by either cutting it for AFAB participants or growing it out for AMAB participants. By manipulating their hair in this manner it led to a conjoining of their gender identity with their gender performance. A few interviewees also explained how doing certain activities became a way to express their gender identity. Mason (they/them) explained that their job is in a male-dominated field, which has created a sense of gender affirmation due to them feeling like they are "doing a man's work now." Overall, gender presentation became a way for the interviewees to gain a sense of confidence and affirmation within their gender identity.

Playing with Gender

Although many interviewees described performing their gender within the constructs, others described a wanting to go beyond these stereotypes. When asked "Has your gender identity impacted the way you dress?" Cory (he/him) responded, "My gender didn't change the way I dressed, but it made me realize how my clothing makes me be perceived." Cory explains that he loves to switch between baggy stereotypically masculine outfits to tight-fitting stereotypical feminine outfits, but when he makes this switch he will experience different reactions from others. While wearing more masculine clothing he is greeted with affirmations about his gender as peers and strangers use correct pronouns; however, when wearing more

feminine clothing Cory explains “If I were to wear a dress in front of those who have doubted me, they would look at me and be like ‘see we were right! We knew that you were just faking it.’” When Cory would wear these feminine clothes, he would experience more cases of misgendering and negative comments about his gender. Cory is not the only interviewee who has experienced this impact on gender performance and gender perception, as six interviewees described similar situations. Due to this, many interviewees discussed having to decide what was more important to them, their gender performance or being affirmed within their gender. Mason (they/them) explained that before coming to the interview, they decided to “dress more masculine today because [they] really don’t want someone to misgender [them].” This becomes a balancing act as these individuals have to decide if they would rather be confident within their self-expression or be referred to as their correct gender identity.

Although these constructs exist, many of the interviewees described a desire to be creative with their gender performance, many using the terms play, freedom, and expression when describing their presentation. Nine out of the fifteen interviewees described this idea of play within their gender identity. Mason (they/them) explained that they “like to have fun with the way (they) perform gender” by switching and mixing commonly masculine and feminine clothing. This allows them to express themselves in a more fluid and fun manner, which overall makes them more self-confident about their identity. This understanding of “play” with gender was displayed by other participants as they described dressing in ways that may contradict their gender identity. Twelve participants noted an understanding of fluidity within their gender identity. For Scarlett (he/she/they), being able to embrace a more fluid understanding of gender, also allowed her to break free of the expectations and gender roles created by their sex assigned at birth. Many other interviewees discussed viewing their gender as something that flows and

changes; although they might not identify with a gender-fluid label, this understanding of gender became a common experience for these individuals. As the interviewees described playing with gender, they also used descriptive terms to portray their gender outside of the binary. Kitt (they/them) described their gender as "90s British GarageBand," due to the way they love to wear ties and t-shirts together, Tuesday described themself as a "little gay white boy," explaining how their "flamboyant energy" is mixed with their masculinity, and Finn (he/they) explained their gender as "dyke" and "butch" even though identifying as a transman. By using these descriptions, the interviewees described a new freedom it brought to their gender identity.

Many participants described this understanding of gender as playful, which came from past experiences. One of these individuals was Erin (any). They discussed being very stressed about their gender and gender performance throughout high school. It wasn't until their last year in high school that he decided to embrace this fluidity. Erin explained that picking out clothing became a stressor in their life, saying:

> I would start to stress myself out too much every morning trying to figure out if I am feeling like a girl today or if I am feeling like a guy today. It stressed me out so much that I started to stop caring about it.

Similarly, Mason (they/them) explained that when watching their partner (a transwoman) become overwhelmed with expressing her gender identity, they realized the playfulness they could have with their own identity. They started wearing skirts and embracing femininity that they had locked away, overall explaining that "I think she helped me come to terms with not being seen for who I am, but instead accepting that and still feeling comfortable with who I am." For these individuals, gender performance started as a stressful place as they believed they needed to perform a certain way to fit into society; so by embracing this fluidity of gender, they were able to have fun expressing their gender identity. It is for this reason that many interviewees

explained that the norm for everyone should be the idea of gender as playful. Mason expressed that overall, everyone should be able to play with gender because it both becomes an important way of self-expression and a way to make the world a better place by going beyond the violent gender roles, saying:

> I think gender presentation is a fun aspect of just being alive. It's kind of like getting a tattoo - like you just decide one day that you want to do something new or just change your body and it's freeing in that way and fun…I took a class and we had to imagine a genderless playground. It's not black and white if anything you see more color. Maybe instead of a boy pulling a girl's hair, you see a kid passing a ball to someone. I think gender can come with more peace in the world if we are more playful with it. It would give people an opportunity to not be toxically masculine or toxically feminine.

For Mason and many other interviewees, this understanding of playing with gender not only allows more self-expression within their gender identity but also breaks down the constraints brought by gender roles. Robin (he/they) explains that they feel "a lot more free" because he is "embracing the costume instead of like, fitting into the costume." Therefore, this understanding of fluidity became a form of self-confidence and survival in a constricting environment.

Conclusion

Gender performance and gender roles coexist causing a continuous loop as they impact each other. Gender performance may support or contradict gender roles, causing many different perceptions from others as society constructs ways to "correctly" perform each gender within their given role. This eventually causes the transgender and non-cisgender communities to defy these constructions, leading to public outbursts of confusion and anger while similarly causing the community stress to try to conform to these limiting structures. As stated, many interviewees expressed their desire to find ways to fit in within these gender roles while also expressing a desire to break out of these constructions. To break out of this structure, many participants described changing their perception of gender to see it as fluid and playful. This allows them to

embrace their own gender identity and gain self-confidence in their gender expression. Overall, gender performance and gender roles played an important role in this study and it impacted each interviewee's experience of their own gender identity.

Conclusion

This study addresses the importance of researching non-cisgender experiences by noting that existing research focuses on negative events, which isolate the non-cisgender community and create a single-story narrative. Single-story narratives can have a devastating impact, as they isolate those whose experiences may differ from this narrative and create negative stereotypes, leading to increased violence against this community. One of the ways to break down this single-story narrative is by focusing research on displaying the complexities of these experiences and highlighting real non-cisgender voices. Using a feminist research approach, this study centered on the importance of highlighting these non-cisgender voices through its collection of 15 qualitative 60-minute interviews with individuals who identify under the non-cisgender label. During these interviews, participants were asked a series of questions relating to how their gender identity has impacted different aspects of their lives. Community and gender presentation were noted as the biggest commonalities between these experiences.

When discussing the importance of community to the non-cisgender population, it was noted that research and media typically center this discussion around a loss of community through ostracisation, harassment, discrimination, illness, and death (Feder, 2020). However, this study goes beyond that common trope as it discusses the many nuanced ways community and support systems can impact one’s own experience with being non-cisgender. Interviewees described the ways that their support systems helped them learn about the language around non-cisgender gender identities, supported them through the coming out process, as well as how

communities like family, friends, workplace, clubs, hobbies, and other organizations can both affirm their gender identity or isolate them. Understanding the complexities around the broad range of communities and support systems breaks down the single-story narrative focused on loss and adds a nuanced understanding of the impacts these communities have and how important affirming communities are to the non-cisgender population.

Similarly, single-story narratives have been constructed on gender performance. There has been limited research on the impacts of gender presentation, gender perception, and gender roles on the non-cisgender community. Through this research, many participants noted the ways that gender roles influenced them through expectations forced upon their sex assigned at birth and their gender identity. To combat these expectations, the interviewees described the act of "playing" with their gender performances through dressing in ways that may reflect or go against their gender identity and using abnormal labels to define their gender identity. Again, this challenges the single-story narrative by displaying the many complex ways that gender is performed, both within and outside gender roles and expectations.

Having these complex stories, broadens the understanding of the many experiences non-cisgender individuals may face due to their gender identity. It is important that this information is then archived and shared as it can break down stereotypes and biases forced on this community. Therefore, by having this study focus on the complexities of being non-cisgender, it starts the process of dismantling this stigmatizing story.

Setbacks

This study's goal was to diversify the archival of non-cisgender communities; however, it is important to note what the research lacked and what needs to be added in future work on this topic. As previously stated, this study lacked diverse ages, races, and narratives of those assigned

male at birth. Instead, its population was mostly white participants, between the ages of 18 to 28, who were college-educated and assigned female at birth. Overall, this left out many experiences of those outside these populations and limited the study. If repeated, it is important that this study finds participants within these missing populations to understand and fully diversify the archive of non-cisgender experiences. This study also used qualitative research as its main source of data. Although this research method was used to create a deeper trust between the researcher and the participant, it also caused the researcher to have fewer participants than quantitative research would have allowed. Similarly, Beetham and Demetriades' research explains that using a mix of qualitative and quantitative research (also known as mixed methods) is more impactful than solely qualitative data, as it allows the researcher to reach multiple dimensions of data (Beetham & Demetriades, 2007). If this study was repeated, it would be important to use this mixed methods approach to have a larger research population and access information that could have been missed. As previously stated, there were many other themes mentioned throughout the interviews (Table 2); however, this thesis lacks the resources to fully engage with every theme listed. It is important that continued research on the non-cisgender community engages with these other themes to create an archive of these diverse experiences. Although community and gender performance was reported more frequently, each of these experiences is just as important as they impacted the individual's life with their gender identity. It is overall important to highlight all the diverse experiences and backgrounds of the non-cisgender community to truly break down the single-story narrative.

Participants' Hopes

When understanding the importance of this work it was also significant to know what this research means for the participants. Research on sexual assault survivors recommended using the

question, “What do you hope this interview does?” as a way to acknowledge why the participant wanted to be a part of this research and highlight the importance of this work. Responses to this question were categorized into four different themes participants focused on expanding the single-story narrative by either breaking down the individual timeline and societal assumptions or adding to the archive and one additional theme of personal hopes. Five participants described wanting their stories to display the complexities of what it means to be non-cisgender to other non-cisgender individuals. Their hope was to present a narrative that was different from the single story and let others know that their different experiences are also normal. As Alex states, “There are many different ways to be trans.”

- Alex: “I hope that it shows people that there are many different ways to be trans and you don't need to follow the boxes and timelines that you see in media.”
- Anais: “I want other trans folks to know that it might be scary at first but it is okay. And also like there are different stages within transitioning. You don't need to know right away or follow the same timeline as others.”
- Kitt: “I hope that if this information goes into a database somewhere, I hope that someone can get it and realize that they are not alone. There are others who are constantly questioning. I want it to be there to show that everyone has a different journey and they may be at a different place and that is beautiful. And I also want to show everyone that I do exist.”
- Lilith: “I hope it can help other people realize something about themselves.”
- Tuesday: “I hope this helps other trans people to be not afraid, and to be very forward about their experience, and I hope this makes them feel less shy. I think there are a lot of trans people who are afraid to correct others and are told to be not confident. I hope that showing this creates a ripple effect of confidence within the community.”

Similarly, six participants noted hoping that their stories would create societal change by dismantling the single-story narrative. A few described that they hoped their stories would become a tool to humanize the non-cisgender experience, noting the large increase of hateful media and discourse towards this community. Others hoped that it solely changed the way that others perceive the non-cisgender community by creating more nuance in these experiences.

- Allen: “I hope it informs people and I hope it makes somebody rethink the experience. People will often look at transgender people and judge them, but they have no idea what people go through to just be themselves. They automatically put people down or threaten their lives or actually go through taking their lives. So just safety, safety through understanding. That's honestly one of the biggest concerns. I don't just mean the safety of your life but the safety of having laws in place because we're not necessarily safe here. Things are unraveling here just like they are everywhere else and we're not always going to be seen as a safe haven if there's not allies. It's not just trans people fighting for trans people; people who are cis should also be supporting and fighting. You need to be voting for the same thing. Everybody is so stuck in their own lives that I hope it just makes people get their heads out of their own asses and pay attention to trans people.”
- Cory: “I hope it is heard.”
- Finn: “I would love to nuance people's perspectives on transness. I would love to have it be something that challenges people's perspectives. I really appreciate that we connected on that point of our identity being political and queerness being radical. It's this topic that I want others to understand because I believe that being LGBT and being queer is different. Terms like LGBT can be a more sanitized version of what it is the dirty messy life of queer people. I would hope that comes out of this as well as queerness as radical and political.”
- Mason: “I would say change someone’s mind about gender, but some people won’t change their mind, and that’s okay. I hope it provides a way for someone to look at the world differently because that’s what happened to me when I saw what being trans was. I saw the whole world differently and I hope others will too.”
- Scarlett: “I hope it can expand people’s understanding if it is just the people reading the study, working on the study, or even just you. I hope it expands their perspective. I also hope it allows folks to understand that not all non-cisgender people come from a place of dysphoria. Some people don’t realize that there is more than what they are assigned to and they can feel comfortable outside of that. Most trans and non-binary people, I know did not come to their gender because of this dysphoria but instead, it was brought by some external force.”
- Sinclaire: “I hope it lets people know more about the variance of non-cisgender experiences. I feel like a lot of people just want to label you and put you in a box but there are so many different experiences between us all. And there is a huge spectrum, so I think it’s important to highlight these differences.”

Additionally, the importance of creating a bigger archive on the non-cisgender community became a very important factor for two of the participants. They explained that they have noticed

the limited literature and media around this population and hope that the collection of their stories could allow for increased narratives around this community.

- Johnny: “I want more experiences to be archived because it is especially good to have due to where things are going in the United States. If things went entirely south, I want there to be something left of my identity and my experiences.”
- Robin: “I hope it widens the gate of what it is like to not be a cis person in society, in college, and in life. I hope it becomes a record for future generations. I always like finding pieces of queer history, which is hard to find but so meaningful when you see it. I think queer history is a really cool thing and it shows me that we were here and exist.”

Lastly, two participants described that they hope that this experience will benefit them. Talking about personal experiences is a form of therapeutic practice, especially for those whose stories are silenced and ignored by societal narratives.

- Cecile: “I hope it will help you with a sample and also allow me to share the experiences I have felt.”
- Erin: “I don't have any. Just thank you for researching this information. It's been very important for me to tell you my story.”

Overall, this thesis put these hopes in perspective during every step of its creation process. I focused the research on breaking down the single-story narrative that has often led to violence and ostracization of the non-cisgender community. This research displays the complex ways that gender identity can impact one’s life and the ways someone may come to terms with their gender identity. This thesis also created a space for the participant to share their stories without judgment or silencing and it prioritized giving the participant autonomy within the study’s creation. Building this thesis off the hopes of the participants allowed for a more realistic understanding of the non-cisgender community that goes outside of the constraints of the single-story narrative; ultimately becoming one step in the process of breaking down this isolating discourse.

This leads to my hopes. As a researcher, I hope my study adds to the limited collection of non-cisgender experiences, diversifying the archive and dismantling the single-story narrative. I hope that this research allowed the participants to feel comfortable sharing a story that they may have to constantly hide and feel like their story is valued and important. I hope my study highlights the importance of displaying these narratives and eventually sparks an increase in research on this community. Overall, I do believe that these hopes came true. This study was able to accomplish these goals as it collected these diverse stories and allowed participants to have a space to share these experiences. This study described the incredible complexities of what it means to be non-cisgender and became one step in the creation of a nuanced understanding of being non-cisgender.

Future Directions

Although this study does display the complexities of non-cisgender experiences, there is more that needs to be done to change this institutional silencing of non-cisgender experiences and stories. First, there needs to be more research on this community that diversifies the single-story narrative. These stories then need to be shared outside of academia, so that this information becomes easily accessible and eventually increases the amount of representation in the public eye. Then, there needs to be systematic and institutional change. This includes ending policies that ban queer and trans-focused literature, increasing education on the non-cisgender community, and creating policies that protect non-cisgender individuals. By incorporating these changes, non-cisgender individuals will be able to have a world that allows a more complex discourse of what it means to be non-cisgender, allowing these communities to thrive rather than just focusing on surviving. Overall, this research hoped to diversify the larger narrative of the

non-cisgender population and bring to light the importance of researching these silenced communities. As Adichie argued in her 2009 Ted Talk:

> Stories matter. Many stories matter. Stories have been used to dispossess and to malign, but stories can also be used to empower and to humanize. Stories can break the dignity of a people, but stories can also repair that broken dignity. (17:27).

Only by having these first-person narratives of the non-cisgender population can we break down assumptions, stigmas, and biases created by this single-story narrative. By breaking these stereotypes there will be increased authentic representation, which can increase the advocacy for non-cisgender rights and policies protecting this community. Continued research on this population must be done and the non-cisgender community must be included in all research.

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Appendix

Figure 1.

Age of Participants

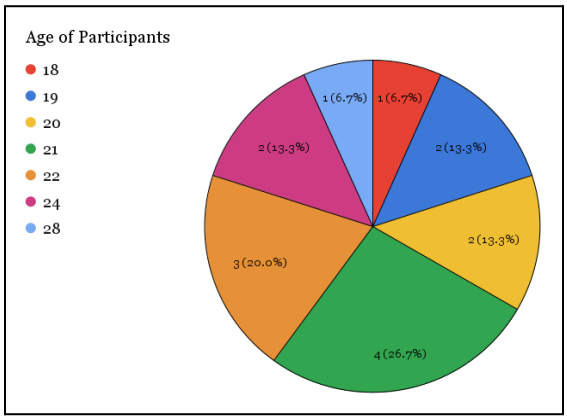

Figure 2.

Participants' Year at University

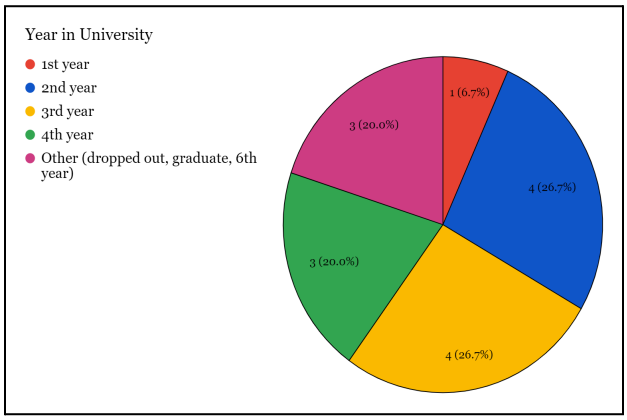

Figure 3.

Participants' Race

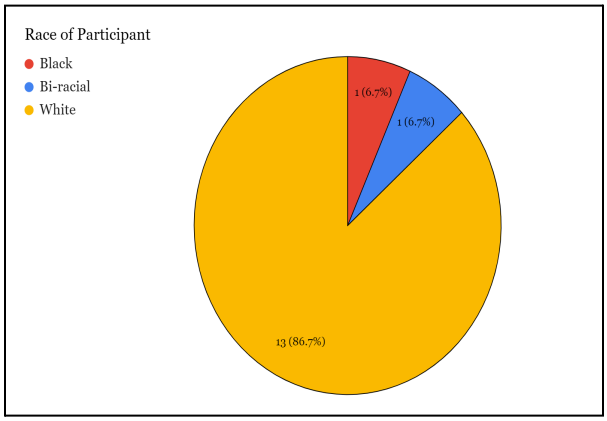

Figure 4.

Participants' Sex Assigned at Birth

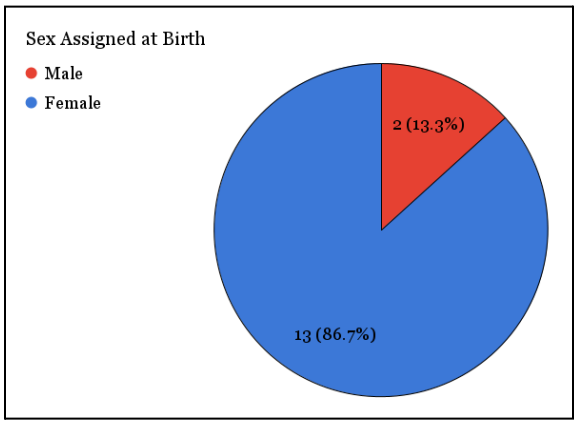

Figure 5.

Gender Identity of Participants

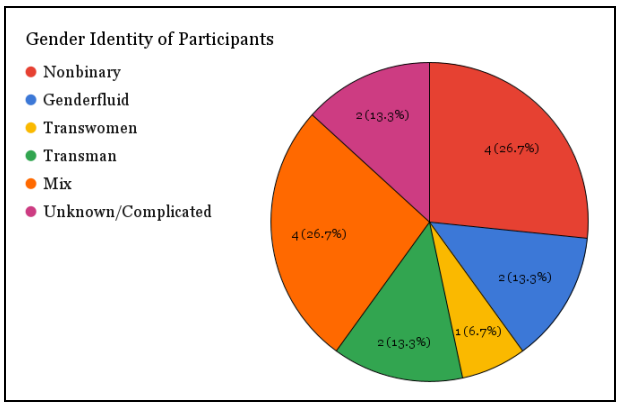

Figure 6.

Pronouns of Participant

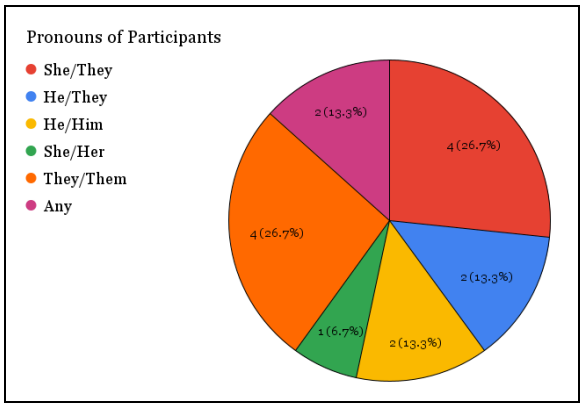

Figure 7.
Sexual Orientation of Participants

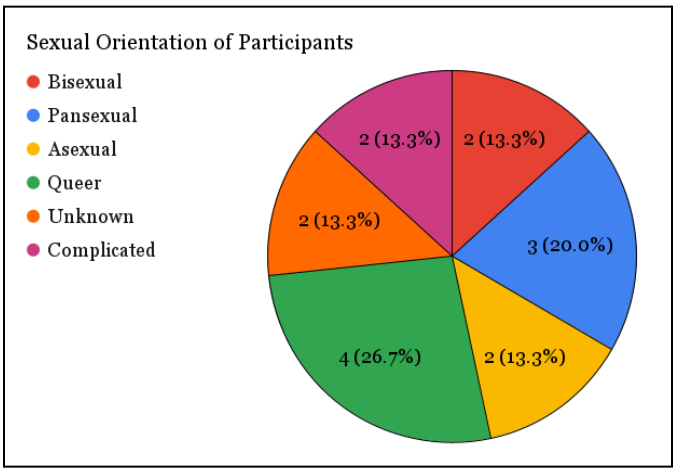

Table 1.
Demographics.[19]

Name	Age	Year in school	Race	Sex Assigned	Gender Identity	Pronouns	Sexual Orientation
Alex	21	3rd	White	Female	Unknown	She/They	Asexual
Allen	22	Drop out	White	Female	Transman	He/Him	Unknown
Anais	22	4th	White	Female	Nonbinary	She/They	Queer
Cecile	28	Graduate	Bi-racial	Female	Unknown	She/Her	Unknown
Cory	21	2nd year Transfer	White	Female	Nonbinary	He/Him	Pansexual
Erin	18	1st	White	Female	Gender fluid	Any	Queer
Finn	21	3rd	White	Female	Nonbinary, Transman	He/They	Complicated, Lesbian
Johnny	20	3rd	White	Female	Transmasc	They/Them	Bisexual
Kitt	20	3rd	White	Female	Nonbinary, Gender fluid	They/Them	Ace flux, unknown
Lilith	19	2nd	White	Male	Transwomen	She/They	Complicated
Mason	24	6th	White	Female	Nonbinary	They/Them	Pansexual
Robin	21	4th	White	Female	Nonbinary, Transman	He/They	Queer
Scarlett	22	2nd	White	Male	Nonbinary	He/She/They	Bisexual

[19] All demographics are based on participants' self identified terms.

Sinclaire	24	4th	Black	Female	Complicated, Nonbinary	She/They	Pansexual
Tuesday	19	2nd	White	Female	Gender fluid	They/Them	Queer

Table 2.
Coding

Total Mentions (#)	Themes
123	Community: Social Support, organizations, family, friends
63	Gender Presentation: Clothing, actions, and behaviors that are based on gender identity
56	Harassment: Discrimination, violence (Physical and/or verbal)
49	Language: Used to note the ways individuals talk about their own identity in terms outside of the norm. Ex. describing gender expression as "90s garage band"
45	Anxiety: Confusion and fear caused by gender identity
36	Gender roles: Expectation of how to behave, act, dress, etc based on gender identity
34	Sexuality: Physical, emotional or romantic attraction
32	Affirming: Mentions of ways a person affirms their own gender identity
30	Role Models: Real or fictional inspirations
27	Fluidity: Mentions of androgeny and movement between gender identities.
25	Transitioning: The physical, mental, and emotional change in outward expression of gender identity
23	Dysphoria: Feel disconnected from one's body, commonly due to it not fitting gender identity
20	Education: Schooling (pre-K through College Education; Learning about gender identities beyond cis men and cis women.
18	Others Perceptions: The way others view and act towards the participant
13	Hobbies: Groups and activities
13	the participant was involved in
12	Safety: Ways the participant analyzed and became aware of their own safety
12	Self Love: Participants love for themself
12	Boxes: Constructions caused by gender roles and expectations
10	Labels: Different labels to describe gender identity, gender expression, and sexual orientation
10	Mental Health
9	Disability: Includes both physical and mental disabilities
9	Work Force: Employment of the Participant
9	"Tom Boy": Used by others to describe AFAB participant's gender identity
8	Physical Body
8	Masc and Femme: Gender expression displayed through masculinity and femininity. Often used

	to describe their self-presentation of gender
6	Future Prospects: How gender impacted their future prospects (goals/hopes)
6	Play and Fun: Used when describing gender presentation as a playful source of gender expression
6	Taking up or Breaking into Spaces: Participants described not being invited into spaces and instead being isolated from heteronormative spaces.
5	Race/Ethnicity
3	Bathrooms: Noted when talking about discriminatory policies and feeling safe in isolating spaces
2	Religion: Includes Christianity, Judaism, Islam, and spiritual groups
2	Queerness: Used to describe LGBTQ+ identities and their impact on the self-perception and expression

Quantitative Pre- Survey:

Want to Participate in a Study on Non-Cisgender Experiences? I am an undergraduate student at CU Boulder conducting interviews on non-cisgender experiences. This community has been marginalized and silenced and I hope to use this study to put narratives back in the hands of the non-cisgender community. This study entails a one-time 60-minute interview and a quick survey. If you are interested please fill out this form below!

- Are you Non-Cisgender? This means your gender is different from the sex you were assigned at birth.
- What is your gender identity?
- What is your race and/or ethnicity?
- How old are you?
- Are you willing to participate in a 60-minute interview and a quick survey?
- How would you like me to contact you? Please put that preferred contact below.
- Please include anything else you would like to tell me before the interview here.

Quantitative After Survey

You are being sent this survey because we just finished our interview. In our interview, I mentioned that I am a mandatory reporter and therefore there may have been experiences you were unable to tell me. Also, this is an opportunity to discuss any other additional information we did not discuss in the interview. This is an anonymous form, so as long as you do not mention any specific places and names I will not be able to report on any of this information. Therefore, if you feel comfortable, I welcome you to share these experiences here.

- Were there things that you weren't able to tell me because of my role as a mandatory reporter?
- If you answered yes and would like to share this experience please do in this section. Please do not use any identifying information like names and places.
- Is there anything else you would like to discuss about your experiences as noncisgender?

Thank you for participating in this study. Below there are resources to help support you if any of this information was triggering. These are the same resources given to you at the interview.

If you are a CU student:

Office of Victim Assistance- OVA (confidential): Counseling and advocacy for the University of Colorado Boulder students, graduate students, faculty, and staff who have experienced a traumatic, disturbing, or life-disruptive event. Website: https://www.colorado.edu/ova/ Phone number: 303-492-8855

Counseling and Psychiatric Services (CAPS): Counseling for all University of Colorado Boulder students Website: https://www.colorado.edu/counseling/ Phone Number: 303-492-2277 (24/7 support)

OIEC- (reporting) To report any cases of discrimination and harassment, including sexual harassment, sexual assault, intimate partner abuse, and stalking. Website: https://www.colorado.edu/oiec/ Main number: 303-492-2127 ADA Compliance: 303-492-9725 Title IX Coordinator: 303-492-0277 CU Police Department- (reporting) Website: https://www.colorado.edu/police/ Non-emergency Phone Number: 303-492-6666 Emergency Phone Number: 911

In Boulder County:

Moving to End Sexual Assault (MESA): Hotline and resources for survivors and secondary survivors of sexual assault and sexual harassment. Website: https://movingtoendsexualassault.org/ Hotline: 303-443-7300

Out Boulder- Resources for LGBTQ+ support Website: https://www.outboulder.org/ Safehouse Progressive Alliance for Non-Violence (SPAN)- Resources and support for those affected by violence. Website: https://www.safehousealliance.org/ Hotline: 303-444-2424

Mental Health Partners (MHP)- Resources and counseling Website: https://www.mhpcolorado.org/ Crisis 24/7 Hotline: (844) 493-8255

Boulder County Police Department: Non-Emergency Number: 303-441-4444 Emergency Number: 911

Nationwide:

Rape, Abuse, Incest National Network (RAINN)- Resources and crisis hotline for survivors and secondary survivors of sexual assault. Website: https://www.rainn.org/ Hotline: 808-656-HOPE Trevor Project- Resources and support for LGBTQ+ folks. Website: https://www.thetrevorproject.org/ Phone Number: 866-488-7386 Suicide and Crisis Life Line: Hotline and resources Website: https://988lifeline.org/ Phone Number: 988

Qualitative Interview:

Thank you for agreeing to participate in this interview about your experiences being a non-cisgender person (all of those who do not identify with their sex assigned at birth)**.** I will ask you a series of open-ended questions, and you are welcome to share as much as you are comfortable with. The interview should last about 60 minutes. You are not obligated to answer all questions and may leave the interview at any time. With your permission, I will record the interview for later transcription. Your name will not be shared and I will make a fake name to use instead. Your interview will become a part of my Women and Gender Studies Honors Thesis.

I do want you to know that through my employment at the University of Colorado Boulder, I am considered a mandatory reporter. This means that if you disclose any information to me about you being discriminated against, harassed, or assaulted in your capacity as a CU student due to any of your identities I will have to report this information to OIEC. If you have any questions about that mandatory reporting process please let me know. I do know that these may be experiences that you have had, therefore, I will be sending you an anonymous survey where you are welcome to describe any of these situations and or anything else we did not discuss in the interview that you feel pertinent. Please do not use any identifying information in this survey, including any names of people or places because I am legally required to report this information. I will also give you a sheet during this interview that has all of this information so you know what I am required to report. Do you have any questions?

Person Definitions/ Basic Info:
I'm going to start with some questions about your demographic and just some basic facts about you.

1. How old are you? (if under 18, conclude interview)
2. Are you a college student?
    a. If so, How much schooling have you received so far? Undergraduate, graduate, etc.
        i. If you are an undergraduate, what year are you?
    b. If not, Did you graduate from college? If so, what year did you graduate from college?
    c. Did you graduate from high school? If so, what year did you graduate from high school?
3. What is your race/ethnicity?
4. What is your gender identity?
5. What is your sexual orientation?
6. What sex were you assigned at birth? (If cis-gender conclude interview)
7. What are your pronouns?

Questions about Gender Identity:
Now I would love to ask you some questions about your experiences with your gender identity and how it has affected your life. Please remember that any information disclosed about discrimination, harassment, or assault against your identity while a student at CU will have to be reported to OIEC. If you don't want this information to be reported with OIEC please wait to share until I have sent you an anonymous survey to describe these situations. Also, know that you do not have to answer any of these questions and we can stop the interview at any time.

Info for researcher: The interviewer may answer questions out of order, so I may jump between questions and rely on asking follow-up questions.

Understanding your gender identity:

1. When did you first realize that your gender identity is different from the sex you were assigned at birth?
2. When did you first start telling others about your identity being different from your assigned sex?
3. Discuss your process in choosing this label. Why did this one feel best?
    a. Have there been labels that you have tried but they did not fit?
4. Has your gender identity impacted the way you dress?
5. Has your gender identity impacted the way you act or behave?
6. Has your gender identity impacted the way you are viewed by others?
7. Has your gender identity impacted your sense of self?

Experiences throughout life

1. Did your gender identity affect any parts of your childhood?
2. Did your gender identity affect your experience throughout puberty?
3. Has your gender identity affected your experience as an adult?
4. Have any of your other identities affected your experiences within your gender identity? Examples: race, ethnicity, language, class, etc.

Experiences at School

1. Did your gender identity affect any of your experiences in elementary school, 1st to 5th grade?
    a. How did your school's culture affect your experiences with your gender identity?
    b. Were any of your school relationships affected by your gender identity?
2. Did your gender identity affect any of your experiences in middle school, 6th to 8th grade?
    a. How did your school's culture affect your experiences with your gender identity?
    b. Were any of your school relationships affected by your gender identity?
3. Did your gender identity affect any of your experiences in high school, 9th to 12th grade?

   a. How did your school's culture affect your experiences with your gender identity?
   b. Were any of your school relationships affected by your gender identity?
4. Did your gender identity affect any of your experiences in college?
   a. How did your school's culture affect your experiences with your gender identity?
   b. Were any of your school relationships affected by your gender identity?

Experiences at Work

1. Have you had a job?
   a. If so, did your gender identity affect your experiences at your jobs?
   b. Did your gender identity affect your relationships at work?

Other Relationships

1. Does your family know about your gender identity?
   a. If so when did they find out?
   b. What was their reaction?
   c. How did their reaction make you feel?
2. Do you have a community that has accepted and supported your identity?
   a. If so how has this affected you?
   b. If not, how has this affected you?
3. Is there anyone you have not told about your gender identity?
   a. Why is this?
   b. How does this make you feel?
4. Has your gender identity affected any of your relationships?
5. Were there influences or role models in your life that supported your gender identity? These can be real or fictional role models.
6. Have you ever been harassed due to your gender identity?

Emotions of Gender Identity

1. Before you publicly identified with this label, did it affect you emotionally? If so how?
2. When you started to publically identify with this label, did it affect you emotionally? If so how?
3. Was your mental health affected by your gender identity? If so how?

Other Experiences

1. Has your gender identity impacted any other aspects of your life that we haven't talked about and that you feel comfortable sharing?

Questions about Interview

1. How did you feel during this interview?
2. Why did you want to do this interview?

3. Is there anything you hope this interview does?
4. Were there things that you weren't able to tell me because of my role as a mandatory reporter? Please answer with a yes or no.

Thank you for participating in this interview! Before we part, is there any information that you shared, that you do not want me to include within my honors thesis?
I will send you a follow-up email that includes a Google survey. The survey will be anonymous so if you have anything additional you would like to share this will be a place where you are welcome to discuss those.