(Em)bracing Liminality: A Phenomenological Exploration of Non-Binary Individuals' Subjective Embodiment

Jessica Taylor

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Department of Social Sciences,
University of the West of England, Bristol

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Contents

Abstract 4

Introduction 5

- Gender liminality across indigenous cultures 7
- Contemporary Western non-binary identity 9
- An outline of two models for conceptualising gender 11
  - An essentialist narrative of gender 11
  - A social constructionist narrative of gender 12
- Gender dysphoria 14
- Trans and non-binary experience(s) and the impact of gender variance 19
  - Trans and non-binary experience of health and healthcare-based oppression 20
  - Trans and non-binary experience of educational and employment-based oppression 21
  - Trans and non-binary experience of social oppression 23
  - Trans and non-binary mental health and the minority stress model 24
- Trans and non-binary representation in the media 26
- Embodiment 28
- Aims of this research 31

Methodology 33

- Design 33
- Ontological and epistemological position 34
- Phenomenology 35
- Procedure 37
  - Phase one: surveys 37
  - Phase two: diaries and interviews 38
- Participants 41
- Credibility and Trustworthiness 44
- Ethics 46
- Reflexive Thematic Analysis 46

Analysis 50

  - Theme One: My body is my canvas for self-expression 51
  - Theme Two: Betrayed by the story it tells others about who I am 60
  - Theme Three: It’s not the kind of ship I want to pilot 73

Discussion 87

  - Theme One: My body is my canvas for self-expression 87
  - Theme Two: Betrayed by the story it tells others about who I am 90
  - Theme Three: It’s not the kind of ship I want to pilot 92

Reflections on research methodology relevant to counselling psychology 97
Reflections on potential factors influencing the partial nature of the knowledge constructed .. 99
Implications and potential relevance for counselling psychology practice 101
Recommendations for future research... 105

Conclusion 107

References 108

Appendices 133

Appendix one: Survey participants' demographics 133
Appendix two: Diary and interview participants' demographics 142
Appendix three: Recruitment posting on Reddit forums 143
Appendix four: Ethical approval letter.. 144
Appendix five: Participant information sheet…………………………………………………………………………146
Appendix six: Diary guidelines 148
Appendix seven: Participant consent forms 149
Appendix eight: Article prepared for submission 150
Appendix nine: Reflective statement.. 176

Abstract

There is limited research on the experiences of trans and non-binary individuals, and the research that has been conducted has attracted criticism from the trans and non-binary community on the grounds of not adequately respecting and accounting for lived experience. Alongside this, the experiences of non-binary individuals have tended to be subsumed under the trans umbrella and thus often lost to data synthesis and aggregation, therefore research focusing specifically on their experiences is necessary. In particular, explorations of non-binary embodiment are lacking and given the role embodiment plays in our sense of wellbeing, as well as the role bodily modification may play in trans experience, this could benefit from exploration. Ultimately, this lack may contribute to the dearth reported in the training and competence of psychological professionals who work with the non-binary community, highlighting a need to better understand non-binary individuals from an holistic perspective. In the current study, the aim has been to address these deficiencies utilising a descriptive phenomenological stance. To this end, one hundred and nine qualitative surveys, eleven journals and nine asynchronous email interviews completed by or with self-identified non-binary individuals, recruited through trans and non-binary forums on Reddit, were conducted and then analysed using reflexive thematic analysis. This resulted in three themes being constructed from the data: *My body is my canvas for self-expression*, *Betrayed by the story it tells others about who I am* and *It's not the kind of ship I want to pilot*, with these revolving around a central construct of *(em)bracing liminality*. Overall, these themes act to highlight the way in which embodying a non-binary gendered identity can be both a fraught experience of betrayal, alienation, compromise and ambivalence **and** an uplifting one of individualised self-expression, pride and resistance to an oppressive binary norm. The implication of these for counselling psychology are discussed, as is a reflection on asynchronous emails and online journaling as appropriate research methods for this community.

Introduction

As a trainee counselling psychologist, I strive to recognise social contexts and discrimination in an effort to work towards empowerment of service users; to demonstrate the highest standards of anti-discriminatory practice appropriate to the pluralistic nature of society (BPS, 2005). Social justice, conceptualised as both scholarship and professional action aimed at the shifting of societal values and institutions that disadvantage or marginalise individuals, within our field may be considered as that action which can be said to increase access to means of self-determination (Goodman et al., 2004). This endeavour has been central to the identity of counselling psychology since the inception of the profession (Palmer and Parish, 2008), albeit one that continues to draw controversy and debate (Kennedy and Arthur, 2014).

Much like the current 'pass the mic' project giving a platform to racially minoritised individuals in light of the Black Lives Matter movement (Frost, 2020), this research is predicated on a corresponding belief that trans and non-binary voices ought to be given more space in the academic literature surrounding them, especially given their tendency to be subsumed under the wider LGBT+ banner (Ozturk and Tatli, 2016). Through this work I intend to not simply embrace social justice as a value, a mere 'buzzword', but to act on this value as a core component of counselling psychology as a profession (Vera and Speight, 2003). In a society ever more in the grip of hate crimes against trans individuals (BBC, 2019), this research will stand as testament to social justice action as much as it does social justice as a concept. With its emphasis on the lived experience of non-binary individuals, it will hopefully open a space for their voices to be heard within the woefully under informed profession of counselling psychology (Alderson, 2013).

Despite this emphasis on social justice within counselling psychology, and guidelines from the British Psychological Society (2012) and other groups (e.g. Scottish Trans Alliance, 2015) encouraging psychologists to learn about trans experience, many trans and non-binary people still struggle to find psychologists (and other health and therapeutic professionals) who understand their difficulties.

Whilst psychologists are called to “be aware of the diversity of gender identities - including both binary and non-binary genders” (BPS, 2019:9), our historical role in developing discriminatory, biased and stereotypic perspectives castigating LGBT individuals as immoral, deviant, disordered and even dangerous cannot be overlooked (Bidell, 2016). This being especially true in the ‘western’ world in which gender non-conformity has been consistently pathologised (Ansara and Hegarty, 2012). With nearly 20% of trans individuals in the US exposed to conversion therapy over their lifetime (Turban et al, 2019), some psy-complex workers still misusing their power to speak ‘on behalf’ of trans people (e.g. Littman, 2016), and many therapeutic training programmes offering inadequate guidance on working with trans individuals (Gess and Doughty Horn, 2018), it is no surprise that these attitudes and potential lack of knowledge are a significant hurdle to trans and non-binary individuals seeking support (e.g. Elder, 2016), leaving some feeling too uncomfortable to discuss their identity even with gender specialists (Scottish Trans Alliance, 2015). Alongside this, the relative sparsity of literature focused on the experiences of non-binary individuals, and the tendency for their experiences to be aggregated with the wider trans community (Ozturk and Tatli, 2016), may contribute to the difficulty professionals have in understanding this heterogenous community (Richards et al., 2016, 2017). Indeed, calls for non-binary experience to be explored independently of the wider trans community are not new (e.g. Factor and Rothblum, 2008). Given the sparsity of literature and aggregation of identities in existing literature on broader trans and LGBT communities (often intentionally or unintentionally erasing aspects of the LGBT community), the reader is encouraged to interpret the following introduction, with its limited non-binary specific literature, cautiously.

For my part, I have previously conducted research into the lived experiences of eight self-identified non-binary individuals (Taylor et al., 2019) and through this, in combination with past clinical work, I noticed (alongside another researcher) that speaking of their bodies to be difficult. These experiences piqued my curiosity about the specific role embodiment might play in the experience of being non-binary, especially in light of the cultural essentialism and dysphoria based medical discourses highlighted by trans and non-binary individuals as impacting on their self-expression and pursuit of medical support (Bolin, 1988; Liamputtong et al., 2020; Smith, Cohen and Cohen-Kettenis, 2002; Taylor et al., 2019; Davies, 2020; Konnelly, 2021). Given how such narratives can dictate both the ways a body may come to be sexed or gendered and what actions one may undertake to alter it (Walsh and Einstein, 2020), alongside the impact experiences of social oppression can have on trans individuals relationship with their bodies (Tabaac, Perrin and Benotsch (2018) and the critical role embodiment can play in regard to our general wellbeing (Hefferon, 2015), it seems prudent to fill this gap in the current literature. The following review will therefore aim to offer an overview of gender from both a lived and an academic perspective, focusing on gender dysphoria, the role of oppression in the lived experience of trans and non-binary individuals, the influence of the media around narratives on being trans and non-binary and how trans and non-binary identities may be embodied. In the end, the purpose is to present a phenomenological understanding of human beings as bodily-expressive wholes in contrast to the more prevalent dualistic discourse of gendered roles *and* sexed bodies.

Gender liminality across indigenous cultures

In the heart of Waikiki, on the island of O’ahu, stand the Nā Pōhaku Ola Kapaemāhū a Kapuni. These ‘stones of life’ represent four healers; four healers who, according to oral tradition, were all māhū (Morris, 2019). Whilst currently often used as a slur against trans and gay people, traditionally the term ‘māhū’ designated a respected individual who was considered to exist *between* masculine and feminine identities (Matzner, 2001). Alongside the māhū of Hawai’i themselves, gender liminal individuals span Polynesian culture; for example, the fa'afāfine and fa’atane of Samoa, fakaleiti of Tonga, pinapinaaine of Tuvalu, the whakawahine of Aotearoa/New Zealand, and the akava’ine and akatāne of the Cook Islands (Poasa, 1992; Herdt 1993). The emphasis of these identities is on gender, in the sense of the role being one of a social and cultural nature, with little concern given to the body (Herdt, 1993). In contrast to the predominance of those assigned female at birth in western non-binary cohorts (e.g. Factor and Rothblum, 2008), gender liminal individuals in Polynesia are also almost exclusively those assigned male (Poasa, 1992; Herdt 1993).

For the Mahu above, “their habits coincided with their feminine appearance, although manly in stature and general bearing” (Boyd, 1923:262). Thus, they are often described in a way that blends masculine and feminine. Alongside this, despite the other terms above translating as ‘in the manner of women’, it would appear that masculinity may play a crucial role across Polynesian gender-variant identities (Schmidt, 2016); they *may* therefore all refer to individuals who present with an idiosyncratic blend of masculine and feminine traits, a bi-gendering as it were.

This is clearly evident across another broad culture: Native Americans. Here gender liminal individuals, who are noted in at least 150 tribes (with at least 30 of these having complementary roles for those assigned male and female at birth) are best defined by their spiritual and economic roles, with their gender expression varying as much, if not more, than their non-liminal counterparts (Callender and Kochems, 1983; Roscoe, 1991 and Herdt, 1993). For some of these individuals an ambigender approach is taken in which expressions shift between masculine and feminine (e.g. We’wha, a lhamana of the Zuni living their life in both male and female roles (Bost et al., 2003)), whilst for others there is a bi-gendering of the roles on par with the Polynesians above. Alongside this, there are also those who attempted to completely emulate the opposite sex in a manner that may correspond more to western binary transsexuals (Roscoe, 1991).

Like the two-spirit, the kathoey (of Thailand) and hijra (of India) act to underscore the institutional element of gender liminality in many non-western cultures. The kathoey being understood as synonymous with the Pandaka gender outlined in the Tripitaka (Totman, 2003); the hijra, devotees of Bahuchara Mata, called to be such by their impotence with women, and made eunuch to access her divine powers (Nanda, 1986). Again, we see an emphasis here on assigned male individuals, with assigned females being quite absent. There’s also the centrality of sexuality and body modification in being Hijra that's less present in the Polynesian and native American cultures explored above. Ultimately, these genders, many of whom have experienced some form of colonial suppression (Driskill et al., 2011), share a social (often religious) role within the cultures in which they exist.

In contrast to these cultures, what defines the West in terms of third genders are their conspicuous nonappearance. Whilst they have existed within our mythology (e.g. The Greek Hermaphroditus, a two-sexed child of Hermes and Aphrodite) there are almost no instances of roles for gender liminality in the style of those outlined above. The only two for which any reference could be located are the femminiello's of Naples (Matthews, 2011) and the burrnesha, or sworn virgins, of Albania (Denis, 2012). With both originating around the 15th century, though, they are a positively modern phenomenon compared to the various diversities of gender explored across indigenous cultures above. As well, unlike their non-western counterparts, both aim at crossing from one sex to the other and thus emphasise the dominance of a binary conceptualisation of gender in the West. Despite the lack of socially sanctioned roles for gender liminality in the west there have, however, nonetheless been *individuals*, such as Claude Cahun (Treaster, 2019), who have transgressed or subverted gender norms.

Contemporary Western non-binary identity

Experiencing themselves as something besides male/man or female/woman, those who identify outside of an essentialist binary conceptualisation of sex/gender are seemingly on the rise (Wilson, 2019). In one of the largest studies of trans experience, Harrison, Grant and Herman (2012) asked 6,456 participants from the US, recruited via 800 nationwide trans specific organisations, to identify themselves from four categories: man/male, woman/female, alternating between two genders, and an option for 'gender not listed here'. Given these possibilities they found 13% identified themselves as a 'gender not listed' and 20% as alternating between two genders, with many who recorded themselves as a 'gender not listed' self-identifying as some variation of genderqueer or third gender. There were also plenty who provided more creative and idiosyncratic labels by which they titled themselves: "*birl, jest me, skaneelog, twidget, neutrois, OtherWise, gendertreyf, trannydyke genderqueer wombat fantastica, Best of Both, and gender blur*" (pp.14). Others, still, opted for culturally specific terms, hinting at the role intersections of identity might play in some non-binary identities, e.g. "*two-spirit*", and "*mahuwahine*" (pp.14).

Beyond this work, similar prevalence rates of around 25% to 35% of non-binary gender identification have been reported within the trans community (James et al., 2016; Barr, Budge and Andelson, 2016; Mikalson, Pardo and Green, 2014). Outside of this cohort, however, prevalence rates are harder to come by. The best estimates available, all within a western European context, suggest that between approximately 0.4% and 4.6% of the total population identify outside of a binary gender identity, with a consistent finding that those who were assigned female at birth were more likely to endorse such an identity than those assigned male (Kuyper and Wijsen, 2014; Titman, 2014; van Caenegem et al., 2015). Alongside this, an Israeli study by Joel et al. (2013) report over 35% of cisgender individuals feeling themselves to be 'to some extent' the other sex. Limited as these reports are, they do act as an important highlight to a potential distinction between the relative commonality of those who may experience some degree of gender non-conformity and the smaller number of those who declare an identity as non-binary.

Given the difficulty inherent in even addressing the question of numbers, accurate data on the demographics of the non-binary community is not surprisingly also challenging to come by. However, available reports suggest that greater numbers of this cohort report themselves to be assigned female at birth, White, more highly educated and of a bisexual or pansexual sexual orientation (Factor and Rothblum, 2008; Harrison, Grant and Herman, 2012). Within the wider trans community we can see the interactions of these characteristics more clearly, with there being demonstrable differences across various trans groups. For example, in the US, Black and Hispanic individuals are more likely to be trans than their White counterparts (Flores, Brown and Herman, 2016; Crissman, Berger, Graham and Dalton, 2017). With Lawrence (2010; 2013) showing the prevalence of an attraction to women in trans women positively correlating with the level of individualism within a society, the demographics of sexual orientation of western and non-western transwomen may also differ. As above, the variance here may portend the role intersections of identity may have on the opportunities for trans and non-binary gender identification and expression, as cultural factors may interplay with sexual orientation in the degree to which trans individuals may experience themselves as able to express their identities.

Ultimately, for those who do identify as non-binary, this can imply a diversity of approaches to gender. These approaches are inclusive of, but not limited to: agender or an absence of gender, bigender or a blending of the binary genders, and ambigender or a gender that alternates between the binary positions (Wickham, 2011; Richards et al., 2016). The reflections above on 'third' genders, though, ought not be taken as suggesting a trinary over a binary conceptualisation of gender. Instead, the 'third', or that which I have termed non-binary (due to its popularity (Thorne et al., 2019)), can be understood as "a mode of articulation, a way of describing a space of possibility" (Garber, 1993: 11). Across these distinctions, a shared valuing of individuality and the importance of expressing oneself (Taylor et al., 2019) may support an understanding of non-binary as a multitude of expressions over any absolutes (Herdt, 1993).

An outline of two models for conceptualising gender

An essentialist narrative of gender

A belief in a true essence, that which is irreducible, unchanging, and therefore constituent of a given person or thing, is the definition of essentialism (Fuss, 1989). A metaphysical view, dating back to Aristotle, that purports some objects, no matter how described, have essences; that is, they have essentially or necessarily certain properties, without which they would neither exist nor be the things they are (Speake, 1979). With regards to gender, essentialism would imply that certain cognitive, emotional, and social capacities (as well as the source of these capacities) are immutable and that women and men have distinctive traits in relation to these based on their sexed characteristics, internal reproductive systems and genitalia at birth (Holmstrom, 1998). Importantly, is the belief that categories from an essentialist viewpoint are considered to be historically and cross-culturally invariant.

Essentialist arguments tend to focus on the material, or biological aspect of gender. Although, alongside this 'natural' essentialism is often a social one (Rangel and Keller, 2011). Essentialism is also more than just the attribution of certain characteristics to everyone subsumed within a particular category (as I have done when speaking of the West above), it's also the attribution of those characteristics to the category in ways that naturalise or reify what may be socially created or constructed (Phillips, 2010). With regards to gender, this may best be witnessed in how a quick search of any comments section of any article written about trans or non-binary individuals will quickly reveal someone claiming that trans women are not safe because they are men and all men are inherently violent or predatory.

A social constructionist narrative of gender

Unlike the absolutist stance of the essentialist narrative, a social constructionist view of gender places it as akin to culture, in that it is seen to be a human phenomenon that requires us all to constantly be 'doing gender' (West and Zimmerman, 1987). Indeed, gender could be considered a central aspect of how a person is-in-the-world or a lens through which all experience is perceived (Deaux and Steward, 2001; Bem, 1993), as "talking about gender for most people is the equivalent of fish talking about water" (Lorber, 1994:13). First used within academic fields in the 1950s, Money (1955:254) employed the term 'gender' to distinguish between biological sex and "all those things that a person says or does to disclose himself or herself as having the status of boy or man, girl or woman, respectively". This new terminology then acted to free gender roles from biological sex, or "attributes that, collectively and usually harmoniously, characterize biological maleness and femaleness" (Zucker, 2001:101), such as chromosomes, gonads, hormones and genitals (Migeon and

Wisniewski, 1998). In turn, this opened the way for the likes of Constantinople (1973:1) to critique the notion of gender as “a single bipolar dimension ranging from extreme masculinity at one end to extreme femininity at the other” and hypothesise instead the idea that ‘masculine traits’ and ‘feminine traits’ are more independent than oppositional.

As a result of these mid twentieth century professionals and academics, we were liberated to explore how the sex into which we are born is transformed into a social and embodied experience. In fact, before we are even born some of our parents may hold a ‘gender reveal’ party in which a shower of pink or blue will confirm our sex to our soon to be nearest and dearest. At least it will if you’re born today, a century ago (had gender reveal parties been a part of our cultural gendering back then) the colours may not have played such a central role (Del Giudice, 2012). This is also only true if you happen to have parents who hold true Western notions of gender, as different cultures have their own rules on how individuals are to be gendered; or as Mead (1935:280) put it:

> “many, if not all, of the personality traits which we have called masculine or feminine are as lightly linked to sex as are the clothing, the manners, and the form of head-dress that a society at a given period assigns to either sex”.

Gender then, in contrast to essentialist assertions, may change across space and time. Thus, Butler (1990) argued that gender cannot be conceptualised as merely the expression or disguising of some innate aspect of ‘self’, but ought rather to be viewed as a continual creation brought forth through language, gesture and all manner of symbolic social signs. It is to be understood as consisting of a set of discourses (including the non-verbal and bodily) which, through repetition, become ‘sedimented’ over time to give the impression of substance. This substance is then reified through essentialist narratives, creating as a result positions in which our subjectivity becomes ‘gendered’. Thus, gender ought to be viewed as being real only as an activity and not as a state of being. By their work, Butler (2014) did not, however, mean to present the case that gender is fluid and changeable, considering their own not to be. Instead, they have worked to articulate their sense that gender is neither dependent on an individual's biological sex nor that sex itself is a construct free category; they have aimed to challenge the hegemony of the essentialist conceptualisation of gender outlined above as a means to highlight and undermine the oppressive aspects of being 'gendered'.

Ultimately, "this is perhaps the most controversial issue in sex and gender theory. Is the basis of gender identity essential and biologically based or is it socially constructed?" (Whittle and Stryker, 2006:XIII) In summation, this work aims to hold a position that reflects the impossibility to satisfactorily answer this question, as any answer will ultimately miss something whilst presenting a coherence where there is really none. Instead, it will take up an embodied position (outlined below) that allows for both the materiality of sex and the constructed nature of gender to co-exist. In other words, it is a position that follows van Anders (2015), building on the work of Kessler and McKenna (1978), in recognising that sex/gender is a concept that cannot be understood as either solely biologically or socially constructed.

Gender dysphoria

Gender dysphoria refers to the distress that may occur when gender identity does not coincide with assigned sex (Coleman et al., 2012; Priest, 2019). Although it has been argued that not all trans identified individuals experience gender dysphoria (Bouman, de Vries and T'Sjoen, 2016; Byne et al., 2018; Chen et al., 2016), it has been the predominant clinical framework from which trans experience has been understood. In the World Health Organisation's International Classification of Diseases-10 (1993), gender dysphoria is described as the "desire to live and be accepted as a member of the opposite sex, usually accompanied by the wish to make one's body as congruent as possible with one's preferred sex", with historically an "adoption of a stable, integrated, unambiguous identification as 100% male or 100% female" considered the end point of the medical transition designed to alleviate this dysphoria (Diamond and Butterworth, 2008:366). With this in mind, medical transition can be viewed as geared towards the creation of an aesthetic and functional 'ideal' male or 'ideal' female body. In trans men, for example, neo-phalli are constructed with the expectation of urinating whilst standing, with descriptions of successful surgeries using language of being able to produce “a forceful stream” (e.g. Cheng et al., 1995; Kim et al., 2009). The emphasis on neo-vaginas and neo-phalli, meanwhile, being constructed to accommodate a penis or become erect enough for the purpose of (vaginal) penetration gives clear indication that the ‘end goal’ is to enable heterosexual penis-in-vagina intercourse (e.g. Karim, 1996; Fang et al., 1999; Monstrey et al., 2009). By reading such functional outcomes that surgeons strive for, we can begin to distil how trans bodies can become defined by the essentialist social expectations placed on the (two) sexes, including heterosexuality (Plemons, 2014).

This definition of dysphoria, this narrative of trans bodies, gained popularity with Benjamin (1966) and Cauldwell (1949) who both believed in an essentialist notion of a physical sex and a psychological sex mismatch. Such a notion was not new of course as the German sexologist Hirschfeld (1923), who pioneered the acceptance and exploration on LGBT lives, had also previously written about such a phenomenon though his discussions on ‘sexual intermediaries’. In more contemporary parlance, this can still be seen in the feminine essence narrative (Blanchard, 2008) which, whilst often taken as a *façon de parler* by those in the community, was utilised by the medical establishment throughout the twentieth century to develop clear ‘treatment’ pathways for trans individuals. This acted, historically, to categorise specific narratives of childhood gender non-conformity, adult heterosexuality and persistent genital dysphoria (e.g. Person and Ovesey, 1974; Buhrich and McConaghy, 1978; Blanchard, 1988) as more legitimate than others. In particular, this conflation of sexuality and gender identity can be read into Freund, Steiner and Chan (1982), Blanchard (1985), Bailey (2003) and Lawrence’s (2017) theorisation that some transsexuals are essentially very homosexual men. This subtype of trans women, historically labelled ‘true transsexuals’, are considered to be more acceptable as women. Through recognition of how trans bodies have been studied with regard to how well they align with cis-heteronormative standards (e.g. Zucker et al., 1993; Blanchard, Dickey and Jones, 1995; Fridell et al., 1996; McDermid et al., 1998), and how the conformity to these standards may even influence access to care (Smith, Cohen and Cohen-Kettenis, 2002), we can also highlight the heteronormative narrative underpinning these categorisations of trans experience. Ultimately, these explanatory models of trans identity tend to conflate gender identity with sexual orientation and attraction, as well as the binary conceptualisation of sex and gender noted above.

When presenting to healthcare professionals, many trans women appear to endorse the belief that they will be required to adopt this 'wrong body' narrative in order to gain access to medically supervised bodily modification (Bolin, 1988; Liamputtong et al., 2020), with trans men and non-binary individuals likely following suit. For Hausman (1995), that the medical discourse has contributed to this is little doubted, however her exploration of the autobiographies of trans individuals highlights the maintenance of such essentialist narratives even outside of the clinical setting leading her to conclude that such a rigidly binary, essentialist, narrative around trans identity was one forged *between* the medical and the personal. In essence, she argued that the trans preoccupation with bodily modification was but a manifestation of a greater concern for the gender binary than that found in cisgender individuals. Indeed, early medical accounts of trans women constructed those seeking interventions as holding a shallow and distorted view of what it truly means to be a woman (e.g. Worden, 1955) and contemporary accounts of the rigidity of trans narratives can be found in Hakeem (2012), where the aims of psychotherapy with trans individuals are constructed as being about providing the individual with a broader understanding of the meaning they afford to gender as a construct in relation to themselves and society.

Historically, as may be evident from the above, the focus of the literature around gender dysphoria has also been on trans women, and gender dysphoria as a diagnosis has been noted as more resembling the experience of trans women than either trans men or non-binary individuals (Galupo and Pulice-Farrow, 2019). For example, whilst often used to pathologise non heteronormative sexual orientations in trans women through the label of autogynephilia, Blanchard's (1985) theory, noted above, has seldom had its potential counterpart in trans men explored. Indeed, only in the last five to ten years have trans men begun to find their way into the spotlight, as some self-defined ‘gender critical feminists’ have sought to undermine their identities. Littman’s (2016) attempt, for example, to impose a new narrative of ‘rapid onset gender dysphoria’ (ROGD), the hypothesis that children and adolescents can be influenced by their peer groups and social media to identify as transgender, largely upon the experiences of trans individuals assigned female at birth stands as testament to this. This conceptualisation of trans-masculine experience reflects a deliberate attempt to weaponise scientific-sounding language to dismiss mounting empirical evidence of the benefits of transition for youth (Ashley, 2020). Her complete lack of young trans individuals in her research also highlights the ongoing attempts in some circles to ignore trans individuals’ own voices, whilst her use of a pathologising framework and language (e.g. “cluster outbreaks of gender dysphoria”) act to construct trans identity as tantamount to both an infectious disease and a disorder (Restar, 2020). Such a process has been continued through Shrier’s (2020) limited inclusion of trans voices in her book about ROGD, with her instead, like Littman, opting to rely primarily on parental and ‘expert’ testimony. Like Littman above, her work also repeatedly and pointedly describes trans identity as a ‘contagion’, a ‘craze’ and an ‘epidemic’; this language, of course, dismissive of trans experience and potentially deliberate in its evocation of pathology. Littman’s work has thus been criticised for recruiting from online groups hostile to trans identification (e.g. 4thWaveNow and Transgender Trend), not utilising pre-existing validated psychometrics and thus lacking reliable and internally valid measures of constructs evaluated (e.g. gender dysphoria) and misrepresenting her work as being based on the principles of grounded theory whilst employing a deductive, theory driven, analysis (Restar, 2020). Shrier’s work, meanwhile, has been criticised for drawing conclusion without empirical backing (Cass Eris, 2021). A recent study, covering 173 trans youth accessing gender affirmative care at ten Canadian medical centres, has also failed to find evidence in support of ROGD (Bauer, Lawson and Metzger, 2021). Despite this lack of empirical backing and the severe methodological flaws outlined above, Littman and Shrier (amongst others) have attempted to portray AFAB non-binary and trans masculine bodies as being in distress, victims of being manipulated into being ‘trans’ and thus undergoing a form of ‘conversion’ therapy in which lesbian women are being turned into heterosexual men. They speak of bodily modification as a means to ameliorate the impact of the patriarchy, all the while maintaining an a priori belief that such a means of managing one’s own body is unacceptable.

Whilst little has yet to be written explicitly exploring non-binary identity in this manner, given the high prevalence of non-binary individuals both being assigned female at birth and having non-heteronormative sexual orientations (Factor and Rothblum, 2008), it is possible they too could come to have their experiences pathologised or dismissed through these, or similar, theories. Regardless, the historical (and not so historical) conflation of gender roles, sexuality and embodiment through an essentialist paradigm outlined above has already acted to largely foreclose even the possibility of non-binary gendered identity, with “femaleness and maleness as exhausting the natural categories in which people can conceivably come, what falls between is a darkness, an offense against reason” (Geertz, 1984:85). Thus, non-binary individuals have ultimately been made invisible, relegated to the outskirts of a system that has limited their autonomy through a commitment to a binary division of medical and surgical interventions offered (e.g. NHS England, 2019a; 2019b). This would certainly fit with prior research conducted by myself, in which the non-binary individuals interviewed spoke of the frustration they experienced when their attempts to manage their dysphoria through bodily modification came up against a rigidly binary system (Taylor et al., 2019).

Times, though, may be changing with both the DSM-V and the, in development, ICD-11 attempting to shift to a more de-pathologised and inclusive set of diagnostic criteria around gender dysphoria. There remain distinctive differences between the two, however, highlighting the ongoing difficulties of classifying the heterogenous experiences of the trans community. With the DSM-V, the emphasis remains on the requirement of an individual’s gender causing a clinically significant degree of distress or impairment across important areas of functioning (e.g. social or occupational). A factor explicitly recommended against by both trans individuals and health care providers in a review of the ICD-11 (Reed et al, 2016), which instead aims to decouple gender dysphoria from both sexual disorders and psychiatric disorders. However, in the end, gender dysphoria continues to be medicalised, pathologised and dismissed. It has been, and continues to be, essential across the world if one wishes to access certain bodily modifications and, in some regions, legal recognition of one's identity. However, as is it not reported by all individuals who identify as trans (Byne et al., 2018 and Chen et al., 2016), this continued emphasis on it as a necessary condition for expression of one's identity, both socially and physically, may continue to act to exclude and alienate many trans and non-binary individuals (Davies, 2020).

Trans and non-binary experience(s) and the impact of gender variance

From one hundred lashes, through fourteen years imprisonment with corporal punishment, to death by stoning the identity or expression of trans individuals is curtailed in many parts of the African and Islamic world (Human Dignity Trust, n.d.). Across Europe and North America too trans individuals are increasingly discriminated against in their access to healthcare (Sanger-Katz and Weiland, 2020; Sandler, 2021), legal recognition (Holroyd, 2020) and their freedom to openly discuss their very existence (Parsons, 2020). Even here in the UK, the highest office of government, the cabinet, recently discussed if trans individuals under the age of eighteen should have the right to determine their own bodies and if all trans individuals (especially trans women) ought to be barred from certain, sexed, public spaces (Truss, 2020) and, whilst since reversed, a high court order acted to seriously limit the right of trans children to access age appropriate medical interventions (BBC, 2020). This is the world we live in; a world where only twelve countries, and around a third of US states, even offer legal recognition of non-binary identities.

These experiences, alongside those outlined below around systemic occupational, social, legal, economic and healthcare related oppression, may be referred to as transphobia - a belief set that endorses the notion that trans identity is deviant in comparison to a cisgender norm (Nordmarken, 2014). Ultimately, Tabaac, Perrin and Benotsch (2018) suggest these experiences may have a significant impact, mediated through self-esteem and satisfaction with life, on the relationship trans individuals have with their bodies.

Trans and non-binary experience of health and healthcare-based oppression

The experience of feeling excluded and alienated, noted above, is one not limited to gender specific healthcare. Lykens, LeBlanc and Bockting (2018), after interviewing ten non-binary individuals from the San Francisco area, reported how their participants could feel misunderstood by providers who approached them from a binary perspective, with this tending to result in a sense of their identity as non-binary being invisible. In turn, this led to the participants either concealing their identity to access care or simply going without, and with them ultimately describing a sense of being disrespected and frustrated by the pressure placed on them to conform to binary expectations. Of course, this is only a small participant group, a limitation most research on non-binary experience tends to have (Scandurra et al., 2019), but other studies likely inclusive of non-binary individuals do appear to indicate the same degree of difficulty is faced by the wider trans community when attempting to access healthcare (Heng, Banks and Preston, 2018).

This invisibility, further compounded as it may be for non-binary individuals in particular through their unique struggle in finding a language to convey their experiences (Saltzburg and Davies 2010; Claire and Alderson, 2013; Taylor et al., 2019), may lead trans individuals to take circuitous routes through the medical establishment in order to get their needs met. Given the lack of knowledge around trans bodies noted within the medical profession (Chisolm-Straker et al., 2018), it is not surprising that a pervasive finding across the literature is a sense that trans individuals are often required to educate their healthcare professionals before they can have their healthcare needs met (e.g. Ross, Law and Bell, 2016; Safer et al, 2016). Sadly, for many, this contributes to a tendency to avoid accessing necessary healthcare, including for critical or acute needs (Bauer, Scheim, Deutsch and Massarella, 2014 and Samuels et al., 2018). This lack of knowledge is also not limited to the medical establishment, with Elder (2016) and Bess and Stabb (2009) reporting a lack of knowledge regarding trans experiences as impacting negatively on individuals pursuing psychotherapy.

Alongside this individual led avoidance, the medical and psychological establishments are not without their own responsibility, with many trans individuals reporting inappropriate care, refusal of care and mistreatment by health providers as they experience discrimination and systematic oppression by healthcare professionals and within healthcare settings (Giffort and Underman, 2016), although this has been reported as less the case by those with a non-binary identity (Harrison, Grant and Herman, 2012). However, it may be exacerbated further for those whose identity is intersected by minoritised ethnicity or disability (Grant et al., 2011; Scheim et al., 2017). In the UK specifically, the Scottish Trans Alliance (2015) explored the experiences of 224 non-binary individuals accessing gender specific healthcare and noted that 56% had or may have had problems getting the assistance they needed as a result of their identity. Alongside this 43% of participants stated they had felt pressured by the gender services they had received to appear more binary. In the end, there is a consistent call for professionals of all backgrounds to develop their knowledge of trans related experiences and healthcare (Carlile, Butteriss and Sansfaçon, 2021).

Trans and non-binary experience of educational and employment-based oppression

On the whole, specific educational and employment-based experiences of binary trans individuals, let alone non-binary (as the two are seldom disaggregated), can be difficult to locate, owing to the tendency of these groups to be subsumed under the wider LGBT+ banner (Ozturk and Tatli, 2016). However, what is available paints a rather bleak picture, for whilst trans individuals appear to be more educated than the general populace (Whittle et al., 2007) they are consistently found to be working at levels well below their capability (a:gender, 2007) and they remain an underemployed population, with a median income of CA$15,000 per year in Canada (vs an average of CA$43875), despite 44% having an undergraduate or postgraduate degree (Bauer et al., 2011). In Ireland around 50% of trans individuals have been reported as unemployed (O’Driscoll, 2016) and only 37% as earning over €15,000 per annum (Hearne and McMahon, 2016), whilst in the UK Morton (2008) found that despite 54.9% of their 71 Scottish survey respondents having an HND/degree or postgraduate degree only 29.5% had a gross annual income of over £20,000, with a further 47.9% of respondents having a gross annual income of *under* £10,000 (vs an average of £28,400). In a national LGBT survey conducted by the UK Government Equalities Office (2018) only 65% of trans women and just 57% of trans men reported having been employed in the previous twelve months. In the US the unemployment rate for trans individuals is about double that of their cisgender counterparts, and about 50% of trans employees have reported adverse job outcomes such as being fired, refused employment or being held back from promotion as a result of their gender identity (Grant et al., 2011). Being trans may also lead to a reduction in an already established income, with trans women potentially losing around a third of their salary after transitioning (Schilt and Wiswall, 2008).

It has been highlighted that some of these realities may be due to some trans employees wishing to take time off work in order to undergo gender transition, and these individuals experiencing unique social, psychological and medical challenges as a result (Pepper and Lorah, 2008). However, with a third of UK employers recently acknowledging they are ‘less likely’ to hire a trans person and nearly half unsure if they would recruit a trans worker, it is more likely due to discrimination around their identity (Crossland Solicitor, 2018). Alongside this potential challenge to obtaining employment, Whittle et al. (2007) surveyed individuals on their experiences of discrimination whilst employed and reported that 29% of trans employees experienced verbal harassment, verbal and physical abuse or threatening behaviour. A summary of research by trans campaigning groups by a:gender (2007) also notes how over 50% of trans employees report an experience of discrimination or harassment within the workplace, with a quarter stating a need to obtain alternative employment as a result. A staggering 42% of respondents also cited the workplace as a primary reason for their hesitation in pursuing gender affirmative body modification, and in the UK one in eight trans employees report having been physically assaulted by either a colleague or a customer (Bachman and Gooch, 2018). Intersections with minoritised ethnicities and trans identification may also play a role here, as trans individuals of colour in the US report poorer employment experiences than their White trans counterparts (Grant et al., 2011).

Trans and non-binary experience of social oppression

India, Nepal, Bangladesh, Taiwan, Australia, New Zealand, Canada, about a third of US states, Denmark, Portugal, Malta and Iceland all offer legal recognition to non-binary individuals, whilst Germany does so only for those who are born intersex. In the UK, non-binary individuals are able, albeit often with some difficulty owing to social convention (Fenton, 2016; Taylor et al., 2019), to make use of gender-neutral prefixes such as Mx. However, in 2020, an employment tribunal ruled that the existing lack of legal recognition of non-binary identity was lawful, and not currently a breach of human rights (Bowcott, 2020).

Alongside this widespread lack of recognition, according to the United States National Transgender Discrimination Survey (Grant et al., 2011), trans individuals face heightened rates of gender-based discrimination, rejection and abuse. And, for non-binary individuals within this community the rates may be even higher (Harrison, Grant and Herman, 2012; Budge, Rossman and Howard, 2014; James et al., 2016; Lefevor et al., 2019). In the UK, the number of reported hate crimes against trans individuals has quadrupled over the last five years (Chapple, 2020), although the actual rate of hate crimes may be significantly higher as a recent study noted only one in seven trans victims of a hate crime reported it to the police (Bradley, 2020). In the UK, the authors of a survey study of 889 British trans and non-binary individuals reported over 90% as having been told that they were not normal; 57% having been sexually harassed, assaulted or raped; 56% having either been physically assaulted or threatened with physical assault; 25% having lost family or friends for being trans and 14% as experiencing police harassment (Mcneil, Bailey, Ellis, Morton and Regan, 2012). Again, intersections with minoritised ethnicities and trans identification may come into play here as trans people of colour are at increased risk for suicidality, substance abuse and HIV risk behaviours due to the intersection of racism, sexism and transphobia (Xavier et al., 2005).

Trans and non-binary mental health and the minority stress model

The reported rates of depression and anxiety within the trans community are varied. However, they are consistently found to be above that noted in cisgender populations, with rates ranging from 20% to 88% (Verschoor and Poortinga, 1988; Bodlund and Armelius, 1994; DeCuypere, Jannes, and Rubens, 1995; Haraldsen and Dahl, 2000; Hepp et al., 2005; Gomez-Gil et al., 2009; Nuttbrock et al., 2010; Reisner et al., 2010; Mcneil, Bailey, Ellis, Morton and Regan, 2012; Heylens et al., 2014; Budge, Adelson and Howard, 2013). Likewise, rates of attempted suicide are particularly high across the trans community with estimated lifetime prevalence of suicide attempts ranging from 32% to 41% (Clements-Nolle et al., 2006; Grant et al., 2011) compared to 2% to 9% in the general population (Nock et al., 2008). So too rates of self-harming behaviour are high, reaching as much as 42% (Dickey et al., 2015) versus 1-4% for an adult non-transgender population (Jacobson and Gould, 2007). With regards directly to non-binary individuals, relative to both their cisgender and binary transgender counterparts, they appear to be at an elevated level of risk for depression, anxiety and substance abuse (Stanton et al., 2021).

Alongside these experiences, the more limited literature exploring the prevalence of personality disorders within the trans community has been contradictory. Whilst several studies have noted prevalence rates above those found in cisgender controls (e.g. Bodlund et al., 1993; Hepp et al., 2005; Madeddu, Prunas and Hartmann, 2009) others have reported rates either lower than those found in the general population (Cole et al., 1997) or comparable with it (Palumbo et al., 2012; Heylens et al., 2014). As with the wider role of mental health professionals in the diagnosis of gender dysphoria (Meyer-Bahlburg, 2010), the role of mental health diagnoses within the trans community remains a not unexpected - given the historical and not so historical tendency towards pathologising the lived experiences of trans individuals - controversial topic. Historically, borderline personality disorder (Murray, 1985), schizophrenia (Rajkumar, 2014) and psychosis (Lattanzio and Ribeiro, 2017) have all been used as explanatory models for trans individuals' lived experiences. For example, Meyer (1982) reported a series of features in trans individuals, such as vulnerability to unstructured situations and stress, a pervasive sense of emptiness and isolation, the tendency to externalise all difficulties, little ability to tolerate intimacy, low affect tolerance, a sense of identity diffusion, poor inner sense of continuity, excess use of drugs and alcohol and 'polymorphous perverse' (non-heterosexual, penis-in-vagina) sexual trends that they noted overlapped with a borderline personality. Setting aside an exploration of the wider criticism (too broad for the current literature review) of personality disorders, these experiences could, perhaps, be better explained by the Minority Stress Model (Meyer, 2003).

Although not without its detractors (Bailey, 2020; 2021), the Minority Stress Model (Meyer, 2003), which in this context can be understood as distress resulting from being "gender variant [and] living in an often hostile social environment" (Cole et al., 2000:170), can be applied to the experiences of trans and non-binary individuals outlined here. For example, trans individuals who have endured physical and/or sexual violence are significantly more likely than those who have not had such experiences to report a history of multiple attempted suicides (Testa et al., 2012). This appears to be especially the case for young trans individuals for whom gender based victimisation predicts heightened levels of depression and suicidality (Nuttbrock et al., 2010), with these being four times the rate of those who have not experienced such victimisation (Goldblum et al., 2012). Both of these studies also highlight the reality that attempted suicides are multiple, not one-off occurrences. Furthermore, Clement-Nolles et al. (2006) reported directly on how gender-based victimisation is independently connected to this suicidal behaviour in young trans individuals. It ought to be noted that the impact of minority stress also appears to extend beyond mental health, with gender identity related oppression being reported as influencing the heightened risk for sexually transmitted infections (STIs) (including HIV) and illicit substance abuse (Russell et al., 2011; Testa et al., 2012) within the trans community; alcohol related abuse in particular being 8.5 times higher in those who have experienced gender-based oppression (Nuttbrock et al., 2014). Gamarel et al. (2014) also noted how in 191 partnerships (consisting of a trans woman and a cis men) the experience of gender-based stigma was associated with lower relationship quality.

Ultimately, Bockting et al. (2013) noted a positive association between poorer mental wellbeing and social stigma for trans people, whilst Sanchez and Vilain (2009) demonstrated that low group self-esteem was a strong predictor of psychological distress, and that a poor internalised view of trans identity was correlated with a poor level of psychological wellbeing. A meta-analysis by Tan et al. (2020) has also acted to reinforce a focus on the role cultural and ethnic factors may play in trans experiences of discrimination. In the end, there is a wealth of evidence that indicates both support from family (Erich et al., 2008; Simons et al., 2013), as well as access to bodily modification (Murad et al., 2010) can reduce the distress associated with gender dysphoria for those who experience it.

Trans and non-binary representation in the media

In the Iliad, Achilles attempts to avoid war by dressing as a woman only to have his plan foiled when he fails to be excited by a gift of perfume from Odysseus, whilst in Shakespeare's Twelfth Night Viola spends much of the play in the role of a young man named Cesario. This benignly humorous cross-dressing trope eventually found its way to the 20th century and many depictions of cross-gender characters were played for comedic effect - such as in films like Some like it Hot (1959), Tootsie (1982), Mrs Doubtfire (1993) and White Chicks (2004). However, in all of these examples the characters heterosexual cisgender nature is never questioned, indeed the audience's awareness of their 'true' identity is central to the comedy. On television too, potentially trans characters such as Chandler's father in the popular US sitcom 'Friends' (1994-2004) or Pat from the SNL sketches (1990-1993) and subsequent film 'It's Pat' (1994) have been utilised mainly as comedic props, rather than fully-formed and respected individuals. In relation to this long-standing and relatively benign mockery of gender non-conformity, Serano (2007) and Bettcher (2007) note that media depiction of explicitly trans feminine bodies usually falls under one of two main archetypes: the 'deceptive' and the 'pathetic'. 'Deceptive' depictions involve a cis-passable trans woman (usually played by a cisgender woman), usually with a penis, 'fooling' cisgender heterosexual men into being attracted to her - with a 'big reveal' at his expense. The character of Dil, in the Crying Game (1992), is a good example of this, as are the villains, Lois Einhorn, in Ace Ventura (1994), Montana Morehead in Soapdish (1991) and Tanya from Naked Gun 33$^{1/3}$: The Final Insult (1994). In each of these instances trans bodies are presented as false, with their 'truth' being revealed to an often horrified protagonist. There is little doubt in these scenes that trans feminine bodies are portrayed as not only deceitful, but also disgusting; a sentiment perhaps best personified by an episode of the US comedy Family Guy, in which a main character spends no less that forty five seconds violently vomiting after discovering he has slept with a woman who is trans. Ultimately, this trope is taken seriously enough that Endemol's There's Something about Miriam (2004), in which a number of cisgender heterosexual men were to seduce a single (unbeknownst to them) trans woman, led to the heterosexual cisgender men who participated in the show being awarded a substantial financial settlement for the 'damages' done in being paired with her (a *trans* woman).

As for the 'pathetic' depictions of trans feminine individuals, these have much in common with the cross-dressing trope named above, although now the comedy comes not from the ignorance of those around them but rather at their expense. These characters essentially portray trans women as harmless caricatures - always attempting to reach some idealised femininity, and always falling short; Barbara from the British comedy series the League of Gentleman (1999-2002) is an example of this. Every time a news story portrays a trans woman applying female accoutrements also speaks to the superficiality of these representations, and the implicit notion that beneath the veneer the 'truth' of a person's sex is always waiting. These individuals, unlike their deceptive counterparts, are usually portrayed by cisgender men and may also be viewed as expressions of bodies in distress or as monstrous aberrations (Halberstam, 2016).

It's important to again note here the (negative) emphasis on trans women, over the invisibility of their male and non-binary counterparts. As with the shift away from pathologising in the clinical articulation of trans identity outlined above, however, the media too is changing (Capuzza and Spencer, 2017). The emphasis above on the salacious depiction of trans femininity is slowly giving way to more nuanced depictions, such as Sophia Burset in Orange is the New Black (2013-2019), several characters from the ongoing series Pose (2018-2021), Nomi Marks in Sense8 (2015–2018) and Maura Pfefferman in Transparent (2014-2017). It’s also important to note the role trans women are increasingly playing in their own portrayal. The depiction of trans masculine individuals too is beginning to come out of the shadow of invisibility it has traditionally fallen under (Bendix, 2020), and non-binary individuals are starting to find their way onto the small screen, with the Emmy nominated role of Dillon in the ongoing US drama Billions (2017-present), Cal in Sex Education (2021) and Adira on Star Trek Discovery (2020). Ultimately, there is a decades long debate within media studies that would appear to suggest that the media may both reflect and influence public discourses (Hopkins, Kim and Kim, 2017) and therefore, when combined with the oppressive experiences outlined above, could impact on how trans and non-binary individuals may come to view and experience their bodies as invisible, unknown, disgusting, deceitful, pathetic or monstrous. As depictions continue to change, hopefully, this will also encourage more positive ideas of how trans and non-binary bodies can be viewed and experienced too (McInroy and Craig, 2015).

Embodiment

Transsexualism, or now transgenderism, originated around the notion of a person being split between a psychological and a morphological sex (Hamburger, 1953) and this, failing to be alleviated through any psychological means, led to an emphasis on the body as the only site of therapeutic intervention (Benjamin, 1966). As noted above, those early individuals seeking out such interventions were pathologised, whilst those offering to help were often criminalised. Thus, the trans body was prohibited and positioned as defective. It’s no surprise then that autobiographies of these early pioneers positioned themselves as physiologically intersex, and sought to produce ‘evidence’ that they really were male or female of body and not just sick of mind (e.g. Cowell, 1954;

Jorgensen, 1967; Dillon, 2017). As outlined in more detail above, as the 20th century approached its zenith, however, a turn to discourse through an assortment of queer theorists, most notable amongst them Judith Butler (e.g. 1990; 2011), set off a movement away from an essentialist narrative of gender as determined by sex to one in which the script, now reversed, had gender in the starring role: sex, more in the back seat (Butler, 2011). Over time, this has represented a shift in the way in which 'trans' has come to be understood as no longer being solely the purview of the essentialists and their sense of it as *change*, but to now encompass notions of *crossing* and *moving beyond* gender too (McKenna and Kessler, 1978). In relation to this, there is some degree of 'gatekeeping' in how these terms are employed from within the trans community itself (Ortiz, 2020), and whilst for many these discursive turns have opened up new opportunities of gender transgression, for others the assertion that sex and gender are not immutable have acted to undermine the traditional trans claim of being a fully constituted subject, only mis-embodied (Plemons, 2017).

Criticism of this move towards the discursive declaration of sex and gender as something one *does* over something one *has*, however, have not been absent. Both Martin (1994) and Prosser (1998), whilst commending the move's ability to liberate the body as a site of potential, have spoken on the way our bodies can also act to limit the narratives we impose upon them, and criticised the likes of Butler and other queer theorists for not accounting enough for the materiality of the body. Others too have given voice to the notion that our bodies, and thus our sex, are more than passive non-entities that are created solely through social discourse, rather they are viewed as being imbued with their own agency that 'punches back' (Alaimo and Hekman, 2008). In recognising the corporeality of the body in this way, the oft misinterpretation of Butler (1990) as espousing a view that gender is akin to an outfit that could be donned and discarded at will, is being challenged. So too the notion that the body is but a tabula rasa onto which bodily modifications are little more than superficial accoutrements in the name of an internal sense of 'self' as either man or woman (Bornstein, 1995). It's important to note that this 'return' to/of the material is not without its own problems, however, as gatekeeping from within the trans community towards those who espouse the importance of sex (Ortiz, 2020) and pressure from fundamentalist religious organisations (e.g. Truth in Science) and (cisgender) women's groups seeking to exclude trans women (whom they define as men) from 'single sex' spaces, whilst opposing gender identity self-identification through essentialist narratives of sex, (e.g. Women's Place UK) are on the rise. Indeed, such 'gender critical' views are now considered protected by law in the UK. Ultimately, both of these may potentially lead to an inhibition in how trans and non-binary individuals come to understand their own bodies through the instillation of enforced narratives around how sexed bodies are to be constituted.

Embodiment, being a meeting point between that of the animal and that of the angel within us, is in essence, a way to conceptualise human experience that seeks to combine the materiality of our existence (our corporeality) with the mental (our culture and language). Reminiscent of Hegel's (1977) master-slave dialectic, it is the argument that our mind is served by our body, without doubt, but that it is also subjected to it (Dubois, 1908). In this, it stands in contrast to the long-held tradition of the western psyche to work through binaries, best exemplified by the well-known cogitations of Descartes (1993). The central tenet is to acknowledge the way in which we experience the world and ourselves both objectively and subjectively, in a reflexive process informed by the social environment (such as medical and cultural discourses) in which we dwell (Williams and Annandale, 2014). Merleau-Ponty (2013) articulates this through his assertion that both empiricism and rationalism cannot alone adequately describe our phenomenology, or the way in which we experience ourselves and the world around us. Empiricism presupposes our sensory experience as direct and the primary means through which we come to knowledge, whilst rationalism postulates knowledge as being formed within our minds and that our sensory experiences are mediated through it. Experience, however, is neither purely sensory nor fully interpreted, and how we experience ourselves and the world around us therefore must be understood as a process that includes both sense and reason (Merleau-Ponty, 2013). Ultimately, "*the notion of an embodied mind or a minded body, is meant to replace the ordinary notions of mind and body, both of which are* *derivations and abstractions*" (Gallagher and Zahavi, 2008:135) and thus the purpose of this study is to present a phenomenological understanding of human beings as bodily-expressive wholes in contrast to the more prevalent dualistic discourse of gendered roles *and* sexed bodies.

Aims of this research

Much like their early non-conformist binary trans counterparts, non-binary gendered individuals may struggle to access treatment (Richards et al., 2016), with over 50% still being uncomfortable about discussing their non-binary identity with gender specialists the majority of the time (Scottish Trans Alliance, 2015). Such non-binary gendered individuals may also struggle, like their binary trans counterparts, to find psychologists who understand their difficulties; despite guidelines from the British Psychological Society (2012) encouraging psychologists to learn about trans experience, many trans individuals have reported that lack of knowledge is one of the biggest hurdles to them seeking support (e.g. Elder, 2016), with recommendations being that clinicians familiarise themselves with relevant literature (e.g. Scottish Trans Alliance, 2015). Here, the current study aligns well with the ethos of counselling psychology through its emphasis on a subjective, and intersubjective, way of being that seeks to reject pathologising experience by focusing on empowering and respecting all individuals as socially and relationally embedded beings (Palmer and Parish, 2008; Cooper, 2009; Strawbridge and Woolfe, 2010; Hanley, Humphrey, and Lennie, 2013).

As non-binary gendered individuals have previously described themselves as feeling invisible and unable to fully articulate their identities (Taylor et al., 2019), and as psychologists are called upon by the community to garner a greater understanding of non-binary individuals lives (Budge, 2013), this project aims to bring forth their lives. In particular, given the rise in such individuals seeking out medical and surgical modifications to their bodies (Wilson, 2019), how they experience their bodies as they navigate a binary world. In particular, this study aims to explore how participants make sense of their own bodies (both actualised and desired), how they might experience others making sense of their bodies through a binary conceptualisation of sex/gender, how they might construct an ideal body and their potential journey towards achieving this and how their bodies might impact on their sense of self as a non-binary individual. Overall, the aim is to meet the recommendation of the BPS (2012) above for psychologists, which is inclusive of counselling psychologists, to increase our knowledge of trans and non-binary experience, and to achieve this through adding to a research base grounded in counselling psychologies values (BPS, 2005).

Methodology

Design

As a trainee counselling psychologist, I, and thus this research, am concerned with the practice of psychology in the navigation of experience and distress and the target audience are those varied practitioners who are likely to come across non-binary individuals through their work across mental health. As such, I acknowledge here the less purist, more pluralistic, stance taken on conducting this exploration of a social phenomenon (Johnson, Long and White, 2001) and how this work is underpinned by a philosophical pragmatism that emphasises the creation of knowledge that has a practical value over that which seeks a reification of any particular understanding of a phenomenon (James, 1995). Aiming for an inductive phenomenological exploration of non-binary individuals' subjective embodiment, analysed using a descriptive and empathic reflexive thematic analysis, this study undertook an approach in which pre-existing theoretical conceptualisations were not emphasised in the development of an analysis; instead, the focus was on the amplification and elaboration of non-binary individuals' own sensemaking and understanding (Hussey and Hussey, 1997; Neuman, 2013).

As there is a dearth of literature around the topic of non-binary identities (Richards et al., 2017), and some indication that specific discussion around their bodies may be challenging for this community (e.g. Taylor et al., 2019), a qualitative approach was selected to allow for an in-depth exploration of the subtleties of meaning and perspective (Willig, 2013) that non-binary individuals have in relation to their bodies. A qualitative approach has previously been used to explore the importance of appearance norms for lesbians and bisexual women (Huxley, Clarke and Halliwell, 2013), the visual identities of gay men (Clarke and Smith, 2015) and trans embodiment in the US prison industrial complex (Rosenberg and Oswin, 2015) and so, given its exploratory nature (Willig, 2013), is a fitting approach for this research. Due to previous criticism from the trans community towards academic work lacking consideration for the lived experience of being trans (Clarke et al., 2010; Prosser, 1998), and to encourage participants to feel comfortable speaking openly and honestly (Guba and Lincoln, 1985), an empathic hermeneutic position emphasising a stance that seeks to imagine what-it-is like to be the participant, was also employed (Willig, 2013).

Ontological and epistemological position

How we access, or perhaps produce, knowledge (our epistemology) is as important a question as what there is to actually know (our ontology). This work combines my a priori ontological realism with my relativist epistemology and, as such, a critical realist stance underpins its methodology (Bhaskar, 1975; Archer et al., 1998; Scott, 2005). In other words, unlike a constructionist approach that would consider there to be no reality beyond that created through language and a positivist one that would argue we are able to access a reality autonomous of our minds (Guba and Lincoln, 1994), the critical realist stance of this project allows a recognition of the existence of a reality beyond our experience of it whilst also respecting that this reality can only ever be accessed indirectly (Collier, 1994); an assumption of a tangible reality mediated through representations influenced by factors such as participants' culture and language (Ussher, 1999). There is a *truth* to the world, but our *understanding* of it is not guaranteed (Shilbrack, 2014).

The critical realist position of this research is defined in the broadest sense of being one that rejects the epistemic fallacy, in which we reduce what is real to that which we can know or say about the real; that one can and should "*distinguish between people's beliefs about reality and reality itself*" (Smith, 2010:127). It is a stance that accepts that there are stable and enduring aspects of reality that exist independently of human conceptualisation (Fade, 2004), whilst also recognising the socially embedded and fallible nature of scientific enquiry (Bhasker, 1975). It reinforces a distinction between ontology and epistemology and allows me to hold a post-positivist aim for the truth, whilst recognising the limitation of ever being able to completely achieve it (Archer et al., 1998). Thus, the ontological and epistemological paradigm that guides me is one that acknowledges a need for both the reflexivity and trustworthiness outlined throughout this methodology. Also, with particular regard to this research, a pre-existing reality that shapes the way in which participants' construct meaning around their bodies is recognised alongside the way discourses might act to expand and limit how they can be in the world (Willig, 2013). Ultimately, a critical realist stance encourages consideration of the materiality of the body by "*bringing the biological body back in, so to speak, without stripping agency of agency or structure of structure*" (Williams, 1999:798); it is a bearing that allows us to recognise more fully the paradoxical situation in which humans both *are* and *have* bodies (Bates, 2015).

Phenomenology

Consistent with this study's focus on subjective embodiment, phenomenological research aims for insight into our embodied being through a dual exploration of the, very little discussed in the methodological literature, "*kinaesthetic, sensory, visceral and 'felt sense' dimension of bodily lived experience*" alongside an acknowledgment that our bodies are not free from our "*emotional-cognitive, relational and social worlds*" (Finlay, 2011:30). Aiming to "*know the phenomenon as it shows itself as described by the participants*" (Parse, 2001:79) by seeking to explore the phenomenon in question in as free and unprejudiced a manner as possible, a phenomenological approach is deemed appropriate for this study. For Moustakas (1994) and Colaizzi (1978), such an approach revolves around a focus on the experience in question, such that a full description can be elicited in the service of portraying the underlying essence(s) as seen through the eyes of those experiencing. For phenomenologists, a core aspect of this ability to portraying phenomenon is the concept, originating in the works of Husserl (2001), of epoché or bracketing (Willig, 2013). Here, the researcher aims to explore the experience from a naïve perspective, aiming to limit suppositions through a process of reflexivity around identifying and acknowledging a priori thoughts about the phenomenon under exploration. For example, in my write up of the analysis I noticed I had used the word 'surprisingly' when speaking about participants who had reported desiring a binary sexed body, subsequently removing this as it spoke to my position and not that of the participants. This process of reflexivity was encouraged through intermittent discussions with a non-binary counselling psychologist peer, through engagement with university research supervision and through personal reflection and journaling.

Phenomenology can be considered to have reached its zenith with the work of Husserl (1995), although nascent accounts of it exist in the works of Brentano (1995) and James (2018). What connects such a span of practice and reflection is ultimately 'a return to the things themselves' in line with an attempt to put aside any pre-existing conceptualisation, ideas, attitudes and interpretations of the phenomenon under consideration (Husserl, 1995). As this research sits within a critical realist paradigm, aiming for a descriptive account of how non-binary individuals experience their bodies, the intention is to emphasise Husserl's original attempt to throw light on the essential and general structures of a phenomenon, whilst eschewing his later turn to interpretivism. Such a position allows for the recognition that this phenomenological research aims to explore the experiential world of the participants through an emphasis on transcending, or suspending, past knowledge and experience in order to understand the phenomenon under study (Merleau-Ponty, 2013). Ultimately, in line with a phenomenological stance, this research aims to concern itself with seeking to know an experience as it is experienced by others (Breakwell et al., 2006) or to capture how "*whatever is given, or present itself, is understood exactly as it presents itself to the consciousness of the person entertaining the awareness*" (Giorgi 1997:238). To this end, I have ultimately attempted to "*put aside* [my] *own understanding of the phenomenon,* [to] *not engage* [my] *own understanding of the phenomenon and* [to] *remain open to what the participants tell* [me]" (Giorgi, 2009:40).

Procedure

As the overall aim of this research was to offer participants an opportunity to produce rich, reflective, data the methods were selected with this in mind. Three distinct data collection methods were employed: a qualitative survey, diaries and asynchronous email interviews; each of these is outlined below. By adding not only detail but also allowing for multiple ways of representing and analysing that detail, via a process of crystallisation, these three methods used together encourage the trustworthiness (see below) of this research (Ellingson, 2008; Tracy, 2010).

Phase one: surveys

Recommended for the exploration of meaning and experience (Braun et al., 2020) qualitative surveys can explore the diversity within a population (Jansen, 2010); and this is especially useful for a community as heterogenous as the one under study (Factor and Rothblum, 2008); given the under-explored nature of this study's topic, hearing this assortment of voices was also an important factor in selecting surveys as it enabled potentially missed areas of interest to arise from participants ahead of the interviews. As the internet affords greater access to geographically dispersed populations (Mitchell and Howarth, 2009), and several analyses have demonstrated surveys conducted online to provide results as valid as their more 'traditional' counterparts (Birnbaum, 2004; Evans & Mathur, 2005; Gosling, Vazire, Srivastava & John, 2000), an online qualitative survey was used. There is a significant lack of literature around the use of qualitative surveys, which may explain its tendency to not be utilised (Terry and Braun, 2017); however, Braun and Clarke (2013) encouraged surveys to be constituted of open-ended, non-leading, empathic (not challenging or critical) questions that are ordered in such a way as to not overwhelm participants. As such, the survey used in this research was compromised of several demographic questions (see Appendix one) and eight open-ended substantive questions focused on non-binary bodies:

1. How would you describe your experience(s) and feelings about your body? [e.g. what is your relationship with your body]
2. In your own words, could you give a detailed outline of your ideal body?
3. In what way (if any) have you attempted to modify your body to meet your ideal?
4. In what ways have/do you use your body to express your identity? [e.g. clothing/tattoos]
5. How have others responded to your body?
6. What impact has your body had on your day-to-day life? [e.g. public changing areas/sex life]
7. How has your body impacted on your sense of self?
8. Is there anything else you would like to tell me, or think I need to know, about your body?

The survey also served as a recruitment tool as to be selected for phase two participants had to agree to further participation via a question on the survey. The survey was published, via Qualtrics, on the 1st November 2019 and, to provide ample time for participation and completion, remained open until the 1st February 2020.

Phase two: diaries and interviews

Phase two consisted of a diary-interview study with eleven participants recruited through the survey. Of these eleven, nine would go on to complete a diary-interview, with two completing only a diary. A diary is a regular, personal and contemporaneous record that offers first person observations and reflections of experiences recorded over an extended period of time (Alaszewski, 2006). For Plummer (2001) and Kenton (2010) they can enable participants to capture mundane events that may be overlooked in retrospective accounts given in interviews, whilst allowing the recording of a multitude of experiences before they are re-constructed into a single meta-narrative via a one-off interview. Thus, solicited diaries may be considered an excellent process for collecting rich qualitative data (Corti, 1993; Elliot, 1997; Bartlett and Milligan, 2015) and their emphasis on capturing life as it is lived lends itself well to phenomenological research (Bolger, Davis and Rafaeli, 2003; Morrell-Scott, 2018). The use of diaries in the current study was intended to both capture participant's priorities and to provide them greater control over what and when to share (Milligan et al., 2005; Worth, 2009). In this way, as the interview portion of this study was guided by the content of the diaries, the use of diaries encouraged a shift in the power dynamic between participants and researcher by allowing participants a role in directing their own interviews (Meth, 2003; Markham and Couldry, 2007; Spowart and Nairn, 2014). Despite these boons, however, solicited diaries may create an issue of fatigue if the diary is maintained for too long (Wiseman er al., 2005), leading this to be managed in the current study by offering flexibility of length to participants and limiting recording to a maximum of one month (Coxon et al., 1993).

Diary keeping is commonly supplemented by an interview to expand on entries made in the diary (Elliot, 1997) and across qualitative research interviews are the most common method of data collection (Sandelowski, 2000). The original intention of this study was to offer participants a choice of either a face-to-face or a virtual (asynchronous email) interview (see Appendix five); however, whilst face-to-face interviews are generally perceived to be the pinnacle of interview research, with virtual approaches being relegated to poorer substitutes (Novick, 2008), virtual interviews have been demonstrated to also offer rich material (Bjerke, 2010; Madge and O'Conner, 2002; McCoyd and Kerson, 2006). And whilst there are concerns regarding the lack of non-verbal cues (Bjerke, 2010) and direct observation of emotion (McCoyd and Kerson, 2006) impacting on the data collected these are deemed to be outweighed by the confidence and anonymity afforded to participants wishing to speak on the potentially sensitive topic this research explores (Ratislavová and Ratislav, 2014); this anonymity potentially promoting a more honest response (Madge and O'Conner, 2002). As such, offering only asynchronous email interviews as a convenient and practical alternative (Gibson, 2014; Walker, 2013) as a result of limitations imposed by the global pandemic, was deemed acceptable.

No research interview lacks structure (Mason, 1994; DiCicco-Bloom and Crabtree, 2006). However, they can be thought to sit along a continuum from structured, through semi-structured, to unstructured (Bryman, 2001; May, 1997). With an unstructured interview questions are left unspecified so that material may emerge from the interview as it progresses (Reber et al., 2009), with this allowing participants to be more able to narrate their experiences at their own pace (Corbin and Morse, 2003). Asynchronous emails, in particular, allow participants greater control of when they choose to participate (Gibson, 2014; Fritz and Vandermause, 2017), which is particularly useful given the international nature of this study's participants. It also affords greater control over the amount of their time participants give to the interview process (Mason and Ide, 2014) and encouraged epoché through offering me more time to sit with and reflect before responding (Bampton and Cowton, 2002).

Diary-interview methods have a long history (Zimmerman and Weider, 1977) and are able to offer a greater depth than diaries alone due to both participants and researcher having the opportunity to explore and reflect further upon the diary entries (Kenten, 2010). Unlike Zimmer and Weider's (1977) original intention for the interview to 'interrogate' the journal accounts in order to increase the accuracy of the analysis, the current study employed the diary-interview method in an attempt to encourage reflexivity on the part of both participant and researcher (Pillow, 2003). To this extent, throughout their interviews participants were called back to sections of their journals and asked to further elaborate on experiences they recorded. In the end, this approach was believed to lend itself well to capturing potential variations in the way participants experienced their material bodies and to offer additional insights into their lived experiences.

Ultimately, eleven participants were asked to keep a daily journal of between two weeks and one month prior to their interviews, in which they would record and reflect on the day-to-day experience(s) of their bodies. And, of these eleven, nine would go on to complete a diary-interview.

The diaries were relatively unstructured, with participants having the scope to record what is of importance to them. However, guidelines were provided which asked participants to record all experiences that have brought their bodies to their attention, or where their bodies have had some impact on their life (e.g. when showering) (see Appendix six). In conjunction with these, I held a focused unstructured interview (Gray, 2009) which, through the use of participant's diaries as aide memoires, was centred around the topic of the participants' body. In line with Moustakas (1994), interviews were focused around two general questions: what had participants experienced in terms of the phenomenon and what context or situations had typically influenced or affected their experiences of the phenomenon; the phenomenon being their subjective embodiment.

Participants

Specific experiences are required of participants so, to ensure a richness of information was collected (Patton, 2002), a purposive 'sampling' method has been used in which participants were encouraged to snowball or pass information regarding the study on to those they believed might be suited to, and interested in, participating. This technique is commonly used in studies centred on gender and sexuality as these communities are typically 'hidden' and thus hard to reach (Clarke, Ellis, Peel and Riggs, 2010). Ultimately, LGBT individuals spend more time online than their non-LGBT counterparts (GLSEN, 2013) and this is largely driven by desires to socialise and illicit a sense of belonging (Driver, 2007; Laukkanen, 2007; Pullen, 2014). As the intention was to recruit individuals who were open and willing to reflect on their identities, participants were recruited via online forums (e.g. www.reddit.com/r/NonBinary) and, due to my own lack of presence online, via social media (e.g. Facebook and Twitter) shared by individuals known to me. Reddit, in particular, offered the potential to recruit a large sample size (in a short amount of time) and to target a specific demographic via its subreddit system (Shatz, 2017). Reddit thus enabled greater access to individuals who were engaged in their non-binary identity and, presumably, more practiced in speaking about this. The advert used in recruitment can be found in appendix three. Inclusion criteria were a fluency in English, being over the age of eighteen and self-identifying as non-binary. One participant was excluded due to being underage.

Determining ‘sample’ size in qualitative research is a complex and somewhat contentious practicality, influenced as it is by the focus of the research, the methods being employed, the diversity of the population under consideration, the richness of data expected from each participant, the analytic goals of the study and last, but by no means least, the pragmatic realities in which the research is embedded (Braun and Clarke, 2021b). In the end, 231 individuals reviewed the survey, 109 completed the entire survey and a further 15 completed the demographics only. In total, 37,500 words of data have been collated from the 109 fully completed surveys. At the closing of the survey, thirteen individuals had expressed an interest in participating further via an interview. Eleven of these responded to a follow-up email soliciting their continued interest. However, three later declined further participation. Information regarding the diary-interview format was forwarded to the remaining eight individuals, of which four completed a journal and an interview. A second round of soliciting participants via social media then elicited a further 11 participants. Seven of these submitted a diary, with five of them completing an interview as well. Two participants ended their interviews early. In the end, eleven participants completed a diary and nine also an interview. In total this amounted to 30,500 words of data from diaries and 34,000 words of data from the interviews. In the analysis, below, diary-interview participants have each been given a pseudonym, whilst survey participants have been allocated a number. All extracts are labelled as to where they came from (e.g. Jordan: Diary).

As part of the survey aspect of this study, participants were asked a set of questions pertaining to their demographics and their full responses can be found in Appendix one. In order to ‘situate the sample’ (Elliott, Fischer & Rennie, 1999), however, a summary is provided here. The mean age of participants was 27.5, with the median being 25 and the mode being 21. Three participants identified themselves as under the age of 18, and their data were not included in the final analysis. The eldest participant was 57. In terms of ethnicity, 88% of participants identified themselves as white, 2.5% as black, 3% as Asian and 6.5% as other. In this latter category, participants identified themselves as Latinx, mixed (Middle Eastern and White), Hispanic, mixed (Asian and White), White and Latino, mixed (Black and White), mixed (European and Central Asian) and Human. 33% described their nationality as British, 51% as North American (e.g. United States, Canada), 11.5% as continental European (e.g. France, Poland), 2% as Australian, 1.5% as South African and 1% as Indian. In reference to sex assigned at birth, 61% identified themselves as assigned female and 39% as assigned male, with none describing themselves as intersex. With regards to employment and social class, 36% were students, 13% were outside of paid employment (excluding students) and 51% were in paid employment. From this, whilst social class is difficult to categorise, utilising the reported occupational status of participants who identified themselves as employed 14% fell into tier I, 33% tier II, 17% tier III, 8% tier IV and 9% in tier V on the registrar general's social class categorisation scale. 17.5% were not identifiable (e.g. self-employed). Finally, pertaining to sexuality, around 42% of participants identified themselves as bi/pansexual, 16% as some variation of asexuality (e.g. greysexual) and 8% as lesbian or gay. The remaining 42% reported a wide variety of idiosyncratic sexualities (e.g. femme-oriented, scoliosexual, phallophile, lesbian/androphilic).

Alongside these survey demographics, the diary-interview participants had a mean age of 27; 73% identified as White, with 91% from North America, Great Britain or continental Europe. With regards to their sex assigned at birth, 55% were assigned female and 45% male; none were intersex. And with regards to employment and social class, 55% reported themselves to be students, with the remaining 45% being in employment. Those in employment were all either tier I or tier II of the registrar general's social class categorisation scale. Finally, in terms of their sexuality, the results were as idiosyncratic as those in the survey data, with most identifying as either bi/pansexual or some variation of asexual. Ultimately, full responses can be found in Appendix Two, but as can be seen, the survey and diary-interview respondents were similar to one another, with both aligning closely to reported norms for the non-binary community (Factor and Rothblum, 2008; Kuyper and Wijsen, 2014; Titman, 2014; van Caenegem et al., 2015).

Credibility and Trustworthiness

As Lincoln and Guba (1985) stress the *reader* to be responsible for assessing whether the circumstances and context of a study make the results relevant for their own needs, the credibility and trustworthiness of this study are ultimately out of my, or any authors', hands. However, since their seminal work, there have been several attempts to further articulate and delimitate meaningful criteria for encouraging the quality of qualitative research (e.g. Thomas, 2006). Many of these tend to view thematic analysis as a monolith and thus may not offer criteria best suited to this more reflexive work (Braun and Clarke, 2021a). As a result, alongside Braun and Clarke's (2021a) 'twenty questions to guide assessment of thematic analytic research quality', Tracy and Nowell's (2010; 2013) eight 'big tent' criteria were adopted to guide this research due to their felt closeness to the ethos of reflexive thematic analysis. Ultimately, the trustworthiness of this study is centred around its aim to stay true to the voice of participants and, additionally informed by Nowell et al. (2017), the following three steps were taken to encourage the credibility of this project: thick description, crystallisation and member reflections.

Thick description, with its call to show not tell, sits well with the inductive empathic stance of this study and its emphasis on allowing participants to speak for themselves and encourage the rich description of theoretical, methodological and analytical choices has been outlined in this section. A reflexive statement (see Appendix nine), also offers insight into my own awareness, motivations and cogitations; to showcase epoché (Willig, 2013) and my 'sincerity' (Tracy and Hinrich, 2017).

Crystallisation, alongside this, offers a way to achieve depth, by adding not only detail but also allowing for multiple ways of representing and analysing that detail (Ellingson, 2008). To this end, a variety of data collection methods were employed: online surveys, diaries (including several drawings from participants created when they were completing their diaries) and interviews. Allowing for different forms of representing, organizing and analysing, this enabled complexly rendered interpretations of meanings whilst acknowledging that the knowledge produced, in line with my critical realist stance outlined above, remained always of a partial nature (Ellingson, 2008). Debriefing with a supervisor and trusted peers also supported crystallisation (and 'sincerity') by offering an opportunity for "a significant degree of reflexive consideration of the researcher's self and roles in the process of research design, data collection and representation" (Ellingson, 2008:10). Finally, member reflections, acting less as a test of the accuracy of the analysis, as might be true from member checking (Lincoln and Guba, 1985), and more as an opportunity for participant collaboration and elaboration (Ellingson, 2008), were sought out in order to establish how well the synthesised analysis resonated with both participants and members of the wider non-binary community. Unfortunately, despite the findings being posted in multiple reddit forums (from which participants were originally recruited) for two weeks, and 98 individuals reviewing them, only 8 individuals offered any form of feedback. As such, member reflections have been noted where relevant; however, as the limited feedback was of a positive and acquiescent nature they did not contribute any changes to the analysis.

Ultimately, Lincoln and Guba (1985) defined trustworthiness as the way researchers can influence themselves and readers that their research findings are worthy of attention, and Tracy and Hinrich's (2017) state that this can be pursued via high-quality qualitative research marked by: a worthy topic, a rich rigor, sincerity, credibility, resonance, a significant contribution, ethics and a meaningful coherence. These criteria cut across the entirety of this study; However, as per Lincoln and Guba's (1985) reflection, it is in the end left to the reader to make their own evaluation of this work.

Ethics

Both the British Psychological Societies 'Code of Human Research Ethics' (2010) and 'Ethics Guidelines for Internet-mediated Research' (2013) were adhered to. Confidentiality and anonymity were key ethical considerations and transcripts have been stored on a password protected computer, with participants being informed that the guarantee of security and anonymity may be reduced for email correspondence (James and Busher, 2006). Informed consent was also clear in outlining the option participants had with regard to their right to secede from the project (within certain practical limits: presentation of the research, submission of progression evidence, and the final thesis). With regards to minimising harm, participants were informed of the difficulty that may arise in regularly recording about their bodies and experiences, and information was provided regarding potential sources of support (e.g. the charity Mind's trans helpline).

Reflexive Thematic Analysis

Due to the heterogeneity of the non-binary community (Factor and Rothblum, 2008), an ideographic approach may prove difficult for exploring shared meaning. Unlike interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) (Willig, 2013), the emphasis in thematic analysis on coding and developing patterns of meaning across a data set lends itself more to this aim. Thematic analysis has a history, predating IPA as a phenomenological method (Braun and Clarke, 2021c), as a 'flexible, straightforward, and accessible' approach that has frequently been utilised to explore the experiences and viewpoints of specific groups. It also has greater ability in moulding itself to the specifics of a project as that project evolves and develops (Clarke and Braun, 2018; King, 2004), in this way aligning well with phenomenological research and its ability, through its emphasis on an inductive stance, to take note of factors that may emerge as a study progresses (Gray, 2010). IPA, traditionally, is also focused on the analysis of data from interviews (although not exclusively) (Smith and Osborn, 2003), whilst thematic analysis has a richer history to draw upon in the analysis of the alternative data sources utilised in this research (Willig, 2013).

Thematic analysis is a qualitative research method that can produce trustworthy and insightful analyses across a range of epistemologies and research questions. It is a method for identifying, analysing, organising, describing and reporting themes (Braun and Clarke, 2006). Arguing for an iterative engagement across multiple levels, Halling (2008) calls for phenomenological research to explore both participant's particular experience and those themes shared across the phenomenon under consideration, for both to be utilised in the exploration and explication of the phenomenon as a whole. Such an approach has been used here, with participants' accounts being read both within the data (e.g. athwart a single participants' diary and interview) and across the data (e.g. across two or more participants' diaries). Ultimately, Braun and Clarke's (2006) six phase model for organising qualitative data into themed meaning, was utilised in the exploration and explication of the data:

- For the first step, I familiarised myself with the data and for the initial analysis the data were thoroughly read through several times over the period of one month with excerpts of interest noted and my own reactions to the data captured for reflexivity. A further in-depth analysis, conducted after a familiarisation with the literature, followed the same procedure with more attention given to pre-existing knowledge (e.g. the role of invisibility in participants accounts).

- In the second phase, codes were developed ensuring the participant's voice and frame of reference was prioritised (Braun and Clarke, 2013). Here the iterative process noted above involved shifting back and forth across the data to explore if codes were not idiosyncratic. As a result, codes were occasionally modified - such as when an early code of disgust became superseded by one of shame.

- The third phase was perhaps the most complicated; the organisation of ‘clusters of meaning’ to describe the experiences of participants that present the ‘essence’ of the phenomenon being studied (Creswell, 2007). This construction of themes out of patterns in the identified codes went through several stages, from initial themes being largely ‘domain summaries’ to finalised themes more reflective of thematic analysis’ emphasis on ‘patterns of shared meaning’ created by the researcher (Braun and Clarke, 2019). During this phase, an over-arching theme of ‘(em)bracing liminality’ was developed which helped to contain and make-sense of the individual themes - it gave the analysis its narrative.

- A circular examination of the themes with regard to the entire dataset constitutes the fourth phase and consideration was given to exploring Patton’s (1990) ‘dual criteria for judging categories’, to ensure themes had both internal homogeneity and external heterogeneity. Due to the complexity of the data, there was a degree of overlap between themes. However, each was nonetheless believed to have obtained a richness and coherence called for by Braun and Clarke (2012) and Tracy (2010; 2013). To emphasise the non-hierarchical nature of the themes a triangle was elected as the best representational form of how each theme was an equal and necessary component of the over-arching narrative of (em)bracing liminality.

- In phase five, themes were named and defined. Where possible direct quotations inspired the final theme naming, otherwise excerpts were paraphrased to best capture common meaning through participant’s words.

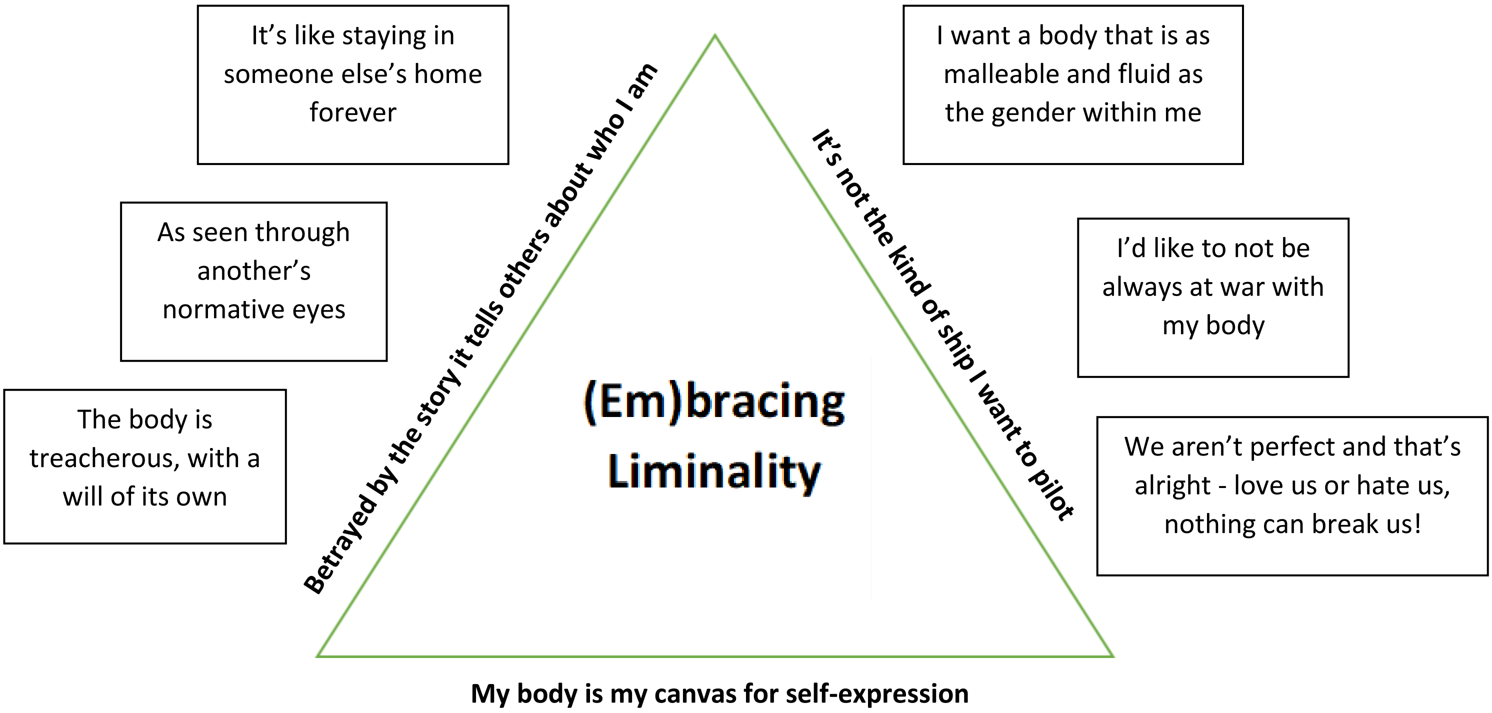
- The final phase, phase six, involves a report being produced. Exemplifying extracts were utilised to highlight each theme, which were presented in an illustrative over analytic manner (Byrne, 2021). Given this stance, relating the data back to the literature was held off until the ‘discussion’. A broad a range of extracts within each theme have tried to capture the participants’ experiences and, as per Braun and Clarke’s (2012) suggestion, the analysis attempted to bring together both descriptive and summative statements about each theme.

Analysis

As outlined above, this research holds that knowledge cannot be objective but is always shaped by the purpose, perspective and activity of those who create it (Willig 2013; Ellingson, 2008; Tracy 2013). This analysis, therefore, is shaped by my role as a trainee counselling psychologist and my aim of producing knowledge relevant and useful for other psychologists (and allied health professionals) working with non-binary individuals. As such, it can take on a somewhat dour tone as it emphasises areas of struggle. It's finale, however, is more uplifting, and this was intentional - an attempt to capture some of the, albeit subtle, joy present across the data. This format also reflects the overall flow of the interviews in which participants tended to move from a space of unspoken, non-reflective experiences of frustration to positions of pride and confidence and the analysis is presented in such a way as to hopefully illicit some of this frustration, confusion and pride in the reader.

Overall, the data has been woven around the conceptualisation of '(em)bracing liminality' with each of the three themes, or three meaningful entities that were constructed to unify disparate material whilst capturing the essence of some degree of recurrent meaning across the data (Braun and Clarke, 2013), contributing to this presented in Figure 1 below. This central conceptualisation speaks to the overriding sense that participants were attempting to navigate the threshold they found themselves in; non-binary subjective embodiment ultimately being constructed as the process of transitioning across gendered boundaries and borders. This has been constructed as an experience that was both to be embraced as a positive expression of self and as bracing, or as a tense and invigorating experience. Both of these terms, embracing and bracing, purposefully evocative of the body as they conjure up images of being held or preparation for an impact.

Figure 1: A construct of how non-binary individuals experience their subjective embodiment


It's like staying in someone else's home forever
As seen through another's normative eyes
The body is treacherous, with a will of its own
Betrayed by the story it tells others about who I am
(Em)bracing Liminality
It's not the kind of ship I want to pilot
I want a body that is as malleable and fluid as the gender within me
I'd like to not be always at war with my body
We aren't perfect and that's alright - love us or hate us, nothing can break us!
My body is my canvas for self-expression

Theme One: My body is my canvas for self-expression

This first theme describes the way participants spoke about the central importance individuality and self-expression had in their embodiment; each having an idiosyncratic bodily ideal to which they were working towards, or had already achieved. There was no absolute on how a non-binary identity may be embodied and participants acknowledged this as an important aspect of the appeal of a non-binary identity. The individuality spoken of was accompanied by a sense of reclamation and agency, of the body being moulded in the name of participant's inner selves, and clothing was a significant aspect of this reclaiming. For participants, it seemed *taking control* of their bodies was important and a sense of agency was prevalent across their accounts, with their bodies often positioned as barriers to be negated in their endeavours to express their gender(s). However, there was an ever present tension for me (as an outsider) around the way participants blurred the lines between gender as an internal experience and gender as performative.

A variety of bodies that could be considered non-binary were described by participants, speaking to the individuality that pervaded their reflections on their sense of embodiment. In light of this, there was a prevalent belief amongst participants that "*there's no correct way to look or be nonbinary*" [Finley: Diary] and there was little consensus about how to define a non-binary body. There was also no sense that participants' identity as non-binary was connected to the particular form their body took, with them instead describing unique bodily ideals. Amongst these idiosyncratic bodies a few participants described aiming to inhabit a body constructed along binary lines, although as can be seen in the following two extracts these accounts could be suffused with melancholy:

> "*I wish I never went through a testosterone puberty. I wish I just experienced oestrogen instead of testosterone at age 11-12. I just want people to look at me and see a normal girl but alas. I'm well aware of how T* [testosterone] *has irreversibly changed my body and I am not angry but I am trying to change what I feasibly can...into a body that is more feminine*".
> [Survey respondent #61]

> "*My ideal body would consist of being flat-chested, and having a penis. However, I don't want to be too masculine. I really don't want to have too much hair either, I prefer having smooth skin. I feel like my cheeks are sometimes a bit too chubby, and would like my jawline to be more prominent, but not too sharp or defined. I personally like having softer features*".
> [Jamie: Interview]

Alongside these few binary aspirations, however, almost all other participants spoke of how "*broadly speaking there are two kinds of androgyny: one that mixes male and female characteristics (e.g. soft, feminine facial structure combined with facial hair) and one that avoids both male and female characteristics (no breasts, no facial hair etc)*" [Bailey: Interview]. In regard to this, each participant had their own combination of primary and secondary sex characteristics that spoke to the manner in which they wished to express themselves and multiple quotations have been included here to demonstrate the variety and diversity of ideal bodies (imagined or achieved) described in the data:

> "*Very feminine face, slender shoulders and waist, long legs, two sets of genitals 🤷*". [Survey respondent #30]

> "*I had surgery to remove testes and to create a vagina and labia while keeping my penis in lieu of a clit*". [Survey respondent #57]

> "*In a perfect world, my ideal body would be a seamless blend of masculine and feminine features. Think of the marble sculptures of Hermaphroditus, and that would give a very clear image of what I would prefer to look like*". [Survey respondent #3]

> "*a 18-year old masculine athlete with broad shoulders, muscular but slender, little body hair, and a vagina instead of a penis*". [Survey respondent #73]

> "*On the taller side of UK average height, no facial hair, straight build (not curvy), flat chest, limited body hair. Female genitals that don't menstruate and do not have the risk of becoming pregnant. I would like a more rugged and masculine face*". [Survey respondent #80]

We can see above how participants' ideal bodies are not limited to aesthetic considerations, but that the way in which the body functions, for example as athletic or non-reproductive, are also important aspects of how their ideal bodies are inhabited and imagined. Alongside these attempts and imaginings at bodily modification there was a recognition that "*it is important to be aware that direct feelings about one's body are not the only source of influence*" [Survey respondent #34] in terms of how one might come to relate to their body. In regard to this, participants spoke about non-bodily modifications, such as how "*clothes are very important!!!*" [Survey respondent #78] and how clothing was as "*an extreme extension*" [Survey respondent #82] of the body. For example, River described how clothes were an extension of their body and how they could be utilised to create a sense of ease in one's own skin. They give words to how important non-bodily modifications are, as they name these as necessary for them to feel 'at home'. Clothing takes centre stage, as it acts to literally transform the way in which the body is experienced. By changing clothes, participants were able to feel more at home and comfortable with their (unchanged) body:

> "*I have felt "at home" in my body in particular outfits, circumstances and with certain people. The outfit that makes me feel most at home and comfortable in my body is either my pink or orange dungarees (that are shorts), my binder with planets on, my tee shirt which has plants on, boxers, long rainbow socks and doc martins*". [River: Interview]

Raising the role of control, of agency, Morgan spoke to the abundant manner in which clothing and other appurtenances of gender were used to present the body in a way more appealing to their sense of self. For participants, their bodies and their clothing were often presented as interacting with one another. There was a sense that an alteration in one led to a shift in the other; below we can see how the body could be adjusted through clothing:

> "*There are some aspects of my body that I have some amount of control over. For example, I can wear a binder, put on makeup, grow out and style my hair, and paint my nails. I can hide, show and to some degree accentuate aspects of my body with my choice of clothing, shoes, and accessories*". [Morgan: Interview]

Below, Tyler names the interchangeable nature of clothing and surgery, or bodily and non-bodily modification, through referencing them both as equal means to achieving some sense of comfort in one's body, whilst Finley reflects on the manner in which bodily and non-bodily modifications can literally overlap in the way they might rely on and reinforce one another. The body and its accessories are here made one:

> "*That's the nice thing about clothes and surgeries, you can change things in some ways that help you feel more at home in your body*". [Tyler: Interview]

> "*I think part of my fascination with clothing history is that throughout the centuries and decades, a particular body aspect would be greatly exaggerated no matter the gender,*

> *although it seems to have been more prominent for women. And while not many bodies were really changing (albeit maybe a little bit in a corset or the neck rings of the Kayan people, or Chinese foot-binding to give a few examples), the extremes through dress to me, as a modern viewer, denote a sort of morphing of the physical form*". [Finley: Interview]

Ultimately, the importance of this intersection between the body and its accoutrements was captured succinctly in one particular email interview exchange with Jamie in which they initially chose to speak about their clothing when asked about their body and then later objected to my attempt to establish a distinction between their body and their clothing:

> "***Thank you for exploring further your relationship to clothing, but I was wondering if I could hear more about your body...***
>
> *Excuse me, clothing to me was something my body is a part of, along with everything else that influence my mind to perceive a physical thing like it, so pardon if my answer wasn't really what you were looking for*". [Jamie: Interview]

Viewing of their body and accoutrements as interchangeable offered participants opportunities to explore and manifest their sense of self in more meaningful ways. For example, in outlining a blending of their body hair and henna tattoos, one survey respondent named the potential this offered them for artistic self-expression. The dissonance that participants experienced when their bodies and clothing were at odds with one another is also readable here:

> "*I get really creative with my body hair. I've shaved different patterns on every inch of my body as a way to embrace the body hair I was given, and to embrace it in a way where it's not just a symbol of my agab* [assigned gender at birth]*. The next step has always been to do henna tattoos that interact with the hair patterns, making my body a sort of evolving art piece. I have no interest in permanent or semi permanent body modifications. I don't pin myself down to one aesthetic just like I don't pin myself down to a gender. If I got some cool*

> *witchy tattoo that would be great for my goth looks but not for my '80s department store looks. The worst case scenario is that if the aesthetic doesn't match up, it makes the clothes look like a separate thing from my body, and clothing is such an important part of my self expression that I can't compromise that*". [Survey respondent #27]

Despite the primacy of clothing and adornment, and the secondary nature of the body as a canvas, in the above excerpts, the reality for participants was that their bodies remained an obstinate barrier, a force acting to inhibit their freedom to express themselves as they wished. Below we can see a collection of examples in which participants all gave voice to experiences of their bodies rising up and impeding their self-expression through non-bodily modification:

> "*I have a really small figure, my stature is short and small. And because of that, I can't exactly buy clothes that are more of my fashion taste or are what I like because they can't fit me*". [Jamie: Interview]

> "*I'm very particular about my clothing, and I do have one tattoo and several piercings. I'm often frustrated by the way I pick out clothes I'd like to see on an ideal me, and the current body I have doesn't wear them right. But I don't want to buy clothes solely to wear on this body as it is now*". [Survey respondent #66]

> "*I'm mostly comfortable with my body although I do try to reduce my breasts by wearing sports compression bras. I mainly wish my hips were flatter as it limits my clothes options and I generally prefer men's clothes but struggle to find stuff that fits my hips*". [Survey respondent #50]

Through discussing character customisation, a process in gaming whereby you create an avatar that is designed to your specific wishes (e.g. hair style, hair colour, skin tone, sex, eye colour, muscular build, etc.), Jaden spoke about how they connect to their body as a site of creation. The capacity afforded to them to bring into the world an embodiment of their choosing was highly appealing, above and beyond the game itself:

> "*I started playing an MMO* [massively multiplayer online game] *that I played when I was younger recently and it has been fun but the time I spend on it comes at the expense of everything else. The ability to chose* [sic] *and fine-tune everything about the way you present to others is something that really makes me want to play these types of games*". [Jaden: Diary]

They were not alone in this expression of interest in taking control of their body's aesthetic and other participants articulated their own sense of fear and frustration when faced with the limitation of control they experienced in regard to their bodies. There was a sense from Jamie below of how they found their body to evoke an awareness of agency and, in particular, the way this agency was inhibited:

> "*Because of the way my body is naturally made, I wouldn't be able to obtain those certain performances or appearances that I would like. That's not something I can control. That's something I lack the ability to change or control. And the lack of ability to change or control can still create frustration*". [Jamie: Interview]

This inhibition was ever present and could weigh heavily on participants, adding a hint of melancholy to the manner in which they spoke of their bodies as sites that were beyond their control. There was a lamentation around how the body was not able to obtain an ideal of neutrality:

> "*The idea that I wasn't in control of how my body looked and that it would never be "neutral" was always there*". [Survey respondent #27]

Cutting across participants accounts, however, was a strong sense of reclamation. This reclaiming of their bodies, through the choices they had made, was offered in relation to articulation around their bodies as the default option - a beginning, an untouched carapace that they could personalise and make individual. There was a common reflection, most evident in the second excerpt below, that participants' bodies were to be constructed and decorated as a means to escape an experience of being imprisoned by a body not of their choosing:

> "*I feel like my body uniquely represents who I am, and much of that is because of decisions I actively made instead of just a default. Before transition, my body felt very neutral like it was just the default shell I was stuck with*". [Survey respondent #57]

> "*The parts of my body that I feel dysphoric about, like my large thighs, I decorate and reclaim as my own piece of artwork by tattooing them. I dye my hair bright colours and wear bright, patterned and colourful clothing because then it's like my "female" body is my own, rather than something I have been stuck with or trapped in. It's like buying a piece of ikea furniture and then personalising it by painting or using decoupage to make it your own*". [Jamie: Interview]

These varied experiences were not, however, free from conflict. For some participants, the reclamation of their bodies was caught between a drive for a customisation of the body to meet individual expression and a reliance on norms based on the commodification of the body. Below we can read into the extracts the way the ideal body is compared to a representation of the body designed for purchase and consumption; the perfect body is one to be admired, not lived:

> "*In a perfect world it would be like a "ken doll", no genitals at all (but if I have to have genitals I prefer "female") and a flat chest. I don't want to be really muscular or to have a beard. I basically kind of want to be completely flat all the way down my body*". [Jamie: Interview]

> "*I think about this a lot. I often come up with an androgynous barbie doll. I would like my shoulders as slim as they are, my arms muscled, slightly waisted body, nothing in my genital area, but wide hips*". [Survey respondent #15]

However, as Morgan put it, ultimately "*exerting control can be a powerful way to decrease the distance between the image I have of myself in my mind vs what I see in the mirror*" [Morgan: Interview]. This sense of ownership was another prevalent articulation made across participants' accounts and was expressed as being a key element in how they manage the experiences of alienation and limitation outlined elsewhere in this analysis. Below are three accounts that each speak to the way participant's experience of agency over their bodies enabled them to feel more at ease; together they offer insight into the way the body could be experienced as constrictive, akin to a static and stolid alabaster sculpture awaiting the application of vivid colours through the participant's inked paint brush:

> "*If my freedom were gone, my body would become an awkward costume that doesn't fit and doesn't come off*". [Finley: Interview]
>
> "*I have tattoos and dyed hair because they make me feel far more at home and like my body is a sculpture I can decorate however I like*". [Jamie: Interview]
>
> "*I'm considering tattoos and piercings which can be hidden as I've got trans and NB friends who have done the same to get a sense of ownership over their bodies*". [Survey respondent #74]

Ultimately, participants spoke to the idiosyncratic modifications they sought out. Non-bodily modifications, such as clothing, were emphasised, indicating the manner in which participants experienced little distinction between their bodies and the 'accessories' attached to them. In many ways, participants' bodies were experienced as akin to coat-hangers for identities as, much like cat-walk models, they sought to negate their bodies such that they became canvases onto which an identity could be overlaid. In essence, participants were attempting to take control of the manner in which they give meaning to their bodies. The emphasis was often on the clothing, or the presentation of the clothed body, over the corporeality of the body. With much of this modification made in the hope of negating the body, the body could act as a more neutral staging ground for the expression of a participant's gender. The body could be nullified such that it is more malleable and becomes a better container of self-expression. In summation, a sense of agency over self-expression could be read across participants' accounts. Not only was ownership and control of their bodies central to their experience, but so too a subtle fear of being out of control. There was a strong emphasis on the way bodily modifications were spoken as reclamations of the body, as means through which the body could be brought under the hilt of identity. The body as potential is evident here, a default blank slate upon which an identity can be impressed. In so many ways, participants' bodies were secondary to their will and often discussed in light of how they can support or inhibit the expression of their experience(s) of gender.

Theme Two: Betrayed by the story it tells others about who I am

This second theme aims to bring an overall focus to how participants spoke about their bodies as being under the pressure from social expectations and norms and, in so doing, attempts to accentuate how participants' subjective embodiment was influenced by factors outside of themselves. It seeks to articulate a shared experience of feeling othered. The fist sub-theme, *It's like staying in someone else's home forever, perpetually a guest*, aims to highlight a sense of dissociation expressed by participants in relation to their bodies; their bodies as seemingly disconnected from themselves, as mediated through their ideal selves. The emphasis is on how this disconnection was embodied through a feeling of alienation. In the second sub-theme, *as seen through another's normative eyes*, participant's expression of their bodies as sites of pressure to conform to socially determined conceptualisations around gender/sex is presented, with these conceptualisations being embodied through fear and self-imposed limitation. The facet of feeling othered highlighted here is the interactive element of this experience. The final sub-theme, *the body is treacherous, with a will of its own*, speaks to the construction of their bodies through betrayal and how participants experienced their bodies as acting against their desire to be unlimited in their embodiment of gender; it speaks to participants' experience of feeling subjugated by their own bodies.

It's like staying in someone else's home forever, perpetually a guest

When reflecting on their bodies, many participants expressed a sense that "*It can result in an alienating feeling, where I feel like I'm living in someone else's body, detached and foreign and decidedly not my own*" [Morgan: Interview]. Here, Morgan's words construct the body as alien, an unfamiliar space that isn't entirely of one's own tenure. The imagery of foreign territory and another's possession build up an experience of dis-ease at the precariousness of the body - to whom does it truly belong?

Below, this estrangement from their corporeal selves was further elaborated upon by Morgan and Cameron, through a turn to analogies of home. These were used to express their experience of feeling out of place, of naming a baseline awareness of themselves as not quite the 'masters' of their own bodies:

> "*This feels like staying in someone else's home forever, perpetually a guest…I never have that sense of being able to relax in a place that is mine. Even during times that my gender aligns with my body, I know that it's only temporary and I can't get comfortable. I'm never a resident, always a transient, just passing through. I never have the chance to stop and catch my breath, or to regroup. I am never at rest*". [Morgan: Interview]
>
> "*Another point of comparison is staying in someone else's house. It's probably a fine house, but it's not the same as being 'at home'. I can't articulate right now what the exact difference is – but I think it's clear that there is one. I think that ideally we are 'at home' in our bodies, and I am not right now*". [Cameron: Interview]

Whilst naming a sense that their experiences seem common for those like them, Cameron and Jordan offered up further articulations around their sense of disconnection and alienation as they spoke to the manner in which their bodies were experienced as intrusive in their presence. Together, they built up their bodies as ill-fitting, almost suffocating, and there is the impression of the body as being almost violently imposed upon them:

> "*I feel very alienated from my body at times. I guess this is a pretty universal experience for trans people, but I feel it too. I sometimes feel like my body has been thrust upon me, like a coat that's too big. I use it, but it's not right, and it's not really for me. I'm almost never (physically!) comfortable. I'd really like to be*". [Cameron: Interview]
>
> "*There are times where just my body itself existing leads to a feeling of disconnected, especially about my chest which is just so unavoidable at times*". [Jordan: Interview]

These shared experiences of "*looking in the mirror* [to] *see a stranger*" [Survey respondent #62] and how "*it seems like everything is off*" [Charlie: Diary] offer a common summation of how participants experienced their bodies, as "*whenever I experience myself as an embodied and gendered being, my body feels like a shell around me, rather as simply 'me'*" [Cameron: Interview]. The disconnection from their bodies captured here by a survey respondent, Cameron and Charlie offer a glimpse into how participants bodies were constructed as being on the precipice of embodiment - bound up in a tangle of both being their body and at once removed from it. The imagery of a shell here is revealing as so often a shell is the meeting point between a body and its environment, and can be constructed to be both a part of a body and as separate from it. A snail's shell may both determine it as a snail, but also be misconstrued as something one can simply pluck off. It is at once both necessary and contingent to being a snail. So too, as discussed by a survey respondent below, were participants' bodies constructed as both necessary and contingent in relation to their sense of selves:

> "*I spent most of my life dissociating from my body because it didn't feel like "me." It was just a tool, a meat mech that I was piloting, and like most of the actual tools I own I didn't really*

> *care how it looked. I started to care more when I started taking testosterone and started identifying with the reflection I saw in the mirror: actually bothering to make sure my hair was styled nicely, trying to eat in a healthy way, wearing professional clothing, and so on. But my body didn't feel like it was part of me until I woke up from top surgery. Finally seeing my chest look flat, the way I had always felt it should was an incredible relief. It's only been a year since I had top surgery, and the scars are still pretty fresh, but even now it feels really bizarre and alien to think that I used to have breasts. Despite all the pain they caused, they never became part of my mental image of myself*". [Survey respondent #56]

For others, their sense of alienation from their bodies was captured in how they "*become dissociated when I think about it for too long*" [Survey respondent #64]. The power of both their bodies presence and participants' desire to be removed from it are apparent here as despite their efforts to keep it from mind, the body always returns. To manage this, many participants sought a detachment from their bodies or parts thereof, often discussing them as objects to be kept at a distance:

> "*One thing that these past days have made very apparent to me is that I don't experience things about my body very actively or often. If I do think about my body it's usually about my body in relation to something abstract, rather than something directly happening*". [Jaden: Diary]

> "*It's easier not to think about my body at home. Avoid the mirror, wear relaxed clothes and it's all good. Of course the bits of my body that make me uncomfortable are still there and I am still aware of them but they are easier to ignore*". [Jorden: Diary]

> "*There will be moments where I don't mind having a vagina, and moments where I don't want it. Most of the time, I am just detached from it*". [Jamie: Diary]

This avoidance of the body was most poignantly articulated by Bailey as they reflected on the manner in which their own avoidance secured them against the pain of their body and their gendered expression not aligning. Charlie too put words to the role non-bodily modification could play in supporting them to keep their body out of their minds, to their desire to find some semblance of comfort in the face of their alienation:

> "*As it stands, during particularly hectic periods I may forget to shave or match my clothes and end up looking unpleasant as far as gender identity is concerned. During those periods I try to briefly forget about my body and how it looks and if the matter at hand is indeed pressing, it usually works. I worry that having feminine accessories while simultaneously disregarding my femininity in other aspects could lead to a clash that would make me feel bad, both in gender and aesthetic terms*". [Bailey: Diary]

> *"if i can find a few pieces of clothing i really like, or a hairstyle that fits, it negates a lot of consciousness about my personal appearance from day to day*". [Charlie: Diary]

The 'mundane' everyday reality of this disconnect that participants experienced from their bodies was neatly captured by the extracts from River's diary, below. On several dates they recorded how they struggled to be in the presence of their body, such that they regularly concealed it during the routine activity of bathing:

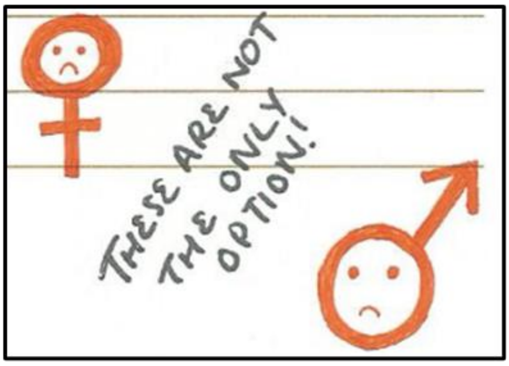
- 18th May: "*This evening I had to shower in the dark so I didn't have to see myself*". [River: Diary]
- 4th June: "*I put extra bubbles in the bath so I didn't have to see myself*". [River: Diary]
- 13th June: "*I couldn't shower today because I just couldn't manage to look at myself*". [River: Diary]

Ultimately, participants spoke to a sense of alienation through shared experiences of their bodies as feeling foreign. Their bodies were experienced as at odds with their sense of self, as though they acted to conceal and constrain participants' ability to fully embrace and convey their experience of self. This could lead participants to release their bodies from their minds and try not to dwell on the sense of disconnect they experienced, leading them to experience their bodies as not quite their own.

As seen through another's normative eyes

A sense of oppression permeated participants' accounts of their bodies. For example, Cameron articulated a sense of frustration around how "*I cannot express my gender authentically. My body is in the way. Whenever I express my gender I end up transgressing social norms, which I do not want to do*" [Cameron: Diary]. Here we can read the way participants experienced their bodies, through the eyes of social expectation, as being a barrier to their self-expression. There was an awareness on the part of participants, named here by Jordan, with regards to how they "*become much more aware of my body and the parts of it that cause me dysphoria and I am preoccupied with how they might be seen by others*" [Jordan: Interview] when in social situations. Ultimately, these extracts capture how participants' bodies were often experienced as diminished, invisible and limited through the binary norms perceived in another's eyes. The visual excerpt below, from River's diary, aptly captures the frustration and sorrow this binary conceptualisation of gender had:

Figure 2: "*These are not the only option*" [River: Diary]


THESE ARE NOT THE ONLY OPTION!

This sense of pressure, or perhaps oppression, was frequently expressed through a naming of how others would 'read' participants' bodies for indicators of gender identity and there was a great deal of frustration in relation to "*why must gender be thrown at me*" [Survey respondent #52]. This sense of powerlessness in the face of how their bodies may be constructed was captured by the desire expressed to be all together free of a body. As the eyes of another could render participants' non-binary identities null, or at least bring them into question, it was not unsurprising that participants spoke of wishing to be a disembodied mind:

> "*I remember sometimes wishing I could be a disembodied mind*". [Cameron: Diary]
>
> "*So, since I can't be comfortable presenting masc or presenting femme, can't be comfortable with whole sections of my body, I'll just cover it up and pretend that I'm a disembodied consciousness floating through space and time until things get better*". [Morgan: Diary]
>
> "*sometimes i wish i didn't have a body at all - just being a mind interacting with people with no barrier of appearance would make things much different, and maybe easier*". [Charlie: Diary]

Through these descriptions we can read an experience that their bodies are burdensome and inhibitory for participants. Below, several survey respondents put words to the discrepancy they may experience in light of the way other's may view their bodies. Much like how one might imagine a lone wander on a beach might feel when their subjectivity is suddenly interrupted by a stranger coming over a hill and shifting their self-perception from an observer to an observed, participants' experienced the gendered materiality of their bodies, through the eyes of another, as crashing down upon them:

> "*I am somewhat resentful of certain facial features because I feel they stand in the way of achieving "perfect" androgyny, but this is more to do with the way people perceive me than something I would like to change for myself*". [Survey respondent #80]

> "*I don't feel much discomfort over my general body shape, but I dislike that it gets read as male*". [Survey respondent #76]

> "*I wish people didn't see me as my birth sex based on my body parts. To me they're just there. It causes me dysphoria when they are used to define who I am or sexualized*". [Survey respondent #54]

In light of the above, the way the body is **seen by others** could clearly be as, if not more, important than the way it is **experienced by participants**. At the least, the conflict caused by the potential disparity between these positions is evident. Below, we can see how River was quite cognisant of how their body, once read through a cis-heteronormative lens, left them feeling exposed:

> "*I had my screening to be part of the COVID-19 vaccine trial. Having to do a pregnancy test because I am a "female of childbearing age" was weird and made me feel a little vulnerable*". [River: Diary]

Alongside River, Cameron and Jaden (below) also reflected on their awareness of the conflict the social and interpersonal expectations a binary view of gender ultimately had on their sense of being able to freely utilise their body. There was a suggestion of sorrow in their words as they brought to mind memories of being unable to inhabit their bodies the way they may have wished to, of their "*want to be able to wear both fem and masc coded clothing in public without raising eyebrows*" [Jaden: Diary], of how:

> "*There's also aspects about the way I've been socialized to use my body – it feels like I cannot use it to express myself in my movement and appearance, and that is due to gendered pressure*". [Cameron: Interview]

> "*I remember being very young and questioning why I couldn't do the things that girls could: Why can't I wear those interesting clothes, why can't I dance and be liked, why can't I sing and be liked*". [Jaden: Diary]

In the end, these experiences raised a question in the mind of Riley (below) around the role such experiences played in their desire to pursue bodily modification. Again, their body was a site for a battle with the binary and again the meanings attributed to their body were in conflict, leaving the body to be experienced as constrictive in light of how others decide it should be used. We can read here the powerless that can come along with the way a body's contours are charted by another, leaving the participants with a map that doesn't help them navigate the ground of their corporeal being:

> "*Maybe if the world didn't connect any physical traits to binary gender or to sexuality, maybe then I wouldn't have any issues with my body. Because then people would let me use my body in any way I wanted. Its hard to say*". [Riley: Interview]

Combined, these experiences of having their bodies viewed and acted towards as binary gendered were voiced by participants as barriers to the visibility of their non-binary identities. There was a fear expressed that their bodies might act to conceal their sense of self and thus inhibit their ability to be fully present in experiences of value to them. For Jamie and a survey respondent (below) their bodies were emphasised as being at risk of invisibility when under the gaze of socially imposed meaning. There was a conflict with regards to their attempts at self-expression against how their bodies often spoke for themselves in guiding how others viewed them:

> "*With haircuts, I always worry about the shape of my jaw and the not-so-very masculine hairline I have. A lot of hairstylists and barbers tend to make a masculine or andrygonous* [sic] *hairstyles more...soft, for an individual that gives off a very feminine feel to them*". [Jamie: Interview]

> "*My body is useful, I live in it, it is strong and healthy, and I am grateful for what I can do with it, but my body does not align with my gender and it betrays me in how it means others read my gender and respond to me. My body is small, and people treat me as if I am young and need protection*". [Survey respondent #65]

This power of another to gender participants based on their bodily characteristics was experienced as leaving participants limited in how they were able to embody their sense of self. There was a sense of fear articulated in how this power acted to inhibit participants in manifesting their gender as openly and freely as they wished:

> “*Putting on a skirt and makeup gets me weird looks and puts me on the defensive. Like, should I wait to go to the bathroom because some jerk might not like my gender expression?*”. [Tyler: Interview]

> “*It's frustrating because I can never properly express or present how I want to, and I would always be mistaken as 100% one gender or the other. And this makes it harder for me to show or give an example to others on how I feel and identify inside. I don't have a clear goal with this because I have so many limitations on presenting, expressing, and experimenting*”. [Bailey: Interview]

Alongside this experience of how others gendered them, there was, also some acknowledgement that their ‘gendering’ may also come from within. Through holding a strong awareness of gender participants may have sought out a non-binary position as a form of respite, a way to live in their bodies in light of the relentlessness of both others and their own binary gendering:

> “*I'd argue that I perceive the genderedness of things very strongly. That's also why I'm drawn to androgeny and trying to get the best of all genders*”. [Jaden: Diary]

Ultimately, participants had a complicated relationship with the way others might view them. There was a keen sense of the role the socially constructed aspect of gender had on their bodily experiences, but they also wished to transgress these. In the end, their bodies appeared to have the deciding role and we see here the frustration, and sense of betrayal, of living with a non-compliant body at the mercy of another’s gaze:

> "*i have a weird relationship with clothes. i constantly consume the rhetoric that clothes have no gender, makeup has no gender- but there is the inevitable moment when someone does a double take at a masculine person wearing a skirt and fishnets… in some ways this has made my life easier - as an afab person, it's much smoother to experiment with style and gender presentation when it's entirely normal to wear pants and hawaiian shirts out in public. however, i find myself looking dreamily at sundresses and frilly blouses and wanting to wear them. i love feminine clothing, but i feel like my body is too feminine to wear them*". [Charlie: Diary]

Across the excerpts selected above can be read the way participants spoke to how, through another's eyes, the reality of their bodies could not be hidden. They were acutely aware that this experience connected strongly to their interactions with those around them, through which their bodies were lived. They described their bodies as mediated by the expectations of others and ultimately presented them as being at the mercy of the other's power to read into them an identity at odds with their own understanding. This navigating of the internal and external experiences of the body led many to realise their bodies through frustration and sorrow, to such an extent several spoke in words of longing to be a disembodied mind. There was an understanding by participants of their body's visibility being indelibly linked to the invisibility of their non-binary identity.

The body is treacherous, with a will of its own

Cameron spoke succinctly when they stated that they often "*feel my body can be working against me*" [Cameron: Interview], as well as how they "*cannot express my gender authentically. My body is in the way*" [Cameron: Diary]. Their words here capturing a shared experience for participants of how "*when my body is doing something that doesn't match my internal view of myself, like getting my period, I feel betrayed by my body, like it's an external force, not really part of me*" [Survey respondent #19]. Whilst situated here, this sense of betrayal clearly reaches across themes as it speaks to participants' experiencing their bodies as "*frustratingly inadequate; limiting. Betrayed by the story it tells others about who I am*" [Survey respondent #22]. With participants describing a feeling of being at odds with their bodies, we again see here the construction of the body as 'an external force' that stands in an often uncomfortable relationship with an 'internal view' of oneself.

This division between the body and the mind is explored here through the theme of betrayal. As seen in the excerpts above participants painted their bodies as 'against' and 'in the way' of their sense of self. Below, Riley and Finley further speak to how they experienced their bodies to stand in the way of their attempts at self-expression:

> "*I was trying on clothes from both sides of the store and I liked a lot of things but noticed how it sucks that really the clothes on the women's side fit me better than from the men's even though I like the men's clothes better*". [Riley: Diary]

> "*It frustrates me that I can do the same exercises as a guy but because my body is flooded with estrogen* [sic] *I will not build muscle like said guy*". [Finley: Diary]

Often this sense of betrayal was discussed through a profusion of intense emotional experience, and extracts from the interviews with Jordan and Morgan capture the anger, frustration and ultimately the loss that were experienced by participants when their bodies, even when modified, refused to comply:

> "*There are also feelings of anger, this is particularly because I wear a chest binder and when I can't breath* [sic] *deeply, or I am sweating under it or its otherwise uncomfortable because of it I feel angry about and towards my chest for being how it is and not how it should be*". [Jordan: Interview]

> "*I strongly identify with those women who are barren, who cannot conceive through no fault of their own and will never know that experience. I mourn that loss deeply. (I'm tearing up writing about it)*". [Morgan: Interview]

Morgan also went on to elaborate on their experience of their body as having a seeming agency of its own; there was a sense that the body could interpose upon the will or activity of participants. The 'out of the blue' manner in which the body could 'appear' and make itself known at any time left Morgan with a frustration at how this inhibited their ability to see themselves as they wished to be seen, as a gap opened up between their internal sense of self and the external reality of their presentation, often leaving them to feel exposed and vulnerable:

> "*We shared a short embrace, but I felt the unwelcome development of an erection within my pants, and it instantly killed the mood for me. My body means well, but sometimes it just gets things so wrong*". [Morgan: Diary]

> "*But sometimes I do see myself. I'll catch a glimpse of myself in the mirror while brushing my teeth, or I'll see myself in a group photo posted to social media. However it happens, I'll see myself, and my brain will choose once in a while to see what's really there. Sometimes, what I see and what I picture in my mind are very close, and everything's ok. Other times, what I see and what I imagine are a world apart, and the disparity is painful*".]Morgan: Interview]

Further to this, Cameron constructed themselves as in a conflict of attrition with their body. As it continued to produce a disparity between itself and the way in which they wished to present themselves they expressed their identity as hampered by their body's tendency to go its own way:

> "*I am tall even by AMAB standards, which means that women's clothing often isn't available in a size that would fit me. Another factor is facial and body hair. This is an issue on which I really feel I'm 'fighting' my body - it keeps growing the stuff, and I have to work really hard to get it to a level I'm even slightly comfortable with. I always have some shadow of facial hair, which makes me feel really awkward. This also keeps me from expressing myself in clothing, accessories or makeup, because I feel like there would always be some 'incongruity'*".
> [Cameron: Interview]

Ultimately, participants' experience of betrayal was often expressed through a lamentation of being "*so very tired of being hyper aware*" [Finley: Diary] of their bodies, in this instance "*of my chest*" [Finley: Diary]. There was a sense from participants that their bodies were all-consuming, that they "*don't just think about it some of the time* [they] *think about it all of the time*" [Riley: Diary]. Articulated most frequently in participants' diaries of their day-to-day living, this intrusion, or imposition, from their bodies clearly connected to their sense of alienation:

> "*My body is not me. There are too many parts that are wrong. It feels like a chunk of my brain, like RAM in a computer being used by that programme that won't stop running, is used up by the wrongness. I want to be able to delete that programme and free that up but I don't know how*". [Jordan: Diary]
>
> "*It's like a chunk of my brain is occupied with the uncomfortable feelings caused by the dysphoria which makes it harder to enjoy things and relax*". [Survey respondent #65]

In the end, this betrayal by their bodies was articulated poignantly by participants. Sharing a sense of their bodies as sites of combat, as they attempted to manifest themselves, participants spoke of their bodies as often acting as barriers to self-expression, with a disappointment that their bodies weren't more yielding. There was frustration at their bodies ever presence and its unyielding imposition on their minds; their bodies were all-consuming.

Theme Three: It's not the kind of ship I want to pilot

This third and final theme builds on participants' experience of their bodies as agentic and seeks to articulate a shared reflection of the participants in experiencing their bodies as independent of their will and as inhibitory of a fuller ability to express their gender identities. It seeks to capture the way in which participants experienced their identities and the materiality of their bodies distinctly and through a sense of conflict. The first sub-theme, *I want a body that is as malleable and fluid as the* *gender within me*, acts to emphasise this through a discussion on fluidity and the manner in which participants experienced their gender identity and gender expression as ever shifting and only intermittently in alignment with their sexed bodies. It touches upon gender dysphoria and the way this was reported as being experienced intermittently. The second sub-theme, *I'd like to not be always at war with my body*, builds further on the often stark contrast between participants' ideal bodies and the material limits of the corporeal bodies. It was constructed to capture the sorrow and frustration of a body that was not as pliable as participants would wish it to be, to emphasise the body as both directing and being subject to participants attempts to embody their gender identity. Finally, the third sub-theme, *we aren't perfect and that's alright - love us or hate us nothing can break us!*, acts to highlight both the role of resigned compromise in participant's accounts of navigating their bodies and their defiance in doing so. It speaks to how participants, even with their non-compliant bodies, sought to identify themselves positively as non-binary.

I want a body that is as malleable and fluid as the gender within me

There was a sense, from participants, that "*people aren't static and move all over*" [River: Diary], and within the data collected the majority presented themselves as experiencing a degree of gender dysphoria that was "*fluctuating in intensity but continuously present*" [Survey respondent #80]. Morgan opened their diary with the following excerpt outlining their unpredictable experience of a rapidly altering sense of gender:

> "*Hi! I'm Morgan, usually. Sometimes I have another name that I go by. For me, my gender is sometimes masculine, sometimes feminine, occasionally both, or neither, or something else. Gender for me feels like a spectrum, not a M/F dichotomy. Where I land on that spectrum varies over time, usually fluctuating between masculine and feminine. A shift from 100% masculine to 100% feminine, for example, might occur over the span of several days. I usually*

> *go to sleep feeling a bit different from when I woke up. I use the term "gender fluid" to describe this changing sense of gender*". [Morgan: Diary]

Whilst Tyler, recording in their diary, offered a succinct description of how this fluctuation can be experienced as an interplay between expression and identity, with sometimes the former directing the latter and at other times (even within the same day) the latter guiding the former:

> "*I started today feeling like a guy - my wife is asexual so she went for cuddles and then helped me cum; didn't flip genders during or after (sometimes do). Spent some time plucking facial hair felt neither gender as I looked and plucked. Went for a run; back to masc. After shower felt femm and put make-up on. Felt like a drifting day (slow shifts between genders)*". [Tyler: Diary]

When expression was more 'traditionally' masculine (e.g. sex and exercise) a sense of masculinity was experienced, whilst at other times Tyler's identity being feminine led them to express themselves in more traditionally feminine ways (e.g. make-up). For them "*this is probably the hardest part of being nonbinary (or trans for that matter). When you notice that your body hasn't 'shifted' with how you feel. It can be disconcerting*" [Tyler: Interview]. Echoing Tyler's desire here to be a "*shape-shifter*" [Tyler: Interview], both Charlie and Finley also spoke of a life-long desire for a body that can transform itself from one form to another as an answer to their ever changing experience of gender:

> "*when i was a kid, i really wanted to be a shape shifter. it was the superpower i always picked. i thought it would be amazing to take any form at all but always retain the same mind and intellect. as an adult, i still wish that i could change forms - but this time, i'd stay human, just swapping between different kinds of bodies to know how it feels to live in them*". [Charlie: Diary]

> “*I've had alien-body fantasies for years. There are days where a genderless and sexless body feels just right. But a male/female body feels right at times too. Then I'm back at this notion of a shapeshifter*”. [Finley: Diary]

This everchanging experience of gender ran across participants’ accounts and was framed as being something beyond their control. Similar to the above reflections on the body being experienced as an external force, here gender too is constructed as an experience that happens to participants, as something they witness rather than govern. Such a position appeared for many to be “*a source of constant anxiety and frustration*” [Survey respondent #22], with Morgan, Finley and Bailey each reflecting a weariness inherent in living in a body that couldn’t keep pace with the shifting of their gender:

> “*But given that I'm fluid, what I'd really want is the ability to shapeshift, a body that is as malleable and fluid as the gender within me, that I could change at will to match how I'm feeling. I'm honestly envious of the people whose gender doesn't change every day* ”. [Morgan: Interview]

> “*My body is human. Female. I don't always feel like that. Sometimes I'd rather be an androgynous alien. Other times I feel more masculine. I wish my body could shift as much as my feelings do*”. [Finley: Interview]

> “*It's rather tiring. I have always believed that it's most important that I experience my body positively myself, but so often that goal seems unachievable given the swings in perception that occur so regularly*”. [Bailey: Interview]

Throughout their accounts most participants referenced a sense of their gender identity as existing in a state of fluctuation. They reflected on the unpredictability this often presented them with and there was a named desire for bodies to be more malleable. There was an acute weariness in the face of their bodies’ intransigence and the stolid nature of the body was constructed in light of the participants' more dynamic experiences with gender or, as Finley succinctly put it: "*my gender feels explosive, dynamic, shifting, exploring. My body feels stagnant, incapable almost*". [Finley: Interview]

I'd like to not be always at war with my body

A sense of a shifting, ever-changing, experience of their gender left most participants feeling "*ambivalent towards* [their] *body*" [Survey respondent #79], such that "*sometimes* [they] *love it and sometimes* [they] *hate it*" [Survey respondent #19]. They noted that whilst "*gender is different than sex, it's still tied to* [their] *body*" [Tyler: Interview] and thus as their gender identity (their sense of self as men, women or non-binary) changed so too did their experience of their bodies. This tended to leave participants with a sense that their "*body is out of sync with itself*" [Cameron: Diary], which often left them uncertain as to how to best embrace and express their sense of non-binary identity, and whether or not to modify their bodies through hormones and surgery:

> "*It feels so difficult to know where to start. My current body is really far from my ideal, but I also don't hate it and am afraid of making changes that will disrupt the peace I've built with myself*". [Survey respondent #22]
>
> "*And though I don't want to lose that softness, I have a strong connection to masculinity that makes what I want or what my goals are, hard to decide*". [Jamie: Diary]
>
> "*I've been on the fence about HRT due to some hesitation over growing facial hair. Today for a costume I applied a faux mustache* [sic] *and goatee for a makeup test. A friend asked how I felt about it. I had to think for a moment, because I felt really neutral. I may not be excited to have facial hair, but I'm also not upset over it. I could take it or leave it. I dream often that I have a full beard. If I grew that much facial hair and didn't want it I guess I could shave. And maybe I would even enjoy having a beard. I will consider HRT more after my surgery. I also*

> *wore my binder all day. It's a Catch-22 because while the binder lessons my anxiety about my chest, it gives me some anxiety about breathing*". [Finley: Diary]

This sense of a 'catch-22' captures the oscillation expressed by many participants of "*trying to be body positive but also gender affirming in* [their] *choices*" [Survey respondent #79]. This conflict, present in participants' attempts to both embrace their bodies, often as sites of health and activity (e.g. athleticism), whilst seeking to change physical characteristics understood to be sexed or gendered, was expressed through a sense of how whilst their body often "*constrains* [them] *it also enables* [them]" [Survey respondent #26]. Riley articulated this in their interview when they stated:

> "*I also of course would love to have top surgery and feel liberated by and excited about the ability to now experience my sexuality without my breasts and vagina, an option I didn't feel confident enough to express before this conversation, and I feel grateful that I was born in this body because I loved using my vagina and breasts during preganancy* [sic] *and nursing of my child, so I feel like I was born in the right body, feel conflicted about it also on another level*". Riley: Interview]

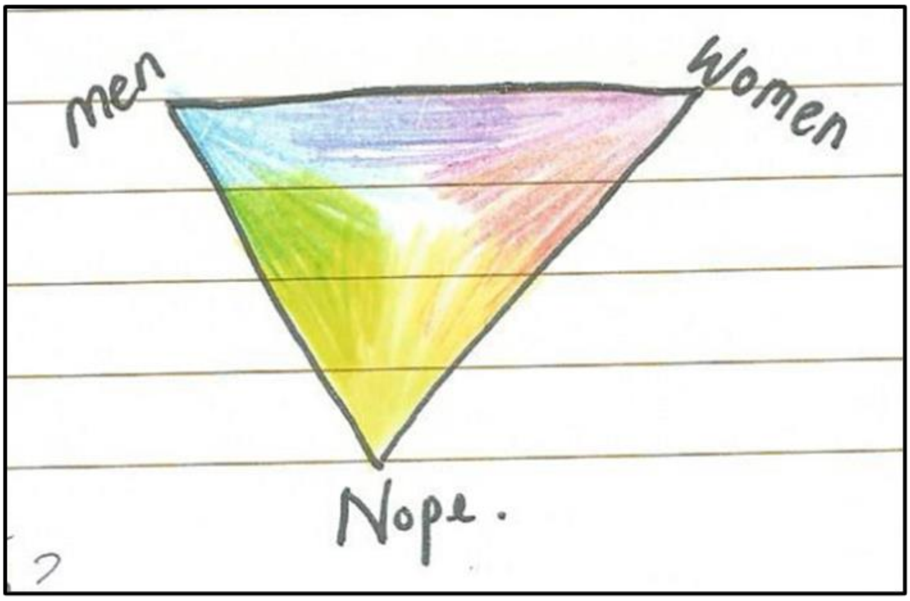
For others, such as Finley (below), the variability of their experience of and with gender contributed to their caution in seeking interventions to manage their body. There was some consternation with regards to the difficulty in locating the source of ambivalence - was it imposed upon the body from an insecurity of the mind, or did it emerge out of the body in distress? There was a difficulty expressed here around how participants struggled to make sense of their embodied dysphoria and to the hesitancy it led to in seeking to modify their bodies:

> "*I'll be honest, it's incredibly difficult to distinguish whether or not I am just hating my body because I struggle to love myself or if I am uncomfortable because there is something about it that is wrong. These conflicting feelings are why it has taken me so many years to finally pursue top surgery*". [Finley: Interview]

This uncertainty and caution extended also to the manner in which participants felt stifled in their ability to articulate their sense of self and there was a degree of tentativeness in how they went about ascribing identifiers to themselves. Captured below in Jamie's diary extract, but illustrated most evocatively in the included diagram from River's diary, we can see an emphasis on participants' rejection of ready-made descriptors of their experience. The confusion and uncertainty felt by participants may also connect back to the fluctuating of their identities:

> "*I spent the day questioning if I was really trans non-binary or just binary trans. I also questioned if I was really trans in any way. It really is confusing and I tend to have doubts every now and then*". [Jamie: Diary]

Figure 3: "*If women are pink and men are blue, all genders in between are a shade of purple. My gender is yellow*". [River: Diary]



The construct of binary gender mediated participants' accounts of how they experienced not only the body directly, but of the manner in which they felt able to express their sense of self. The expression of their identity was also constructed as having an ameliorating quality, as a means to manage their sense of a misalignment between their gender identity and their bodies. This is seen in the light of how intensely their bodies can act as sites of disgust:

> “*There are also times where the binary doesn't have a "good" side to it. It's definitely more rare for me, but there are times where both masculine and feminine feelings, anatomy and presentation don't fit well. Somewhere around 3rd gender or agender, probably. During these infrequent times, my penis and my breasts are equally repugnant, nothing in my closet feels appropriate, and everything's just "wrong". There's no presentation I can adopt to find relief because the presentations easily available to me seem to all have some binary gender connotation to them. Even the androgyny I turn to when I'm feeling between masc and femme doesn't seem to help in those times*”. [Morgan: Interview]

Alongside these ambivalences around identity and expression, participants spoke of how any attempt to modify their bodies “*would just flip the problem, not solve it*” [Survey respondent #27] and, often faced with having “*two ideals: one realistic, one not feasible with current technology…unrealistic*” [Survey respondent #57], there was an acknowledgment that “*considering anything like HRT [is] problematic*” [Survey respondent #11]. With a hint of mourning around the intransigence of the body noted earlier, Bailey reflected on how “*since almost all non-binary individuals are born into binary male or female bodies there is a significant gap between the desire* [sic] *body and current body for most non-binary people*”. [Bailey: Interview]

For Morgan and Bailey, their fluidity in particular opened up a space of envy and an unsatisfying recognition that there was no obvious ‘solution’ to their dysphoria. There was an articulation around not only an ambivalence with regards their current bodies, but also when considering their ideal and modified bodies:

> “*I'm honestly envious of the people whose gender doesn't change every day. If I had an idea of what my ideal body was, I would pursue hormones and surgery etc. But because my gender is fluid, my concept of the ideal body is likewise fluid. There's no destination I could reach for that would allow me to feel at home all of the time, at rest. Instead, I could have reassignment surgery for example, but I would end up being uncomfortable when I'm feeling*

> *masculine rather than when I'm feeling feminine. There's not a "win" there*". [Morgan: Interview]
>
> "*I need to be careful when I make changes to my appearance. If I manage to neutralize a masculine trait (e.g. trimming and gently shaping bushy eyebrows) that's great, but if I instead add a feminine trait (e.g. shaping eyebrows too aggressively, into highly arched, feminine ones) then that will just fuel my dysphoria due to increased contrast between masculine and feminine features (female looking eyebrows on a masculine looking face)*". [Bailey: Interview]

This lack of 'solution' could leave Morgan feeling "*powerless and helpless*" [Morgan: Interview] and there was a broader sense that, as Finley plainly put it, "*the limitations of my body sadden me*" [Finley: Interview]. The impossibility of absolution was keenly spoken about, often through reflections on the inability of medical modifications to live up to participants' ideals. The limitation of bodily modification as something that may be flawed, something through which errors may occur was also noted:

> "*I currently do not wish to go through with any sort of bottom surgery. The options available, as I know, are not what I need my genitals to look like and feel like*". [Finley: Interview]
>
> "*But there are definitely certain things I can't change, even with ways to change it. There's still a limit or restriction of what can be done. For an example, I have control on whether or not I'd want bottom surgery. I have options of different surgical procedure I can pick from, it's my choice. And I can also alter some other modifications. But the overall outcome isn't decided by me. It's decided by how well the surgery was done, how well my body handles it, and how well my body recovers. And even then, there's still certain limitations in terms of performance. And even appearance*". [Jamie: Interview]

The endless confrontation of these limitations, in the end, could leave participants with a sense of exhaustion and frustration. Here again we can read an experience of betrayal, of a body acting of its own accord and demanding excessive amounts of participants time:

> "*I feel my body can be working against me; changes made to it are never as permanent as they should be, and keeping everything the way I want it to be would take more energy than I feel like I can expend*". [Cameron: Interview]

In the end, participants positioned their bodies as a staging ground for reality confronting the ideal. A stark contrast between their ideals and their realities was constructed and there was sorrow and frustration at the inability of the body to be as pliable as their experience of gender would demand. In summation, participants experienced their bodies through an ambivalence. At times sites of joy and abundance, overall their bodies were experienced through an uncertainty and instability. There was a struggle to find an anchor in their bodies as they were variously experienced as both the cause and the solution to the dynamism of participants' identities. Participants wished to connect to their bodies but recognised that to do so often raised the disparity between the body and the mind. Overall, participants' bodies were conflictual as participants oscillated between the body as master and the body as slave.

We aren't perfect and that's alright - love us or hate us nothing can break us!

Not for all, but for many participants, their bodies were experienced through a sense of compromise. As inevitably their gender shifted, they would find themselves experiencing varying degrees of (dis)comfort with the disparate aspects of their bodies, which remained static:

> "*Hmm yeah I guess I hadn't thought of it as a compromise, even though that's probably a good description. I think I feel it's just a part of life, an inevitability of life. Much like if someone dresses 'fancy' for an event and then realizes it's not 'that fancy' and you can*

> *choose to be embarrassed and out of place or just go with it. It's not 'right' but it is what it is there's not much you can do about it but choose to live and act whatever is most comfortable. Maybe some days you can't handle feeling the dissonance but you do your best with where you are*". [Tyler: Interview]

> "*I've made some compromises to change my body into something that's comfortable for me more of the time. While I love the feeling of smooth shaved legs when I'm fem, I miss the freedom to wear shorts when masc. I love being able to style my long hair, but I miss the simplicity and low maintenance of a short haircut. I love being able to fill a small bra cup with my own natural breasts and the sensations I get when stimulating them during intimate encounters, but binding when I'm presenting masculine is pretty uncomfortable after a while, and I miss being able to sleep on my stomach without the discomfort of squashed boobs. I would make the same choice for each of these decisions, but they did not come without loss*". [Morgan: Interview]

When discussing this sense of compromise there was an experience of dissatisfaction, with Tyler stating "*there probably isn't a better word* [for compromise]*. I just don't like it*" [Tyler: Interview] and Finley expressing a sense that attempts to embrace their identity, such as wearing a binder, were experienced as "*an annoying but necessary sacrifice sometimes*" [Finley: Diary]. Ultimately, when contemplating the concessions they had to make in relation to their bodies participants were keenly aware of the distinction between their bodies and their sense of selves:

> "*I used to draw a lot, unfortunately not much anymore, but when I do, I draw humanoid creatures. I think it's my way of visualizing a body ideal. These creatures are usually lean, a bit muscular, maybe with a little bit of feminine hip and sometimes with breasts and sometimes without. The human limitations of my body sadden me. I mean, I fully recognize how complex and amazing my body is. But a lot of the time, I just wish it could go a little*

> *further. My gender feels explosive, dynamic, shifting, exploring. My body feels stagnant, incapable almost*". [Finley: Interview]

Alongside this frustrating sense of compromise, participants also articulated an embodiment of defiance. Through all of the hardships explored above, they spoke to the joy, potential and pride with which they could experience their bodies. There was a sense that their bodies could actually be sites of peace, free from conflict and suffering:

> "*One thing I remember is I used to really dislike my arm and hand hair. Now, though, I like it. I like my hands*". [Cameron: Diary]

> "*I'd like to start by saying that I believe I'm at peace with my body. I'm far from ideal and I will continue trying to bring myself to that ideal, but I am at a point where looking into the mirror is unlikely to make me feel bad and when someone compliments me I can happily accept it*". [Bailey: Interview]

As expounded upon by both Finley and River we can also read the manner in which participants' bodies could be sites of visibility. There was a pleasure to be gained from a body that allowed participants to be viewed by others the way they wished to be:

> "*I like my broad shoulders and back. I always thought they were a bit more broad than some AFAB bodies so I took that a bit in pride, but wasn't sure if I was just telling myself they were broad. I was complimented recently by a friend's mom (who does some fashion design so works with a lot of models) about how broad my shoulders were and that was really pleasing*". [Finley: Interview]

> "*The first time my partner and I were together I was overwhelmingly anxious but he made me feel seen and valued and at home with my body, he made me feel like he sees me as non-binary rather than female*". [River: Interview]

Most frequently expressed, as captured here from a survey respondent and Riley, was an experience of bodily modification being positive. Through being able to alter their bodies participants garnered greater access to a sense of joy as they felt more able to be at ease with their bodies. There was a sense of the excitement articulated here as participants' bodies came alive when in greater alignment with how they wished to be:

> "*But then I cut off all my hair, and got a boy's cut, and oh my god... That's when I felt it. The right-ness. IT felt GOOD. It was euphoric. I saw something in the mirror that had MY face and SHORT hair!! But it still had bangs, and it was just a hint feminine, like those pictures of the people who I envied! I had it! Then I cut it shorter. And got new clothes. And bound my chest. And when I looked in the mirror I saw someone else. Someone confident. Someone happy. And I embraced myself fully and I felt at home in myself*". [Survey respondent #23]

> "*I also of course would love to have top surgery and feel liberated by and excited about the ability to now experience my sexuality without my breasts and vagina*". [Riley: Interview]

Although for others, conflict could remain. As expressed by Morgan, the joy could be easily erased by a shift in their gender and may thus only ever be a transient affair acting to reinforce the precariousness of non-binary individuals' embodiment as outlined above:

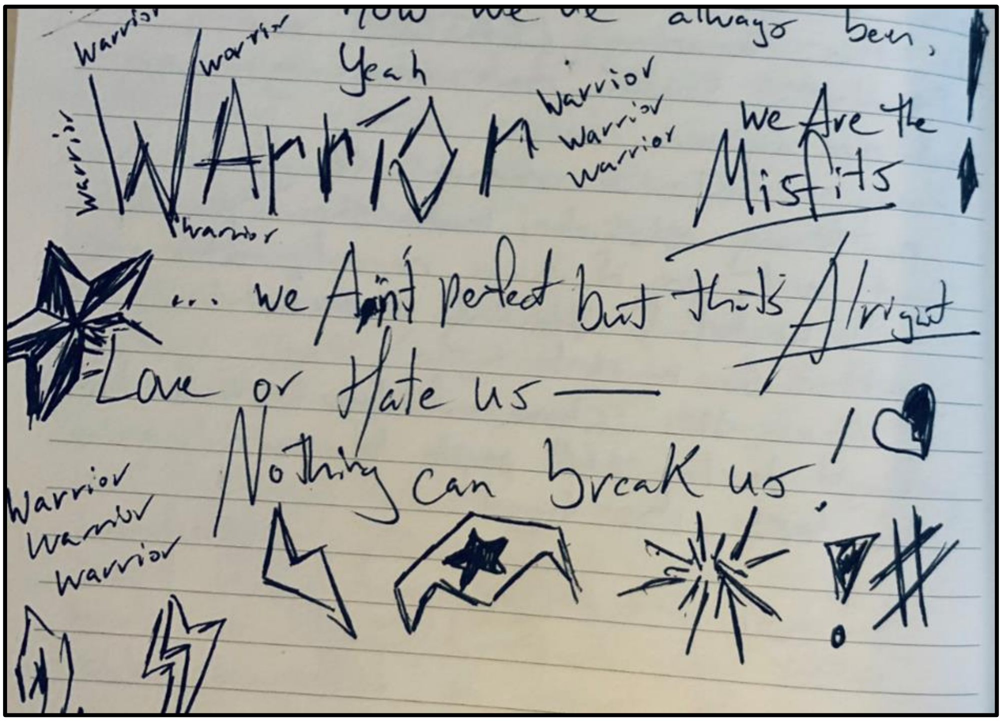
> "*I like the feeling of being stronger and more physically capable, but the additional muscle mass definitely has a masculine feel to it, and I know when my gender swings back towards feminine that's going to cause me some trouble*". [Morgan: Diary]

Ultimately, the freedom to express their identity through embracing a non-binary position offered participants the most rewarding relationship to their bodies. This positioning of themselves gave rise not only to a sense of confidence but also, as captured by Finley, Riley and Tyler below, a sense of prideful defiance. There can be read into participants' accounts an ownership of their experience as othered by those around them:

“*Since I came out as nonbinary and have talked through a lot with a therapist, I have absolutely felt more confident in general*”. [Finley: Diary]

“*feel excited about being able to tell the world to back the fuck off on their gendering of me*”. [Riley: Interview]

Figure four: We are the misfits! [Tyler: Diary]


always been,
Yeah
warrior
warrior
warrior
WArriOr
warrior
warrior
warrior
warrior
We Are the Misfits
... we Ain't perfect but that's Alright
Love or Hate us —
Nothing can break us!
warrior
warrior
warrior

In the end, many participants resigned themselves to some degree of compromise through which the impossibility of achieving their ideals was faced. The body was named as a point of sacrifice, as participants attempted to bring their identities to bear on the surface of a body that was only partially able to manifest their desire. They referenced themselves as caught in a battleground in which sex and gender endlessly vied for dominance. Yet, they also spoke of giving a proverbial middle finger to this through an experience of their bodies as sites of self-expression. A thoughtful defiance in owning their identity as non-binary individuals can be read throughout their accounts as they sought to embrace the bracing reality of their liminality.

Discussion

The aim of this study was to explore the way(s) non-binary individuals experience their bodies, with a focus on the construction of knowledge that may be useful to both the non-binary community and to psychological professionals who may be called to support non-binary individuals as they navigate their subjective embodiment. This section thus discusses each theme in relation to the existing literature, the limitations and potential future directions of this research and provides a reflection on the merits of the research procedure undertaken in this study.

Theme One: My body is my canvas for self-expression

A person's 'dress' can be considered an assemblage of transformations and supplements to the body and, in line with Eicher and Roach-Higgins (1992), participants emphasised how their bodily transformations and supplements were always in relation to, or potentially in relation to, one another. Thus, 'dress' can be a useful concept for speaking about non-binary individuals accounts of their subjective embodiment. 'Dress' can include an extensive degree of potentiality with regard to both direct bodily transformations (e.g. dyed hair, pierced navels or the application of anti-perspirant) and indirect bodily supplementation (e.g. clothing and jewellery). Across their survey responses, diaries and interviews participants spoke of such transformations and supplements to their body running the whole gamut from hormonal and surgical interventions, through alterations (permanent or temporary) to their hair and skin (e.g. tattoos), to the use of clothing to express or challenge their sense of gendered self. In terms of transformation, participants presented variously as seeking to go through, or already being engaged in, binary gender-affirming interventions (such as hormones and surgery to create an embodied experience of the 'opposite' sex), opting to combine these 'pathways' or to not go through with any medico-surgical procedures at all. This adds to the growing literature (e.g. Richards and Barker, 2013; Wickham, 2011; Galupo, Pulice-Farrow and Ramirez, 2017) around how non-binary embodiments can be usefully constructed as falling into three forms: ambigender, agender and bigender or either, neither and both (binary) sexes and, how through the materiality of participants' bodies, the highly heterogenous nature of the non-binary community (Fiani and Han, 2019) may be highlighted.

Similar to some of the earliest reflections around the role of supplementation (e.g. clothing), in which lesbian, gay and bisexual (LGB) individuals were noted to prefer clothes of the 'opposite' sex, as they seemingly felt more at home in them (Ellis, 2001), participants in this study spoke of the *comfort* afforded by clothing and other forms of supplementation. Previous work on the role of clothing in the experience of (binary) trans (let alone non-binary) embodiment is difficult to locate, making any comparisons to the reflections raised by participants difficult. However, what could be identified highlights the variety in what and how clothing is used (Factor and Rothblum, 2008) and the potential role of both validation (Nelson and Hwang, 2021) and congruence (Riggle et al., 2011) in how this sense of comfort through clothing could be constructed, and this would certainly fit how participants in the current study emphasised their experience of clothing as a means through which they felt able to be seen - both by others and by themselves. This would align with Holliday's (2010) reflection on the potential duality of clothing as comforting and expressive, especially as these conceptualisations are not considered to be distinct but rather intertwined - to obtain comfort *is* to express oneself; comfort signifying the degree to which participant's material bodies mirrored their imagined self or the way in which their identity was mapped through and across their bodies. Thus, oft speaking to an experience of desiring to be visible to both oneself and others, in this way Holliday (2010) can help highlight the importance of supplementation, alongside transformation, in supporting non-binary individuals in feeling recognisably so both to themselves and to those around them.

This drive to be recognised, to be visible, has been previously noted within the literature as connected to a sense of individuality, with non-binary identity valued for its capacity to contain and articulate a very diverse range of idiosyncratic gender identity positions (Taylor et al., 2019). In previous studies exploring how transgender individuals label their gender identities there have tended to be a significant number of participants who have elected to identify themselves as either outside the binary options of male and female (e.g. Dugan, Kusel and Simounet, 2012; Kuper, Nussbaum and Mustanski, 2012) or with idiosyncratic terms aimed at capturing their unique experiences of gender (e.g. Iantaffi and Bockting, 2011; Hines, 2007; Bockting, 2008). Indeed, the proliferation of increasingly specific labels such as "*birl, jest me, skaneelog, twidget, neutrois, OtherWise, gendertreyf, trannydyke genderqueer wombat fantastica, Best of Both, and gender blur*" meant to describe unique and ever more precise gender identities is on the rise (Harrison, Grant and Herman, 2012:14). In this study, participants spoke at length of how they sought to embody not some shared conceptualisation of what is was to be (un)gendered but to be *themselves*. Much like how Bornstein (1995) reflects on the way gender may be conceptualised as being free from borders and rules, participants sought to embody their sense of being beyond a binary understanding of gender. They utilised their 'dress' to challenge the 'wrong body' narrative by reclaiming their bodies from the 'default' setting they felt imposed upon them and in so doing echoed both participants in Fiani and Han's (2019) research who connected an authenticity with their sense of autonomy and participants in Vijlbrief, Saharso and Ghorashi's (2020) study who articulated a belief that thinking in binary categories limited their self-expression. In this regard, participants were reflecting the contemporary development within the transgender community towards gender being constructed less as a passive and unified binary construct and more as individually agentic (Hird, 2002). To this extent, this study's participants have perhaps highlighted the way in which Western non-binary gender identities, in the style of Claude Cahun (Treaster, 2019), continue to emphasise the individual over any culturally determined role, such as may be noted in many non-western societies' conceptualisations and expressions of (non-binary) gender (Herdt, 1993). Ultimately, this theme constructs non-binary subjective embodiment as being akin to this individualised "*mix-and-match*" (Nelson and Hwang, 2021:241) or, as so named by a participant in this study, "pick 'n' mix" of sexed bodily constructs and gendered 'supplements'. It speaks to the way participants wished and sought to embody their gender identity free from socially mandated constraints, to the neo-liberal influence on the proliferation of non-binary gendered identities (Zimman, 2019).

Theme Two: Betrayed by the story it tells others about who I am

A prevalent construct across participants' accounts was a sense of alienation, or dissociation - an experience of their bodies as belonging less to themselves and more to another. There are hints of this across the literature, for example in Aboim (2016:231) a 27 year old British self-defined non-binary participant reflected on their experience of being a "*stranger in my own body*" prior to undergoing bodily modifications. So too in Jackson's (2011) PhD thesis can be found their description of their experience of non-binary identity as filled with self-doubt and alienation. In Pulice-Farrow, Cusack and Galupo (2020), participants also described a general disconnect from their own bodies, as though there were something viscerally wrong with them. Much like what was captured through the current study's diaries, Pulice-Farrow, Cusack and Galupo's (2020) participants' experienced this disconnect from their bodies as having a negative impact on their day-to-day lives, as the appearance of their bodies inhibited their interaction with the world around them. Across these studies, as in this one, there appeared to be an embodiment of an otherness through which non-binary approaches to gender were constructed, and perhaps we can see here how the power of a binary conceptualisation of gender, as invested in by medical, media and other discourses, has inevitably estranged and isolated any embodiment of gender liminality (Foucault, 1977). Expanding on these limited prior reflections, this current study calls attention to these experiences of alienation and dissociation as manifestations of feeling othered and recognises how, ultimately, they may be connected to experiences of transphobia. As Keating and Muller (2020) reported in their study on the impact minority stress has on LGBTQ+ adults, who have experienced trauma, transgender individuals' experiences of transphobia were noted as potential contributors to the presence of dissociative symptoms.

This embodiment of alienation, running across participants' accounts, was often accompanied by a prevalent experience of invisibility. Touched upon previously in work by Cosgrove (2021), Taylor et al. (2019), Fiani and Han (2019) and Losty and O'Connor (2018), there is a growing body of literature that names invisibility, erasure or being unseen as a shared experience of individuals who fall under the non-binary umbrella. As with participants in the current study, there was a sense that this could be in relation both to the prevailing binary attitudes of society and in regard to the way the body itself could act to conceal one's sense of self behind itself. Outside of the academic literature, non-binary individuals have expressed similar experiences across various media platforms; for example, Alxndr (2018) and Elysium (2019) both name the ways they have found themselves to be disqualified or forgotten by a society that doesn't know how to relate to those who fall outside and beyond the binary. This experience certainly fits with that of participants in the current study who spoke for themselves of feeling inhibited by binary expectations on clothing and behaviour. There was also an implicit sense, mainly noted in post-interview comments and member reflections around the power of either putting their experience into words or hearing the words of others. This is in line with Saltzburg and Davis' (2010) research, in which they note how their participants experienced a sense of invisibility through a lack of language to articulate and express their identities and experiences. Ultimately, these experiences of invisibility speak to the reality that within a society that regulates sex and gender to be binary, any individual seeking to embody a liminal space will inevitably be invisible. There is an uncertainty around how such individuals are to be seen as there is unavoidably a conflict in identifying a position that recognises their sense of non-identification within existing gendered and sexed norms (McQueen, 2011).

There exists in the literature a precedent regarding the relationship between gender-related minority stress and one's body image in gay men (Kimmel and Mahalik, 2005), as well as an empirical review that notes body satisfaction to be associated with lower levels of gender non-conformity (Wood, 2004). Though these findings do not translate perfectly to trans, or non-binary, individuals there is clear overlap with participants in this study and the manner in which they experienced greater bodily distress when in social environments that had the potential to highlight any disparity between their identities and their bodies. In relation to such experiences, many individuals attempt to ‘pass’ - a practice by which a social identity that is deemed socially abnormal is “*nicely invisible and known only to the person who possesses it*” (Goffman, 1963:73). This process occurs across various communities, such as those of a racialised minority (Butler, 2011; Larsen, 2014), those who are disabled (Brune and Wilson, 2013) and for all of us trying to navigate socially enforced gendered expectations (Mattilda, 2006), yet it seems from this research that passing is more complicated for non-binary individuals, for whom there is no ‘norm’ to aspire to. This inevitability of invisibility has previously been addressed in work by Taylor et al. (2019), and was present across the current study’s participants’ accounts.

Theme Three: It’s not the kind of ship I want to pilot

It has long been believed that gender dysphoria, and the difficulty individuals might experience in bearing it, is central to the experience of being trans (Fisk, 1973). This experience, conceptualised to be distress that may occur when gender identity does not coincide with assigned sex (Coleman et al., 2012; Priest, 2019) was certainly apparent across most participants accounts. However, in line with more contemporary arguments that not all those who identify as trans experience gender dysphoria (Bouman, de Vries and T’Sjoen, 2016; Byne et al., 2018; Chen et al., 2016) and not all will elect to undergo surgeries and hormone therapy to affirm their gender identity (Nolan, Kuhner and Dy, 2019) a few participants reported feeling acceptant of their bodies, without medical and surgical intervention. However, contrary to the significant number of non-binary individuals reported in other studies not engaging in bodily transformation (e.g. Factor and Rothblum, 2008), such individuals made up only a fraction of participants in this study. Instead, those in the present study, as in previous research (e.g. Rubin, 2003; Dozier, 2005), tended to emphasise their gender identity as to some extent embodied through their physical being. The prevalence of this position, however, may only be high in this research in response to its focus on subjective embodiment; as the widespread emphasis on the body in the experience of gender dysphoria (Fisher et al., 2014; Lovelock, 2017) may have led the presence of gender dysphoria to act as an unintended criterion for participation. Nonetheless, this theme speaks to the way(s) gender dysphoria was embodied by this study's participants.

Traditionally, trans individuals' bodily distress and dissatisfaction have been measured through scales that focus mainly on bodily attributes (e.g. what attributes a person desires versus what they deem undesirable), under the assumption that these desires would remain static (e.g. Schneider et al., 2016). This has, historically, been the dominant framework through which trans experience has been explored and understood (e.g. Person and Ovesey, 1974; Buhrich and McConaghy, 1978; Blanchard, 1988) and has led to the advocacy that, if they were to obtain any sense of ease, trans people needed to transition away from their assigned sex (Davy and Toze, 2018). Yet, participants in the current study reported a varying experience of distress in relation to their sex assigned at birth, acting to undermine both the validity of gender dysphoria as a stable phenomenon and the validity of the aforementioned scales in truly capturing (and thus contributing to the definition of) the experience of gender dysphoria. This was noted by Galupo and Pulice-Farrow (2019) when they identified 52% of the 622 self-identified transgender individuals they surveyed as believing the scales didn't reflect their experience of gender dysphoria, with those who identified as non-binary being even more likely to endorse this view. Given the concept of gender dysphoria has been defined less by individuals who actively experience it, and more by the (mostly cisgender) clinicians who interact with them (Anzani, Prunas and Sacchi, 2019), the current study may act to highlight the need for further reflection on how the concept of gender dysphoria may best be utilised when working with non-binary individuals. In light of this, when working with non-binary individuals practitioners may wish to follow the advice of Dargie et al. (2014) by emphasising an approach that supports self-exploration and acceptance over one that utilises any strict adherence to binary conceptualisations of gender.

Alongside this reflection on participants accounts of gender dysphoria, fluidity was a central construct for participants as they spoke of the way they experienced their gender as shifting. This falls in line with Nagoshi, Brzuzy and Terrell's (2012) work in which, through interviews with eleven trans individuals, they noted their participants experienced themselves as tending to identify their gender as fluctuating. Through an online survey of two hundred and ninety-two trans individuals, Kuper, Nussbaum and Mustanski (2012) also noted that it was not uncommon for their participants to report their identities shifting over time. As captured most vividly in the diaries of the current study's participants, these accounts from other studies reflect the way non-binary individuals may embody a sense of gender as male, female, both or neither as dynamic and ever changing, much like it did for participants in Vijlbrief, Saharso and Ghorashi's (2020) research, who were reported to explain their gender as being 'in motion'. Across the current study, and those cited here, participants could be viewed as relating to their bodies as becoming, as "*rhizomatic, nomadic, a constant journey with no final destination*" (Linstead and Pullen, 2006:1292), with this fluidity lending itself to their embodiment being an ongoing, ever shifting, project. Alongside this, much like for the 170 self-identified as gender non-conforming AFAB North Americans reported on by Pardo (2019), participants in the current study also spoke of *behaving* in ways that could be described as genderless or gender-blended, with these behaviours being fluid across time (e.g. not wishing to shave in the morning and then wishing to be hairless in the evening). Thus participants' fluidity of their gender identity was intertwined with a fluidity of their performance of gender and this spoke to a difficulty in grasping exactly how participants came to define and understand their experience of gender. A contribution to the literature here may be that internalised social constructs of gender, as suggested by Hausman (1995) and Hakeem (2012), appeared in some participants to 'trigger' their shifts in gender identity. Previous research from Case et al. (2019) reports on how anger was a common 'trigger' for activating a male identity in the nineteen non-binary individuals in their study and several participants in the current study spoke of 'traditionally' gendered activities (such as sex or exercise) 'triggering' a shift in their gender. Thus, for some, their at times challenging embodiment of a non-binary identity might be influenced by rigidly held binary views on gender. This would certainly fit with Swami and Abbasnejad's (2010) finding that greater body appreciation was associated with less traditional gender role ideology in a cisgender population. For others, however, their accounts of their gender as shifting aligned well with Bornstein's (1998) and Roen's (2002) reflections of gender as a spectrum open to change. In so doing, the accounts of the participants in the current study spoke against a modernist embodiment of transgender as a medically defined state of being, based on the pre-existence of two sexes that had been *transitioned*; instead they emphasised one in which their fluidity was constructed in such a way as to suggest a post-modern experience of transgender as an embodiment of gender *transcended* or *transgressed*.

An important contribution of this research is highlighting the prevalence of ambivalence and a sense of limitation in non-binary subjective embodiment. Whilst this has been named recently in work by Liamputtong (2020), who noted that many individuals identifying as trans experience some degree of ambiguity with regards to their dysphoria, and Taylor et al. (2019:201), in their inclusion of how some of their participants "*reported a sense of ambivalence in relation to their desire for a resolution of their dysphoria*" and a "*frustration at…the limitations of medical interventions*", it is little spoken of in the literature. Participants in this study appeared to be on a threshold between a socially constructed notion of gender identity as fluid and an experience of their material body as stubbornly resistant to modification through discursive or performative practices. In this regard, participants tended to espouse a 'fuzzy' approach to gender that, whilst denouncing an essentialist view, recognised that conceptualising gender as solely a social construct didn't account for their experience of a body as an agent beyond performativity (Tauchert, 2002). It appears that, whilst a theoretical division can be reasonably made between trans*gender* as a transgression of socially constructed gender roles and trans*sexual* as a more essentialist crossing of binary sexes, the non-binary individuals in this study appeared to cut across these two points, with some seeking to destabilise the gender binary and others wishing to embrace it, if only to be distinct from it. Again, this diversity speaks to the heterogeneity of those who consider themselves to fall underneath the term non-binary and to the myriad ways they may seek to embody their identities. Ultimately, participants' ambivalence and experience of limitation, in relation to their imagined or actualised bodily transformations, may be core aspects of their (gender dysphoric) non-binary identity and may speak to an inevitability of distress in being non-binary in a world that cannot offer clear embodied solutions to such a gendered position (Taylor et al., 2019 and Cocchetti et al., 2020).

These limitations meant participants felt that their gendered embodiments were often a form of compromise, an attempt to, much like participants in Taylor et al.'s (2019:201) study, "*find a practical solution*" to the conflict they experienced between their felt sense of gender and the material reality of their bodies. In their unpublished Masters dissertation, Savoia (2017) names how, in order to feel comfortable, their participants, fifteen non-binary individuals, believed they had to make concessions to binary heteronormative standards when expressing their gender. This lead to a difficulty in achieving social recognition of their identities as they sought a balance between self-expression and public acceptance. Like for the participants in the current study, Savoia's (2017) participants articulated the way there was a tension, alongside the conflict with the material body above, between their felt sense of self and the meanings ascribed to their bodies through social discourses. This tension wasn't necessarily always a negative, however, as several participants spoke of a pride, a defiance even, in the way they embraced their being othered. Much as for twenty five self-identified genderqueer participants from Bradford et al.'s (2019) study, those in the current research spoke of a pride and appreciation for the creativity that came in transgressing gendered narratives. In line with Vijlbrief, Saharso and Ghorashi's (2020) eleven participants who identified with a gender non-binary identity, there was also a sense of playfulness in unsettling gender binaries and pleasure in embracing the fluidity of their experiences. A non-binary embodiment was ultimately not a passive affair, but an active one of both discovering and defining oneself.

Reflections on research methodology relevant to counselling psychology

The existing literature on asynchronous email interviews highlight several potential disadvantages and pitfalls, such as the way in which having to craft written responses can be more time consuming when compared to traditional face-to-face interviews that rely on oral responses (Fritz and Vandermause, 2017; Gibson, 2014); this time requirement may encourage short answers from participants, which would then limit the richness of data available for analysis (Hawkins, 2018). In conducting this research, however, this did not come to pass and I was surprised by how extensive most participants' responses were and as a result I would feel confident in recommending this approach to data collection for future research with the transgender and non-binary community of this scope. However, I would caution that utilising asynchronous emails alongside diaries may prove too strenuous for some participants, given the length of time this may require. As one participant, who was subsequently pointed in the direction of support networks, put it when they opted to end their interview early:

> "*I think I am also struggling with the interview style and having to repeatedly revisit the same sorts of thoughts and feelings over and over again a few days apart, thoughts and feelings which are very personal and which are quite painful. I started keeping a diary on the 1st of March and it is now mid-June, the three and a half months have been very difficult for everybody and I as much as I want to help you with your research I do want to be able to get this interview finished*". (Jordan)

Despite this fatigue in some participants, for others the diary aspect of the study appeared to develop over the weeks, such that the data contained within them became richer across the entries. For example, several diaries began with a more surface level description of events (e.g. "*I have done a laser depilation session on my face a couple of months ago and for a good 30 days there was no hair growth at all and it started coming back slowly afterwards*". (Jaden)) but ended with entries that emphasised their emotional experiences more (e.g. *"I have just been kind of unable to do this lately.*

A trans woman in our community lost her life to suicide and I have been alternating between numbness, rage and heartbreak". (Riley)). This appears to fit the way in which diaries can encourage participants to explore more nuanced understandings of their everyday subjectivities, emotions and experiences (Morrison, 2012).

In relation to the disadvantage of time outlined above, some researchers have also argued that participants may struggle to fully convey the extent of their reflections and experiences as they are limited by a lack of social cues, such as tone and pausing, that may contribute to the overall impact of their responses (Fritz and Vandermause, 2017). In this study, in line with others before (Gibson, 2010), several participants employed various creative means to navigate these limits, such as through the utilisation of emoticons and visual imagery (in their diaries); one also employed highlighting their interview answers with bold font to convey particular statements or concepts of importance to them. This certainly aided me in emphasising the descriptive approach this study embraced and it may be worthwhile for those wishing to follow a similar approach to encourage participants prior to data collection to utilise these means as ways of enhancing their responses.

Alongside these considerations, rapport and trust have also been described as difficult to build online (Madge and O'Conner, 2002). Although, contrary to this, and in line with Beck's (2005) reflection that participants may actually feel heard through online interviews, several participants in this study took the time at the end of their interviews to comment on the manner in which they experienced the process to be a positive one that encouraged their ability to speak more openly:

> "*I think it is a really great model for encouraging self-exploration because the anonymity let me be more honest and bold than I ever would be sitting in front of a real human!*". (Riley)

They also expressed a keener sense of themselves and their experiences as non-binary individuals, echoing previous reflections by Vijlbrief, Saharso and Ghorashi (2020) on how their participants appeared better able to understand their own positioning in terms of gender identity as a result of having participated in their study utilising traditional face-to-face interviews:

> “*I think we've explored the topic fairly in depth! I'm happy I could help you with your work and I think this interview helped me learn some new things about myself too*”. (Bailey)

> “*All these questions certainly have helped me, forced me, to put into words my perspective. I truly have a better understanding of my experience than I did before this intervie*w”. (Finley)

This latter experience, of a therapeutic nature, is one previously noted by Beck (2005) in their research, also utilising asynchronous emails, into birth trauma. Like the current study, they report their participants as feeling cared for, acknowledged and listened to and how their written responses may have supported them in making sense of their experiences through the capturing of them in written form enabling them to approach a sense of closure. They also named how participants voiced a sense of empowerment in both being able to put words to their situations and in simply being asked to participate in the study. The expressions of gratitude from several of the current studies participants over having the opportunity to speak their stories also reinforces the possibility that this approach to research with non-binary individuals may empower individuals by offering “ the opportunity for respondents to define the boundaries of their shared knowledge” (Meth 2003:196). Ultimately, I believe this study contributes to the developing literature around the potential asynchronous emails have in supporting the creation of rich, reflective and possibly even transformative narratives of participants’ experiences. In this way, this research supports the argument that asynchronous emails should join their more established counterparts in being viewed as able to capture data that is important to participants and in being able to access participants’ language and terminology - both frequently claimed advantages of qualitative research (Frith, 2000).

Reflections on potential factors influencing the partial nature of the knowledge constructed

As with most qualitative methodologies (Braun and Clark, 2013), this research recognises the partiality of the knowledge constructed (Ellingson, 2008) and thus caution is encouraged considering how the analysis reported may be of use to the reader. In particular, whilst the demographics and breadth of identities collated aligns well with previously established norms for the non-binary community (e.g. Factor and Rothblum, 2008; Wickham, 2011), the decision to exclude those under the age of eighteen from this study should be noted. The use of online data collection methods may also have acted to exclude those non-binary individuals of an older age, seeing as how the internet is favoured by the young (International Telecommunications Union, 2013), and thus their experiences too may not be adequately reflected in this research. One strength, however, may be the large number of AMAB individuals who elected to participate. Given the low reported numbers of AMAB non-binary individuals (e.g. Factor and Rothblum, 2008), this may indicate this particular method of data collection to work well in eliciting participation from these individuals.

Most of the interview and diary participants also identified as White, and from a Western nation state. These facets of their identities may have influenced how they have come to construct their experiences around being non-binary (e.g. Nicolazzo, 2019) and had I been able to recruit more individuals from outside of this limited demographic, the narratives I constructed around non-binary gendered subjective embodiment may have been very different. In relation to this, an area of limitation influenced by myself as researcher, that I wish to specifically highlight as something often overlooked, is the lack of attention I gave to the role participants’ disabilities (including neurodevelopmental differences such as autism) may play in their subjective embodiment. This was an oversight not asked about in the survey demographics and is something that wasn’t raised in the interviews. Ultimately, given how inappropriate care, refusal of care and mistreatment by health providers towards trans individuals may be exacerbated further for those whose identity is racially minoritised by ethnicity or intersected by disability (Grant et al., 2011; Scheim et al., 2017) it is problematic I have fallen into a pattern of overlooking these factors, with this potentially contributing to their near absence in the material collected.

Alongside this, in terms of the findings, it is important to note that due to some disparity in the level of material produced by each participant, some accounts are featured more frequently than others. In order to manage this disparity, a table was used during the analysis and write-up to encourage a balance of participants and perspectives; this table kept a record of each extract used, aiming to ensure a balance of participants and methods were reported (e.g. diary and interview material). The use of pictures from less verbose participants was also utilised, when appropriate, to ensure as much of the varied experiences captured in the material were presented in the findings. Nonetheless, some participants remained more utilised than others, and this ultimately may have acted to emphasise their accounts of non-binary subjective embodiment over their less verbose counterparts.

A final point of consideration, in line with the above, is the considerable variety of ideal and achieved bodily states expressed by participants, with several reporting experiencing little to no bodily dysphoria in their accounts. None of these participants opted to record journals or be interviewed and therefore their experiences have, by and large, not been captured in the diary-interview phase of the study. There may also have been an implicit assumption on my part that these individuals did not exist and that the ideal and desired non-binary body required bodily modification to be achieved, for example in the survey questions two and three (see methodology), which may have put off those who were comfortable with their body from proceeding further. Thus, this research is limited in its scope of speaking about the embodied experience of those potentially numerous (e.g. Fiani and Han, 2019) non-binary individuals who do not wish to modify their bodies.

Implications and potential relevance for counselling psychology practice

Counselling psychology is a diverse collection of practitioners (Pelling, 2004) and thus, ultimately, the recommendations here are unlikely to be applicable to all within the profession. Instead, what is presented are merely my personal takes as a trainee counselling psychologist, offered up for further reflection on the part of readers who too are embedded within this particular professional identity; What is presented is therefore personal and presented to sit alongside the readers own interpretation of this works relevance to themselves. Above, I have outlined how I believe this work relates to research and I would add here that as scientist-practitioners (Barker, Pistrang and Elliot, 1994), this current study stands as testament to how counselling psychologies commitment to a phenomenological stance (Milton, 2016) can be extended to good qualitative studies. Given this particular emphasis in our profession, we may be ideally placed to engage with and produce this particular form of, oft overlooked but nonetheless invaluable (Sandelowski, 2009), descriptive qualitative research. Overall, I believe this study contributes to the long standing attempts to utilise qualitative research methods to close the gap between research and practice in counselling psychology (Rennie, 1994) by adding to our developing of a research base grounded in our values (BPS, 2005).

Alongside this consideration of research, this work also has relevance for counselling psychologies role in clinical work. I have already spoken above on the role journaling might play in this regard, but here I emphasise its potential contribution to the role of “mutual discovery” encouraged within counselling psychology (Strawbridge and Woolfe, 2010:12) when utilised alongside a reflective conversation. This current study, in line with others (Burgwal and Motmas, 2021; Vincent, 2019; 2020) has highlighted how non-binary motivations for embodying their identity through accessing (or not accessing) gender affirming medical interventions (e.g. hormones and surgeries) are heterogenous and, potentially, complex. By calling on its commitment to a democratic, non-hierarchical, working relationship alongside a rejection of a therapist-as-expert stance (Cooper, 2009), counselling psychology can invest itself in the long-standing efforts to develop an approach to counselling trans and non-binary individuals that emphasises a collaborative relationship focused on giving the trans or non-binary individual maximum control when directing their own care (Israel and Tarver, 1997; Krieger, 2017). As evidenced through this current study, such an approach can lead to a greater degree of articulation and insight on the part of non-binary individuals, especially in terms of alternative means through which such individuals may come to express and embody their identities (e.g. through their dress), ultimately supporting them in the exploration and decision making around their subjective embodiment.

It is my sense that, as this study has also highlighted how non-binary individuals experience pressure (both externally and internally) to conform to socially constructed gender norms, counselling psychologists (and other practitioners) are also called to be aware of how such experiences may impact on how non-binary individuals may wish to embody their sense of gender. Counselling psychologists could work to support non-binary individuals to examine, question and ultimately deconstruct dominant gender norms (Carroll, Gilroy and Ryan, 2002; Matsuno and Budge, 2017) by upholding a curious stance that encourages an idiosyncratic embodiment of gender over one that reinforces conformity. As the participants in this study have attested to, non-binary individuals can experience unique challenges when attempting to embody their sense of gender, due to not 'fitting in' with societal standards of how bodies ought to be construed. As a result, they often spoke of experiencing a sense of invisibility and erasure, or as Saltzburg and Davis (2010:95) put it when reporting on their participant's experiences, "fears they may never be seen or known for whom they are". To this end, utilising an approach in support of self-exploration and acceptance over strict adherence to binary ideals is supported by the current study, in line with recommendations by Dargie et al. (2014).

This is not to say we shouldn't also pay heed to the contention, tension and contradictions in relation to their embodiment of a non-binary identity raised by participants in this, and other (Stachowiak, 2016; Taylor et al., 2019) studies, however. To this end, I believe this work calls for counselling psychologists to embrace our negative capability (Simpson and French, 2006; Voller, 2011) or, in other words, our ability to tolerate the pain and confusion of not knowing, rather than imposing ready-made or omnipotent certainties upon an ambiguous situation or emotional experience (Williams, 2018). This current study suggests non-binary individuals may approach the embodiment of their gender under a cloak of ambivalence, compromise and tension and this ought not to be downplayed. Such a utilisation of therapeutic skills is one also encouraged by Finlay (2011) in qualitative research, especially with regards to phenomenological work, and its employment in this current study may go some way to explaining why some participants found their participation to be an enlightening and transformative one. Taking this forward, counselling psychologists, with our commitment to a collaborative approach that encourages growth and potential (Cooper, 2009), may be especially well placed to support non-binary individuals with the challenges spoken of by participants as pertinent to their development of their gendered embodiment, as well as in the further research of this topic.

In light of this, offering a structure around which non-binary individuals may explore their experiences may be something counselling psychologists can contribute. In particular, in line with the subjective and phenomenological ethos of counselling psychology (Milton, 2016; Cooper, 2009), an existentialist approach emphasising awareness, exploration, meaning making and integration could prove useful (Spinelli, 2003). To this end, utilising the four ways of being model (Sharf, 2014) may prove beneficial. As participants spoke of their gendered embodiment beyond the merely corporeal, incorporating the physical, social, psychological and spiritual aspects of embodiment may prove especially useful; such an approach potentially supporting non-binary individuals in both moving seamlessly between exploring different aspects of their embodiment and encouraging them to reflect on how these various aspects may be expressed and experienced. In this way, this current study encourages us to empower our non-binary clients, friends and colleagues by supporting them to find their language, when often this is lacking (Saltzburg and Davies 2010; Claire and Alderson, 2013; Taylor et al., 2019).

Finally, in a broader scope and as outlined in the introduction, this current study has relevance for meeting the training needs of counselling psychologists (BPS, 2012). Mental health training models have not typically focused on counselling concerns specific to transgender clients (Carroll and Gilroy, 2002; Israel and Tarver, 1997) and, in line with counselling psychologies commitment to the subjective experiences of individuals (Strawbridge and Woolfe, 2010), this research has aimed at educating counselling psychologists, and other affiliated professions, about the experiences of non-binary individuals as they embody, or seek to embody, their non-binary identity. It is important that mental health professionals have an understanding of the special needs that trans and non-binary individuals may bring to counselling and this study contributes the importance of embodiment alongside the myriad other needs trans and non-binary individuals may present with. Ultimately, Korell and Lorah (2007) emphasise the importance of counsellor competency in offering an affirmative approach and as many trans individuals report frustration and hesitancy in regard to their therapist's lack of knowledge around trans-related issues (Carroll and Gilroy, 2002; Bess and Stabb, 2009; Elder, 2016), and practitioners incompetence itself being highlighted (Bidell, 2016; Gess and Doughty Horn, 2018), this current study offers information relevant to counselling psychology both directly and in our role as potentially supporting the competence of others through training (Burgwal et al., 2021; Carlile, Butteriss and Sansfaçon, 2021).

Recommendations for future research

Given the call to training noted throughout this work (e.g. BPS, 2012), it's imperative that future work build on the gaps in this current study. With previous literature highlighting the potential challenges of actualising a sexuality when non-binary (e.g. Roche, 2018), of navigating a non-binary identity as a racialised minority (Nicolazzo, 2019) and of experiencing a disability whilst non-binary (Kermode, 2019), exploring the role ethnicity, sexuality and disability may have on the experience of embodying a non-binary gender may be particularly warranted. So to, given how participants in this study leant heavily towards the genderfluid, a factor recognised by both myself and in a member reflection: "*I would note that there was a strong emphasis on nonbinary people with a shifting* *experience of gender*", would further research be necessary with regard to how agender individuals experience the embodiment, or lack thereof, of their gender. Further research into all of these intersected identities may support psychological practitioners in their aim to take on a more holistic and culturally sensitive approach in supporting **all** non-binary individuals (BPS, 2012; 2019).

Perhaps in relation to this, further research around how non-binary individuals conceptualise and seek to embody their sense of gender may also be reasonable. Touched upon throughout this work was the difficulty in ascertaining precisely how participants constructed gender and how rigidly it appeared, at times, to be experienced. Previous research has suggested such a rigidly held view of gender might be distressing (e.g. Hausman, 1995; Swami and Abbasnejad, 2010), whilst engaging in therapeutic conversation around this rigidity has been reported to alleviate some of this distress when experienced by (binary) trans individuals (Hakeem, 2012). Exploring this area with regard to those of a non-binary identity, therefore, could act to further develop therapeutic approaches to support such individuals alongside any medico-surgical interventions they may pursue.

Alongside this, and of particular interest to participants, was the role of clothing in the subjective embodiment of their gender identities, or as one member reflection put it: "*I especially loved the exploration about clothes (and presentation) being part of the body - it's a way I've felt for a long time but never dug into it*". Clothing has previously been explored as an important aspect of identity and self-expression within the LGBT community (Clarke, Hayfield and Huxley, 2012) and this current research adds non-binary individuals to this. However, further research that utilises autophotography or photo elicitation (Glaw et al., 2017), with participants wearing various sets of clothing, might help extend these preliminary findings. In so doing, they could then contribute further to the role dress plays in the embodiment of a non-binary identity and thus to how we, as psychological practitioners, may best support such individuals in the exploration and expression of their gender (Carroll, Gilroy and Ryan, 2002; Matsuno and Budge, 2017).

Finally, in line with previous research documenting transgender individuals to experience abuse and trauma at higher frequencies than their cisgender counterparts (Mizock and Lewis, 2008; Mascis, 2011), and those of a non-binary identity as more likely again than their binary counterparts (Harrison, Grant and Herman, 2012), several participants articulated experiences both prior and subsequent to the adoption of a non-binary identity that could be conceptualised as traumatic. Whilst not a focus of this research, several participants were noted as exploring experiences common amongst those who have experienced trauma, such as a sense of dissociation and lack of agency. Given that trauma may impact an individual's subjective embodiment (Liebig, 2019) and sense of ownership (Rabellino et al., 2018), that trauma, as noted above, is more common in trans and non-binary individuals and that several participants discussed their own experiences with trauma future research may wish to take this further. Doing so, may support psychologists in better understanding any potential connection between trauma and a non-binary embodiment of gender.

Conclusion

Participants' subjective embodiment is constructed through this research as a reach for individuality and agency against a world experienced as imposing socially embedded meaning onto their bodies. It presents non-binary embodiment as a conflict in which the dynamism of gender is pitted against the limitations of the material body and this appeared to leave participants with an ambivalence about their bodies and the bodily modifications they desired or had pursued. Yet, honest reflection supported the development of more certainty, pride and joy. Ultimately, non-binary subjective embodiment, as told here, is a story of two halves, of how bracing it is to experience one's body in conflict with one's sense of self and yet how by embracing a non-binary identity this experience can be more easily navigated and turned into a positive idiosyncratic embodiment of one's gender identity. As the main aim of this research was to hear the voices of the non-binary community, such that they might serve both the community and any professionals engaged with them, I shall conclude with a member reflection on the value of this work to them:

> *"It gave me some vocabulary that I hadn't had beforehand that is going to help me on my own journey with my own gender"*.

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Appendices

Appendix one: Survey participants' demographics

Number	Age	Ethnicity	Sex assigned at birth	Occupation	Educational attainment	Sexual orientation	Gender Identity
1	18	White	Female	Unemployed	High school diploma	Lesbian	Non Binary
2	33	White	Male	Public Servant	Undergrad. Degree	Bisexual	Genderfluid
3	34	White	Male	Horse and Carriage Driver (Coachman)	Bachelors	Pansexual	Androgyne
4	21	Asian	Female	Student	Bachelors	Bisexual	Nonbinary
5	28	White	Female	Production supervisor	Technical college	Queer; aromantic greysexual/pansexual	Nonbinary
6	36	White	Male	PhD student	Doctorate	Prefer feminine gender expression	Non-binary
7	21	White	Female	Student	Bachelors	Pansexual	Nonbinary/Agender
8	39	White	Female	Speech pathologist	MA	Pan	Queer
9	33	White Latinx	Female	Spanish interpreter	Some graduate school	Straight	Genderfluid
10	15	White	Female	Student	I am in grade 10	Gay (I like girls)	Nonbinary
11	21	White	Male	Student	MSc	Pansexual/bisexual	Nonbinary
12	23	White	Female	Student	MRes	Pansexual	Nonbinary
13	21	White	Male	Unemployed/Student	Studied for BA Spanish	Very carefully. Okay that was a joke. Pan/Bisexual, though attracted either to femininity	50% Non-binary woman, 50% amorphous gender-less blob
14	35	White	Female	Physician	Professional medical degree (doctorate)	Lesbian/Androphilic	Queer / androgynous / Transmasculine

15	38	-	Female	Research Assistant	PhD	Pansexual	Non-binary
16	20	White	Female	Student	BSc	Lesbian	Non-binary
17	-	White	Female	Student	High school	Queer	Genderfluid
18	18	White	Female	Student	Freshman in college	Bisexual	Genderfluid
19	20	Latinx	Female	Student	Bachelors	Asexual cupioromantic	Non-binary or demigirl
20	21	White	Female	Student	Finished high school	Bisexual	Non-binary guy or trans-masculine
21	19	Middle Eastern and White	Male	Student	Bachelors	Asexual	Agender
22	27	White	Female	Staff member in a students’ union	Undergraduate degree	Queer	Non-binary
23	-	White	Female	Production in entertainment	Bachelors	Lesbian (Including non-binary people who identify as lesbians)	Agender
24	23	White	Female	Vet Assistant	Some college, no degree	Lesbian/dyke	Genderfluid butch
25	38	White	Female	on ESA	MA	Queer	Genderqueer
26	35	White	Male	Teacher	PhD	Phallophile	Cisish
27	26	White	Male	Kitchen Manager	Bachelors of Fine Arts	I'm straight, but if we have sex you're gay	Genderfluid
28	46	White	Female	Attorney	Juris Doctor	Lesbian or scoliosexual	Non-binary or genderqueer
29	23	White	Male	Unemployed	Bachelors of Science	Pansexual	Genderfluid Questioning
30	30	White	Male	UX Designer	Bachelor Degree	Bisexual	Non-binary
31	25	White	Male	Writer and Freelance Creative	Bachelors	Femme-Oriented	Genderfluid
32	37	White	Female	Self-employed	Bachelors of Science	Bisexual	Non-binary man
33	27	White	Female	Booking officer	A level	Heterosexual	Female

34	37	White	Female	Self-employed craft/trade	Bachelors of science	Bisexual	Non-binary man
35	35	White	Female	PhD student	PhD (current)	Queer	Non-binary/Gender non-conforming
36	21	White	Female	Student	Studying for bachelors in Graphic Design	Lesbian	Non-binary
37	21	White	Female	Student	Bachelor	Queer	Non-binary
38	20	White	Female	Cook	Completed part of high school	Lesbian or gay	Non-binary
39	22	White	Female	Part time online teacher, full time fast food worker	Certificate of Higher Education	Bisexual	Transmasculine
40	20	White	Male	Student	I am currently an undergraduate getting my baccalaureate degree	Asexual lesbian	Genderfluid transfeminine person
41	22	White	Female	Student	1 year into University	Lesbian	Agender
42	25	White	Female	Museum worker and student	Currently obtaining a bachelors	Pansexual	Non-binary
43	22	Hispanic	Male	conservationist	High School Diploma/Some college	Asexual / Bi-romantic	Non-binary woman
44	42	White	Male	Audio	BA	Pan	Fluid
45	25	Mixed, Asian and White	Male	Student	Currently in university	Bisexual/Pansexual	Androgyne
46	20	White Scottish	Female	Student	3rd year of Honours Degree	Bisexual (also queer or pansexual)	Non-binary (also genderfluid)
47	33	Asian	Female	Teacher	PhD	-	-
48	19	White	Female	Crew member	High school	Pansexual	Genderfluid

49	-	White	Male	Preschool teacher	Bachelor	Pansexual	Genderqueer
50	34	White	Female	CTO	Undergraduate degree	Gay	Gender fluid non-binary
51	23	White	Female	Recent college graduate, seeking work	Bachelor's degree	Panromantic, gray asexual	Nonbinary
52	31	White	Female	Technical Product Manager	Bachelors in Fine Arts	Pansexual	Genderfluid
53	25	White	Male	Engineer	BS	Asexual	Woman
54	40	White	Female	Sr Manager Strategy and Programs	Bachelor’s degree	Gay/Queer	Nonbinary
55	29	White	Male	Biomedical Engineer	Master’s Degree	Bisexual	Genderfluid between Agender and Female
56	32	White	Female	Library clerk	BA	Bisexual with a genital preference	Agender
57	29	White	Male	Software Engineer	BS in Engineering (ABET accredited)	Queer (or for simplicity lesbian)	Enby trans woman
58	46	White	Female	Inventory Manager	High School	Pansexual	Non-binary
59	29	White	Female	Retail supervisor	BFA	Queer, lesbian	Genderfluid, nonbinary
60	20	White	Male	Student/Campaign Worker	Bachelor’s degree	Bisexual	Transfeminine non-binary
61	28	White	Male	Environmental driller	College	Gay	Nonbinary, transfeminine
62	29	White	Female	Teacher	Masters	Panromantic asexual	Non-binary/neutrois
63	19	White and Latino	Male	Student	Studying Psychology in University	Queer and Asexual	Agender and Genderflux
64	18	White	Male	Unemployed	Have obtained GED	Aspec	Demiboy and transfeminine
65	35	White	Female	Consultant social worker	Masters	Bi	Agender

66	27	Mixed (White/Black)	Female	Executive assistant	Bachelor's degree	I call myself bisexual	Agender, masculine-leaning
67	21	White	Female	Student	Bachelor's current	Lesbian (grey asexual)	Nonbinary
68	22	White	Female	Software Dev	BSc	Ace (and aro)	Nonbinary (agender/neutrois)
69	31	White Scottish	Female	Full time caregiving parent	Master’s	Heterosexual	Non-binary/gender non-conforming
70	27	White	Female	Student	BSc	I can't	None
71	24	White	Male	Student	Master’s Degree	Bisexual/Pansexual	Non-binary/agender
72	37	White Polish	Male	Volunteer research assistant	BSc	Queer	Non-binary woman
73	34	White	Female	Researcher	PhD	Greysexual	Nonbinary
74	33	White	Male	IT Engineer	Undergraduate degree	I experience aesthetic attraction more than sexual attraction, that is to say I like attractive people but have no desire to do anything with them.	AMAB Agender
75	22	Black Caribbean	Female	Student	Currently studying for a bachelors in biological science	Pansexual homoromantic	Non-binary
76	21	White	Male	Student	Masters	Bisexual	Androgynous
77	18	White	Female	Unemployed student	GCSE, currently extended diploma in art and design at level 3	Unsure, leaning towards masculine traits, maybe aromantic	Cis female if asked by someone unknown/untrusted, occasionally non-binary/ agender, usually "I don't care"
78	22	White	Female	Student	Currently undergraduate	Demi-sexual	Genderqueer or nonbinary

79	23	White	Female	Generalist adviser	Degree	Androsexual	Non-binary, agender
80	20	White	Female	Student	GCSE	Panromantic/Questioning sexuality	Agender/non-binary
81	20	White	Female	Student	GCSE	Panromantic/Do not define sexuality	Agender and non-binary
82	23	White Jewish	Female	Part time masters student, part time administrator	Masters degree	Sex-you-all/Queer	masc-leaning nonbinary or genderbleugh
83	21	White	Male	Broadcast Camera Operator	Post-graduate degree	Asexual	Non-binary
84	35	White	Male	Freelance motion designer	BA	Bi/Pansexual	Androgyne
85	24	White	Female	Unemployed	MA	Queer, ace lesbian, ace bi lesbian	Nonbinary/gender queer but specific genderfluid
86	-	Black	Female	Employed	Bachelor’s	Polysexual	Agender
87	19	White	Female	Student	About to finish high school	I am a panromantic asexual. Sexually attracted to nobody, but gender isn't a factor in my dating life.	Still not a 100% on it, but right now I'm just sticking to the label Nonbinary. If you're asking for an actual answer on how I perceive it, it feels.. very confusing and undefined, like a void. I'm only quite sure that I'm not completely a man or a woman.
88	23	White	Female	Student	Currently studying for bachelor's degree	Bisexual	Nonbinary

89	22	White	Female	Student	Bachelor's	Queer	Nonbinary, genderqueer, genderfluid
90	16	White	Male	Student	Studying for a doctorate	Straight	Female
91	31	Asian	Male	Self employed	Bachelors	Pansexual	Genderfluid
92	36	White	Female	User researcher	Masters	Pansexual	Demiguy
93	-	Black	Male	Food Runner	I am studying for my undergrad	Queer	Nonbinary. Simply, non-binary
94	25	White	Male	Retail	Undergraduate Degree	Straight	Transfeminine
95	33	White	Female	Unemployed	A Levels	I don't know. It's always been a bit of a mystery but I think it's some variety of asexual. I don't experience sexual attraction but I do like sex and intimacy. Generally I've been in more sexual relationships with women, but my longest sexual relationships have been with men. My current relationships are, a steady sexual relationship with a trans nonbinary man, and a long-distance not-even-sure-if-it's-even-still-happening thing with a trans woman.	Nonbinary; agender.

96	32	White	Female	Communications Professional/Academic	PhD	Queer	Nonbinary trans masculine
97	30	White	Female	Disabled	Some college	Demi bi	idk lol
98	34	White	Female	Barista	JD	Queer	transmasc agender
99	43	White	Male	IT Security Consultant	BA Computer Science	Pansexual	Genderqueer
100	20	White	Male	Student	Currently studying BSc in Computer Science	Bisexual	Nonbinary
101	31	White	Male	Software Developer	Currently studying for a MSc	Gay	Nonbinary trans femme
102	35	White	Male	Machinist	Some college	Pansexual	Nonbinary/ agender
103	36	White	Female	Freelance illustrator/ author	BA	Asexual, Demi romantic	Genderfluid
104	33	White	Male	Marketing for LGBTQ+ centre	Associate in Arts	Pansexual	Nonbinary
105	26	White	Female	Creative developer	Bachelor’s degree	Androromantic demisexual	Nonbinary
106	21	White	Female	Unemployed	High School	Androsexual	Agender
107	25	White	Female	Unemployed	Level 2	Trans	Nonbinary
108	38	White	Male	Web Developer	Undergraduate	Pansexual	Genderfluid
109	37	White Polish	Male	Volunteer research assistant	BSc	Queer	Non-binary woman
110	21	White	Male	Student	Undergraduate BA	Bisexual	Non-Binary/trans female
111	20	White	Female	Student	MSc degree	Pansexual	Nonbinary (specifically agender)
112	23	White	Female	Molecular Biology Lab Tech	Bachelor's	Pansexual	Agender transmasculine nonbinary
113	31	White	Male	Librarian	Masters	Pansexual	Genderqueer

114	38	White	Female	Disabled/Artist	Some college	Pansexual or bisexual	Genderfluid
115	30	White	Male	Volunteer	BSc	Asexual	Non Binary
116	28	White	Female	Non-profit sector	Masters of Social Work	Queer	Nonbinary
117	20	White	Female	Student	Current university student, working towards a degree in Biomedical Science	Bi	Transmasculine nonbinary
118	25	White	Female	Retail worker/artist/delivery driver	GED	Gray ace/panromantic	Genderfluid (agender/non-binary/Demi-boy)
119	22	Asian German	Male	Student	BSc	Bisexual	Trans feminine
120	18	White	Male	Student	High school	Greysexual	Agender nonbinary
121	40	White	Male	Software developer	Bachelor degree	Pansexual and demisexual	Non-binary, some unnamed other gender
122	22	White	Male	Unemployed	BSc	Asexual	Undefined
123	40	Human	Male	Information Security Specialist	High school equivalent/mostly self-taught	Polysexual	Demiagender, nonbinary
124	16	White African	Female	Student		Pansexual, polyamorous	Genderfluid
125	34	White	Female	Student	PhD	Queer	Non-binary
126	57	Mixed race (European/Central Asian)	Male	Unable to work due to chronic illness	Graduate Certificate	Acequeer, ceteromantic	Transgenderless, post-penis :)

Appendix two: Diary and interview participants' demographics

Pseudonym	Number	Age	Ethnicity	Nationality	Sex assigned at birth	Occupation	Educational attainment	Sexuality	Gender Identity
Morgan	1	-	White	United States	Male	Computer engineer	Bachelors degree	Lesbian for exactly one person	Non-binary genderfluid
Tyler	2	33	White	United States	Male	-	-	Queer	Genderfluid
Cameron	3	23	White	Dutch	Male	Student	Bachelors	Quoisexual	Non-binary woman
Riley	4	40	European American	United States	Female	Speech pathologist	Masters	Pansexual	Gender queer/non-binary
Jordan	5	35	White	British	Female	Social work consultant	Masters	Gay	Agender
Finley	6	28	White	United States	Female	Production manager	Technical college	Queer and Greysexual	Non-binary
River	7	23	White	British	Female	Student	Bachelors	Demisexual panromantic or Queer	Non-binary
Jamie	8	22	Pacific Islander/Asian	United States	Female	Student	Bachelors	Demisexual	Non-binary trans guy
Charlie	9	18	-	United States	Female	Student	High School	-	-
Jaden	10	-	-	-	Male	Student	Bachelors	-	-
Bailey	11	21	White	Polish	Male	Student	Bachelors	Gay pansexual	Non-binary, agender, gender non-conforming male

Appendix three: Recruitment posting on Reddit forums

Hello all,

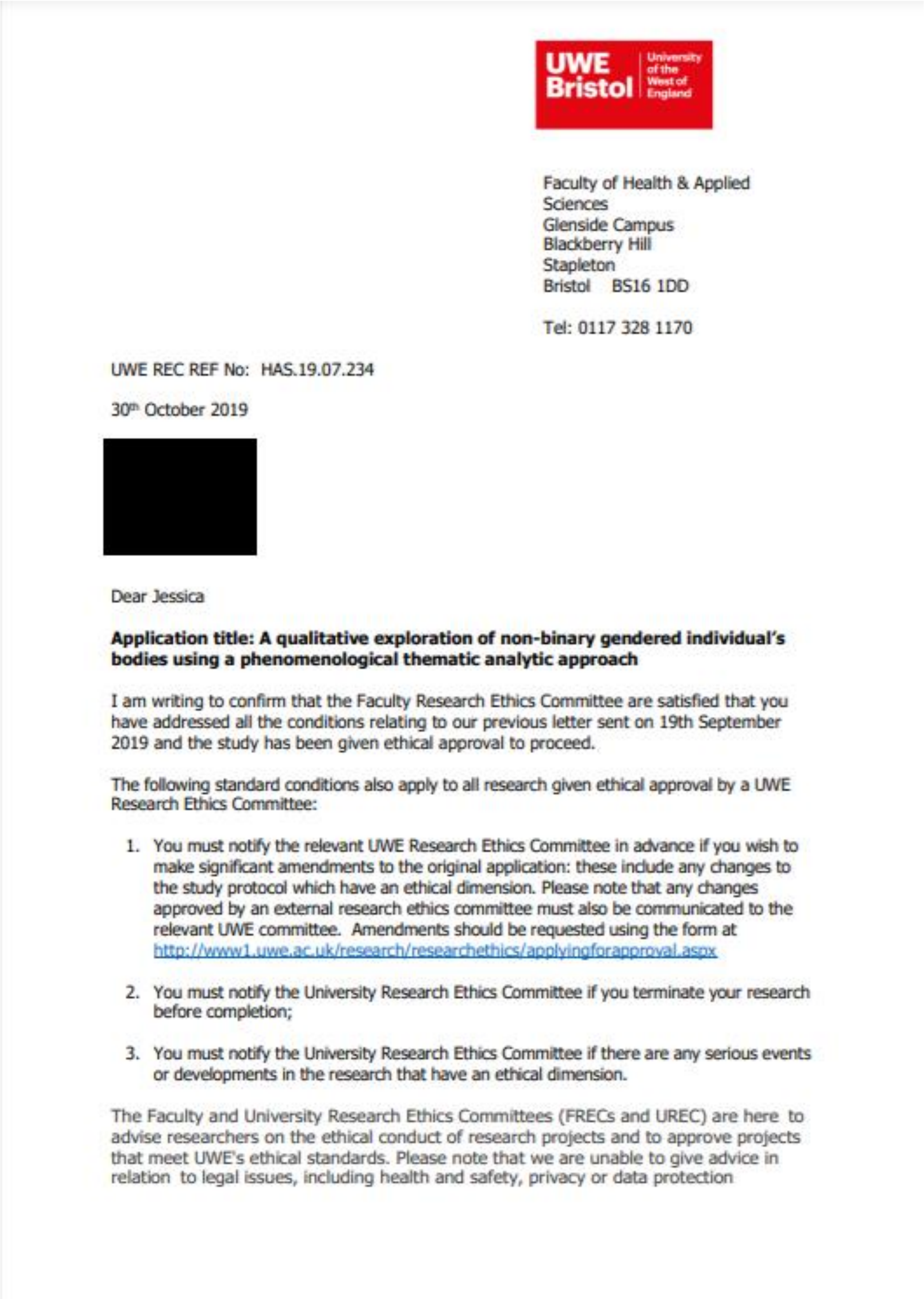
My name is Jessica Taylor and I am currently reading for my doctorate in counselling psychology with the University of West England. My email address is Jessica6.Taylor@live.uwe.ac.uk (for verification). I'm looking to explore non-binary individuals experiences of their bodies. To this end I have obtained permission from the mods to post my survey here.

I have previously worked with the non-binary community to explore their experience of being non-binary (without the focus on their bodies), with this work being published in the International Journal of Transgenderism (a copy of which is available, upon request, to anyone over at my ResearchGate page). This current research is aimed at getting more of a non-binary voice into the research on non-binary identity, so any interest would be welcome.

The survey itself is qualitative in nature - so it's all about the collection of rich descriptions (in other words, if you choose to complete it, write as much as you can muster!) and you don't have to complete it all in one sitting - you can come back to it anytime within a two week period. I'm happy to answer any questions anyone may have, or to make any further amendments here if the mods feel them necessary.

I'm really looking forward to hearing from as many of you as possible. Thank you in advance.

Appendix four: Ethical approval letter



UWE Bristol University of the West of England

Faculty of Health & Applied Sciences
Glenside Campus
Blackberry Hill
Stapleton
Bristol BS16 1DD

Tel: 0117 328 1170

UWE REC REF No: HAS.19.07.234

30th October 2019

[redacted]

Dear Jessica

Application title: A qualitative exploration of non-binary gendered individual's bodies using a phenomenological thematic analytic approach

I am writing to confirm that the Faculty Research Ethics Committee are satisfied that you have addressed all the conditions relating to our previous letter sent on 19th September 2019 and the study has been given ethical approval to proceed.

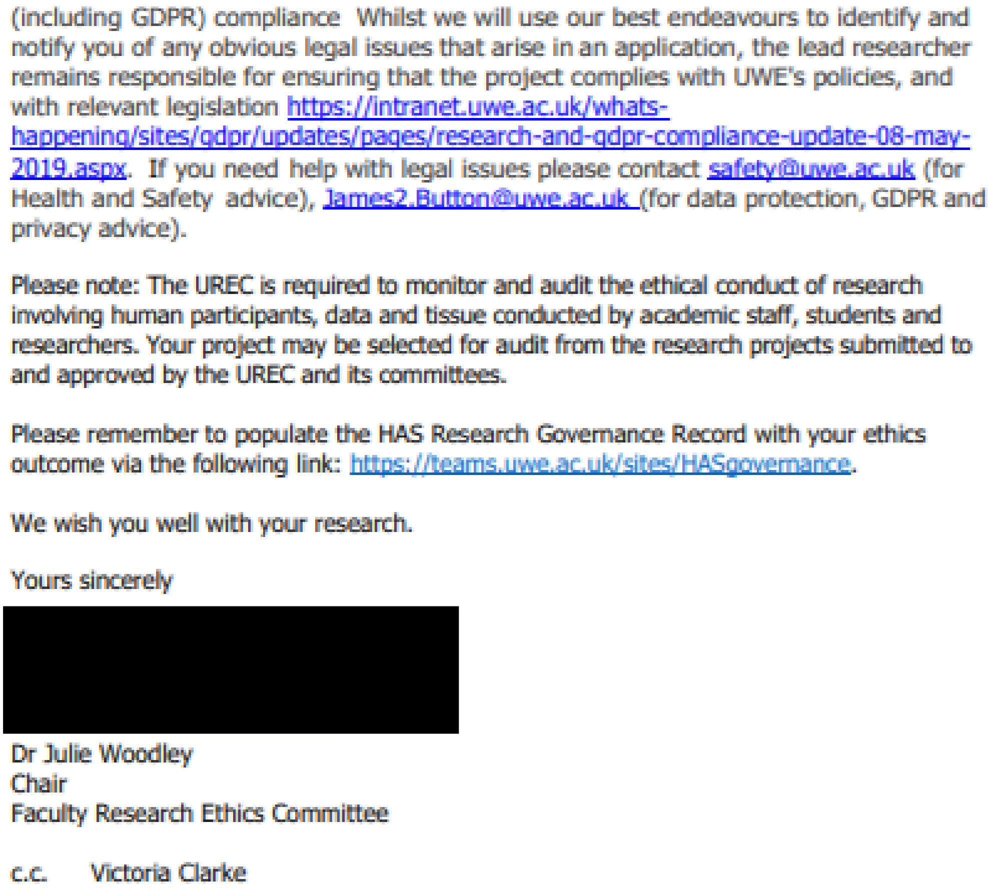
The following standard conditions also apply to all research given ethical approval by a UWE Research Ethics Committee:

1. You must notify the relevant UWE Research Ethics Committee in advance if you wish to make significant amendments to the original application: these include any changes to the study protocol which have an ethical dimension. Please note that any changes approved by an external research ethics committee must also be communicated to the relevant UWE committee. Amendments should be requested using the form at http://www1.uwe.ac.uk/research/researchethics/applyingforapproval.aspx

2. You must notify the University Research Ethics Committee if you terminate your research before completion;

3. You must notify the University Research Ethics Committee if there are any serious events or developments in the research that have an ethical dimension.

The Faculty and University Research Ethics Committees (FRECs and UREC) are here to advise researchers on the ethical conduct of research projects and to approve projects that meet UWE's ethical standards. Please note that we are unable to give advice in relation to legal issues, including health and safety, privacy or data protection



(including GDPR) compliance Whilst we will use our best endeavours to identify and notify you of any obvious legal issues that arise in an application, the lead researcher remains responsible for ensuring that the project complies with UWE's policies, and with relevant legislation https://intranet.uwe.ac.uk/whats-happening/sites/gdpr/updates/pages/research-and-gdpr-compliance-update-08-may-2019.aspx. If you need help with legal issues please contact safety@uwe.ac.uk (for Health and Safety advice), James2.Button@uwe.ac.uk (for data protection, GDPR and privacy advice).

Please note: The UREC is required to monitor and audit the ethical conduct of research involving human participants, data and tissue conducted by academic staff, students and researchers. Your project may be selected for audit from the research projects submitted to and approved by the UREC and its committees.

Please remember to populate the HAS Research Governance Record with your ethics outcome via the following link: https://teams.uwe.ac.uk/sites/HASgovernance.

We wish you well with your research.

Yours sincerely

[redacted]

Dr Julie Woodley
Chair
Faculty Research Ethics Committee

c.c.   Victoria Clarke

Appendix five: Participant information sheet

University of the
West of England
BRISTOL

An Exploration of Non-Binary Individuals' Experiences of their Bodies

Thank you for reading this. You are invited to participate in this research study exploring non-binary individuals' bodies. However, before you decide to participate, it is important for you to understand why the research is being done and what it will involve. Please take time to read the following information carefully and to discuss it with others, if you wish. My (and my supervisors) contact details are below if there is anything that is not clear, and for which you would like more information. Please take your time to decide if you wish to participate.

The purpose of this study

You have been asked to participate as a self-identified non-binary individual. In relation to this, I am interested in how you understand and experience your body, as well as how it impacts on your life and wellbeing. The aim of this study is to collect rich descriptions of these topics.

Potential risks and benefits of participating

You do not have to take part. However, by taking part you will be participating in the expansion of knowledge available regarding the lives and experiences of non-binary individuals.

This survey will ask you to reflect upon and outline in detail how you understand and experience your body, as well as how it impacts on your life and wellbeing. It is not anticipated that there are any risks to participating, with the exception of the possibility for some upset when reflecting on potentially emotional topics. If any distress is aroused, it is recommended you discuss this with any healthcare professionals you are currently involved with. However, for your convenience, you may also like to contact the Mind trans helpline on 0300 330 5468. This helpline, run by trans individuals, is open 8pm to midnight Monday to Friday.

What would the study involve?

This study is in two parts. The part you are about to participate in is an online survey consisting of several open questions relating to your body. There is no time-limit to answering the questions and you are encouraged to take your time to reflect before writing up your answers (the survey allows you to save and continue later). At the end of the survey you will be asked if you are open to being contacted regarding your participation in part two: an in-depth interview aimed at further exploring the themes that emerge from the data collected from the survey. Participation in this survey does not constitute an agreement to participate in an interview, and if you do not select being open to being contacted you will not be contacted again following the completion of this survey.

For those who are selected to participate in part two, interviews can be conducted either in person or via asynchronous emails. In person interviews would take place at the University of West England and last approximately two hours; email interviews have no pre-defined limit but are likely to involve a series of exchanges over a one-month period. Those participating in the interviews will be asked to maintain a diary for one month prior to their interview, in which they would be asked to reflect, daily, on their bodies.

Will the study be confidential? Will it be possible to identify me?

All information will be kept strictly confidential. Only myself, my supervisor, and my examiners will have access to the research data, all of which will be anonymised. All research data will be stored in either a lock filing cabinet or within a password protected folder on a password protected laptop. At the end of the study, or after publication of the results (whichever comes later), all data will be destroyed.

The results of the study

Once the study has been completed, over the next two years, the results will be written up as part of my professional doctorate with the university of the west of England. I will also aim to submit the study for publication in a scientific journal and to present it at professional conferences. All information would be presented in such a way that it would be impossible to identify individual participants.

What to do if you have any questions or complaints

If you have any questions or would like to raise a concern about any aspect of this project, please contact:

Researcher: Jessica Taylor (trainee counselling psychologist at UWE), Jessica.Taylor6@live.uwe.ac.uk

Supervisor: Dr Victoria Clarke (senior lecturer at UWE), Victoria.Clarke@uwe.ac.uk

Appendix six: Diary guidelines

An Exploration of Non-Binary People's Experiences of their Bodies

Daily Journal

You are invited to keep a daily account of the experiences you have involving your body. This account will cover a period of one month, after which we will hold an interview to discuss your experiences in more depth. This diary is part of the research and a copy of it will be submitted to the researcher. It is intended to be flexible, however the guidelines below may help you to get started.

Guidelines:

- Complete the diary *at least* once every day.
- Take notes throughout the day and then use them to write up in the evening.
- Write in a 'classic' journal style, or utilise poetry, notations or any other style that suits you.
- Come back to earlier entries and annotate things you have previously written about. (date stamp any comments you make).
- Alongside writing, you might like to also draw and/or cut and copy/paste things onto the diary pages - whatever images are meaningful to you and capture how you are feeling when completing the diary and reflecting on particular experiences involving your body.

Things to consider:

- Things that drew attention to your body, for example: a song on the radio, a comment by another person, a glimpse of your reflection.
- Feelings: times your body led to a sense of happiness, sadness, elation, anxiety, frustration, etc.
- Times your body involved another person/other people, for example times another person commented on your body in some way, times you thought about another person thinking about your body…
- Times you thought about your body (e.g. after catching a reflection of yourself, when you bathed, have sex, got dressed, etc.)
- Things your body stopped you from doing (e.g. swimming/eating)

Ultimately, when all is said and done, however, this is simply a space for you to record your day-to-day experiences related to your body. An opportunity to catch, as they come up, your thoughts, reflections, and interactions with your physical self and the way this, if at all, relates to your sense of gendered embodiment.

Appendix seven: Participant consent forms

UWE BRISTOL University of the West of England

Participant Consent Form

Please take the time to read this carefully before signing; by signing you agree that:

- You have read and understood the information sheet for this study
- Your participation is voluntary
- You are free to withdraw (without giving reason) at any point during the interview, or to withdraw your data from the study within one month after the interview
- You agree for anonymised quotations to be used in any written-up work

____________________	__________	____________________
Name of Participant	Date	Signature
____________________	__________	____________________
Name of Researcher	Date	Signature

Appendix eight: Article prepared for submission to the International Journal of Transgenderism

(Em)bracing Liminality: A Phenomenological Exploration of Non-Binary Individuals Subjective Embodiment

Introduction

Those who identify outside of an essentialist binary conceptualisation of sex/gender are seemingly on the rise (Wilson, 2019). In one of the largest studies of trans experience, Harrison, Grant and Herman (2012) asked 6,456 participants from the US, recruited via 800 nationwide trans specific organisations, to identify themselves from four categories: man/male, woman/female, alternating between two genders, and an option for 'gender not listed here'. Given these choices, they found 23% identified as one of the latter two options. There were plenty who further provided creative and idiosyncratic labels by which they titled themselves: "*birl, jest me, skaneelog, twidget, neutrois, OtherWise, gendertreyf, trannydyke genderqueer wombat fantastica, Best of Both, and gender blur*" (p.14). Supporting an understanding of non-binary as a multitude of expressions over any absolutes (Herdt, 1993), this research evidences a shared valuing of individuality and the importance of expressing oneself as central to non-binary experience. These varied expressions can be constructed as inclusive of, but not limited to: agender or an absence of gender, bigender or a blending of the binary genders, and ambigender or a gender that alternates between the binary positions (Wickham, 2011; Richards et al., 2016).

Whilst it has been argued that not all trans identified individuals experience gender dysphoria (Bouman, de Vries and T'Sjoen, 2016; Chen et al., 2016; Byne et al., 2018), historically an "*adoption of a stable, integrated, unambiguous identification as 100% male or 100% female*" was considered the end point of the medical transition designed to alleviate dysphoria (Diamond and Butterworth, 2008:366). By reading the functional outcomes that surgeons strive for, such as how neo-vaginas and neo-phalli are evaluated on their capacity to enable heterosexual penis-in-vagina intercourse (e.g. Karim, 1996; Fang et al., 1999; Monstrey et al., 2009), we can begin to distil how trans bodies can become defined by an essentialist social expectation placed on the (two) sexes (Plemons, 2014). Through a recognition of how trans bodies have been studied with regard to how well they align with cis-heteronormative standards (e.g. Zucker et al., 1993; Blanchard, Dickey and Jones, 1995; Fridell et al., 1996; McDermid et al., 1998), and how conformity to these standards may influence access to care (Smith, Cohen and Cohen-Kettenis, 2002), we can highlight how this historical (and not so historical) conflation of gender roles, sexuality and embodiment has acted to largely foreclose the possibility of non-binary gendered identity. In essence, with the belief of "*femaleness and maleness as exhausting the natural categories in which people can conceivably come, what falls between is a darkness, an offense against reason*" (Geertz, 1984:85), non-binary individuals have experienced themselves to be rendered invisible (Taylor et al., 2019).

The Present Study

Although there is a dearth of literature around the topic of non-binary identities (Richards et al., 2017), there are some indications in the literature that specific discussion around their bodies may be challenging for this community (e.g. Taylor et al., 2019). Further, over 50% of non-binary individuals are uncomfortable discussing their identity with gender specialists (Scottish Trans Alliance, 2015) and many trans individuals have reported a lack of knowledge as one of the biggest hurdles to them seeking support (e.g. Elder, 2016). As non-binary gendered individuals have previously described themselves as feeling invisible and unable to fully articulate their identities (Taylor et al., 2019), and as psychologists are called upon by the community to develop a greater understanding of non-binary individuals lives (Budge, 2013), this research aimed to bring forth their lives. This was undertaken so that both non-binary individuals themselves and the professionals who work alongside them might develop a greater ability to discuss their experiences. Previous criticism from the trans community towards academic work lacking consideration for the lived experience of being trans has also been raised (Prosser, 1998; Clarke et al., 2010).

Methodology

Design

A qualitative approach, allowing for an in-depth exploration of participants' subtleties of meaning and perspective (Willig, 2013), was utilised for this study. This research sought to provide an inductive phenomenological exploration of non-binary individuals' subjective embodiment and focused on the amplification and elaboration of non-binary individuals' own sensemaking and understanding (Hussey and Hussey, 1997; Neuman, 2013). The data were analysed using a descriptive and empathic approach to reflexive thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2006).

Participants

Inclusion criteria were a fluency in English, being over the age of eighteen and self-identifying as non-binary. One hundred and nine individuals completed the survey, 11 completed a diary and 9 an interview. The mean age of participants was 27.5, with 88% identifying themselves as white, 2.5% as black, 3% as Asian and 6.5% as other. 61% identified themselves as assigned female at birth and 39% as assigned male, none described themselves as intersex. 36% were students, 13% were outside of paid employment (excluding students) and 51% were in paid employment. Finally, pertaining to sexuality, around 42% of participants identified themselves as bi/pansexual, 16% as some variation of asexual (e.g. greysexual) and 8% as lesbian or gay. The remaining 42% reported a wide variety of idiosyncratic sexualities (e.g. femme-oriented, scoliosexual, phallophile, lesbian/androphilic). The diary-interview respondents were similar to one those outlined for the survey respondents above, with both aligning closely to reported norms for the non-binary community (Factor and Rothblum, 2008; Kuyper and Wijsen, 2014; van Caenegem et al., 2015).

Data collection

By adding not only detail but also allowing for multiple ways of representing and analysing that detail, crystallisation encourages trustworthiness through depth (Ellingson, 2008; Tracy, 2010). To this end, crystallisation was aimed at via the variety of data collection methods employed in this study: online qualitative surveys, solicited diaries and email interviews. Qualitative surveys provide a convenient and anonymous method for the exploration of meaning and experience (Braun et al., 2020) whilst also allowing for the recognition of diversity within a population (Jansen, 2010). As the internet affords greater access to geographically dispersed populations (Mitchell and Howarth, 2009), an online qualitative survey was used. Braun and Clarke (2013) encourage surveys to be constituted of open-ended, non-leading, empathic questions. As such, the survey used in this research was compromised of several demographic questions followed by eight open-ended substantive questions focused on non-binary bodies:

9. How would you describe your experience(s) and feelings about your body?
10. In your own words, could you give a detailed outline of your ideal body?
11. In what way (if any) have you attempted to modify your body to meet your ideal?
12. In what ways have/do you use your body to express your identity? [e.g. clothing/tattoos]
13. How have others responded to your body?
14. What impact has your body had on your day-to-day life? [e.g. public changing areas/sex life]
15. How has your body impacted on your sense of self?
16. Is there anything else you would like to tell me, or think I need to know, about your body?

Solicited diaries can produce rich qualitative data (Elliot, 1997; Bartlett and Milligan, 2015) and enable participants to capture mundane events that can often be overlooked in retrospective accounts, whilst also allowing the recording of contradictory experiences (Plummer, 2001; Kenton, 2010) which may be a feature of non-binary experience (Taylor et al., 2019). For this study, participants were asked to keep a daily journal for between two weeks and one month prior to their interviews, to record and reflect on day-to-day experience(s) of their bodies. They were relatively unstructured, with participants being guided to record experiences that had brought their bodies to their attention, or where their bodies had some impact on their life (e.g. when showering).

Interviews are the most common method of data collection (Sandelowski, 2000). A form of virtual interview (asynchronous email) was adopted for its ability to offer participants greater control of when they choose to participate (Gibson, 2014; Fritz and Vandermause, 2017), which is particularly useful given the international nature of this study's participants. It also afforded greater control over the amount of their time participants give to the interview process (Mason and Ide, 2014) and encouraged epoché through offering me more time to sit with and reflect before responding (Bampton and Cowton, 2002). Such interviews have been demonstrated to capture rich material (Bjerke, 2010; Madge and O'Conner, 2002; McCoyd and Kerson, 2006) and whilst there are concerns regarding the lack of non-verbal cues (Bjerke, 2010) impacting on the data collected this was deemed outweighed by the anonymity afforded to participants wishing to speak on the potentially sensitive topic this research explored (Ratislova and Ratislav, 2014); this anonymity potentially promoting a more honest response (Madge and O'Conner, 2002). The focused unstructured interview (Gray, 2009), in line with Moustakas (1994), revolved around two general questions: what had participants experienced in terms of the phenomenon and what context or situations had typically influenced or affected their experiences of the phenomenon. This approach allowed material to emerge from the interview as it progressed (Reber et al., 2009), allowing participants to narrate their experiences at their own pace (Corbin and Morse, 2003).

Ethics

Ethics was granted and overseen by the authors' university and, as this project involved the use of online methods, both the British Psychological Societies 'Code of Human Research Ethics' (2014) and 'Ethics Guidelines for Internet-mediated Research' (2013) were adhered to.

Reflexive Thematic Analysis

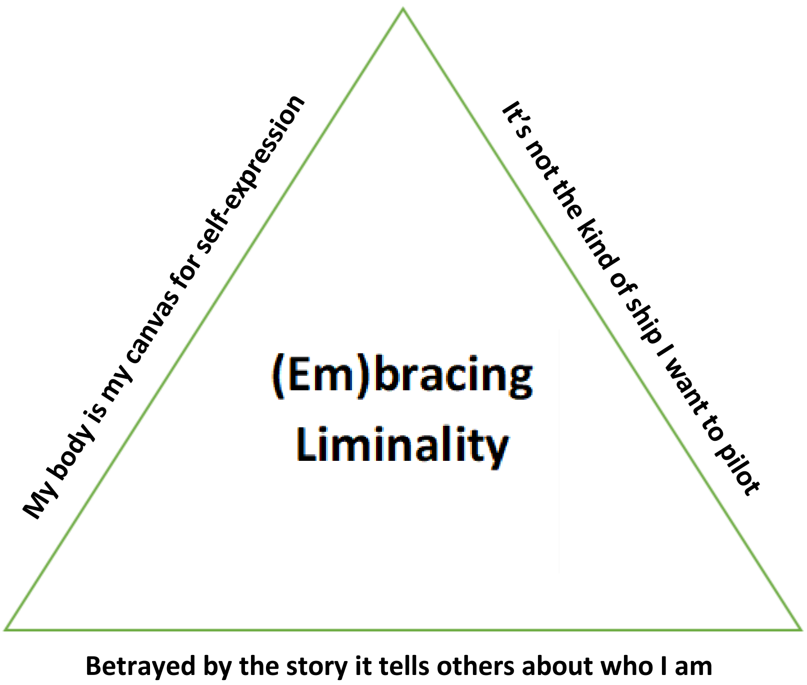
Reflexive thematic analysis is a method for identifying, analysing, organising, describing and reporting themes (Braun and Clarke, 2006) and has the ability to mould itself to the specifics of research as it evolves and develops (Clarke and Braun, 2018; King, 2004). Braun and Clarke's (2006) six phase approach for organising qualitative data into themed meaning was utilised in the exploration and explication of the data: familiarisation with the data, code development, construction of themes, reviewing of themes, naming and definition of themes and the production of a report.

Analysis

This research recognises the partiality of the knowledge constructed (Ellingson, 2008) and thus, in line with Lincoln and Guba (1985), caution is encouraged in assessing whether the circumstances and context of this study render the analysis relevant for to the reader. Overall, the data has been woven around the conceptualisation of '(em)bracing liminality' with each of the three themes contributing to this presented in Figure 1. This central conceptualisation seeks to present participants' navigation of the threshold they found themselves on; non-binary subjective embodiment ultimately being constructed as an experience that was both to be embraced as a positive expression of self and as bracing, a tense and invigorating experience.

Theme one speaks to the role individuality and self-expression played in participants' embodiment. There was no absolute on how a non-binary identity may be embodied and participants acknowledged this as an important aspect of their identities appeal. Theme two presents participants' embodiment as alienated and oppressed, as being under the pressure of socially embedded meaning around how bodies are sexed/gendered. It also speaks to the experience of their bodies through a lens of betrayal and subjugation by their own bodies. Finally, theme three reflects the uncertainty embodied by participants in the form of ambivalence over how best to embody their sense of gender and highlights the *confrontation* with the limitations of the body in the light of participants' more dynamic experiences of gender. It concludes with an explication of the pride and joy that may be experienced through an embodiment of a non-binary identity.

Figure 1: A construct of how non-binary individuals' experience their subjective embodiment


My body is my canvas for self-expression
It's not the kind of ship I want to pilot
(Em)bracing
Liminality
Betrayed by the story it tells others about who I am

Theme One: My body is my canvas for self-expression

A variety of inhabited and desired bodies were described by participants, speaking to the individuality that pervaded participants' sense of embodiment. There was a prevalent belief that "*there's no correct way to look or be nonbinary*" [Finley: Diary] although most participants sought to either amalgamate or negate primary and secondary sexed characteristics, believing that "*broadly speaking there are two kinds of androgyny: one that mixes male and female characteristics (e.g. soft, feminine facial structure combined with facial hair) and one that avoids both male and female characteristics (no breasts, no facial hair etc)*" [Bailey: Interview]. For participants, either their "*ideal body would be a seamless blend of masculine and feminine features. Think of the marble sculptures of Hermaphroditus*" [Survey respondent #3] or they would "*be like a "ken doll", no genitals at all…and a flat chest*" [River: Interview]. Regardless, participants' bodies offered direct avenues for self-expression.

Alongside these bodily forms, however, participants expressed how "*direct feelings about one's body are not the only source of influence*" [Survey respondent #34] in terms of how they might embody their subjectivity. There was also discussion of non-bodily modifications, such as how "*clothes are very important*" [Survey respondent #78] as "an extreme extension" [Survey respondent #82] of the body. River described their clothes as an aspect of their body that could be utilised to create a sense of ease. As their clothing took centre stage, it acted to transform the way in which their body was experienced:

> "*I have felt "at home" in my body in particular outfits, circumstances and with certain people. The outfit that makes me feel most at home and comfortable in my body is either my pink or orange dungarees (that are shorts), my binder with planets on, my tee shirt which has plants on, boxers, long rainbow socks and doc martins*". [River: Interview]

The importance of this overlap between the body and its accoutrements (e.g. clothing) was recurring across the data. It's captured here in an interview exchange with Jamie, in which they initially chose to speak about their clothing when asked about their body and then later objected to my attempt to establish a distinction between the two:

> "***Thank you for exploring further your relationship to clothing, but I was wondering if I could hear more about your body...***
>
> *Excuse me, clothing to me was something my body is a part of, along with everything else that influence my mind to perceive a physical thing like it, so pardon if my answer wasn't really what you were looking for*". [Jamie: Interview]

This viewing of their bodies and accoutrements as interchangeable offered participants opportunities to explore and manifest their sense of self in more meaningful ways. Through blending their body hair and henna tattoos, one survey respondent named a potential for artistic self-expression and the importance of body and clothing being in alignment. They highlighted the difficulty participants faced in navigating their bodies in relation to their self-expression:

> "*I get really creative with my body hair. I've shaved different patterns on every inch of my body as a way to embrace the body hair I was given. The next step has always been to do henna tattoos that interact with the hair patterns, making my body a sort of evolving art piece. I don't pin myself down to one aesthetic just like I don't pin myself down to a gender. If I got some cool witchy tattoo that would be great for my goth looks but not for my '80s department store looks. The worst case scenario is that if the aesthetic doesn't match up, it makes the clothes look like a separate thing from my body, and clothing is such an important part of my self-expression that I can't compromise that*". [Survey respondent #27]

Cutting across participants' accounts was this sense of reclamation of their bodies, that before modification were experienced as "*very neutral like it was just the default shell*" [Survey respondent #57]. Constructed as an untouched carapace that they could personalise and make individual, there was a shared experience for participants that their bodies were to be modified as a means to escape an experience of being imprisoned by a body not of their choosing:

> "*The parts of my body that I feel dysphoric about, like my large thighs, I decorate and reclaim as my own piece of artwork by tattooing them. I dye my hair bright colours and wear bright, patterned and colourful clothing because then it's like my "female" body is my own, rather than something I have been stuck with or trapped in. It's like buying a piece of IKEA furniture and then personalising it by painting or using decoupage to make it your own*". [River: Interview]

There is a sense of ownership here or, as Morgan put it, "*exerting control can be a powerful way to decrease the distance between the image I have of myself in my mind vs what I see in the mirror*" [Morgan: Interview]. The power of this agency was not lost on Finley, who articulated an experience felt by other participants: "*If my freedom were gone, my body would become an awkward costume* *that doesn't fit and doesn't come off*" [Finley: Interview]. Across the data, participants spoke of wishing "*to get a sense of ownership over their bodies*" [Survey respondent #74] as these were experienced as constrictive: "*I have tattoos and dyed hair because they make me feel far more at home and like my body is a sculpture I can decorate however I like*" [River: Interview].

Ultimately, this theme highlights the shared experience of the body as both canvas and barrier and how participants experienced little distinction between their bodies and the 'accessories' attached to them. Their bodies were idiosyncratic and a sense of agency over self-expression could be read across their accounts. Ownership and control of their bodies was central to their experience and there was a strong emphasis on the way bodily modifications were spoken as reclamations of the body, as means through which the body could be brought under the hilt of identity.

Theme Two: Betrayed by the story it tells others about who I am

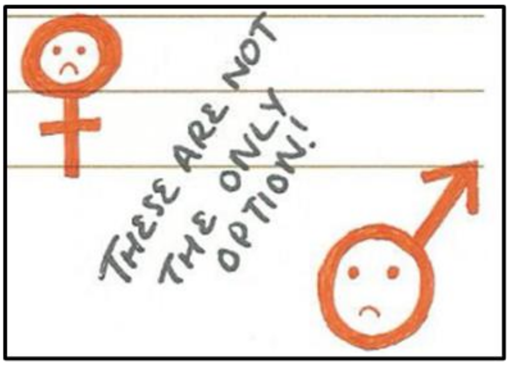
Reflecting on their body, Morgan expressed a sense that "*it can result in an alienating feeling, where I feel like I'm living in someone else's body, detached and foreign and decidedly not my own*" [Morgan: Interview]. Here, they construct their body as an unfamiliar space that isn't entirely one's own and this sense of estrangement was further elaborated upon by Cameron who used an analogy of home to convey their experience of feeling not quite the proprietor of their own body:

> "*Another point of comparison is staying in someone else's house. It's probably a fine house, but it's not the same as being 'at home'. I can't articulate right now what the exact difference is - but I think it's clear that there is one. I think that ideally we are 'at home' in our bodies, and I am not right now*". [Cameron: Interview]

Jordan offered up further articulation around this sense of alienation as they spoke to the manner in which their body was experienced as intrusive in its presence; they portrayed their body as ill-fitting, almost suffocating, and there was the impression of the body as being almost violently imposed upon them: "*There are times where just my body itself existing leads to a feeling of disconnected, especially about my chest which is just so unavoidable at times*". [Jordan: Interview]

These shared experiences of "*looking in the mirror* [to] *see a stranger*" [Survey respondent #62], such that their "*body feels like a shell around* [them]*, rather as simply* [them]" [Cameron: Interview], succinctly reflect the experience of participants' bodies as liminal spaces between their identity and the gaze of another. The imagery of a shell, revealing the construction of the body as both necessary and contingent to their subjectivity, much like how a hermit crab both is and is not defined by its shell. This experience was often constructed through a sense of oppression, with Cameron noting how "*I cannot express my gender authentically. My body is in the way. Whenever I express my gender I end up transgressing social norms, which I do not want to do*" [Cameron: Diary]. Here, the body might be read as a barrier to self-expression, in part through socially imbued meanings ascribed to sexed characteristics. The visual excerpt below, from River's diary, captures the frustration and sorrow a binary conceptualisation of gender could have:

Figure 2: "*These are not the only option*". [River: Diary]


THESE ARE NOT THE ONLY OPTION!

This sense of oppression, or pressure, was frequently expressed through a naming of how others could 'read' participants' bodies for indicators of gender identity and there was a sense of powerlessness in countering this. As the gaze of another could render participants' non-binary identities null, or at least bring them into question, participants spoke of "*wishing I could be a disembodied mind*" [Cameron: Diary]. For Charlie, being "*a mind interacting with people with no* *barrier of appearance would make things much different, and maybe easier*" [Charlie: Diary], highlighting how a potential discrepancy between how participants' experienced themselves and how others perceived them encouraged a dissociation from their bodies. There was a suggestion of sorrow as participants brought to mind memories of being unable to inhabit their bodies the way they may have wished to, of their "*want to be able to wear both fem and masc coded clothing in public without raising eyebrows*" [Jaden: Diary], or as Cameron spoke of it:

> "*There's also aspects about the way I've been socialized to use my body - it feels like I cannot use it to express myself in my movement and appearance, and that is due to gendered pressure*". [Cameron: Interview]

Combined, these experiences emphasised a feeling of invisibility under the gaze of socially imposed meaning. Participants experienced their bodies as concealing their sense of self, leading to conflict with between their attempts at self-expression and how their bodies often spoke for themselves in guiding how others viewed them:

> "*It's frustrating because I can never properly express or present how I want to, and I would always be mistaken as 100% one gender or the other. And this makes it harder for me to show or give an example to others on how I feel and identify inside*". [Bailey: Interview]

Cameron spoke succinctly when they stated that they often "*feel my body can be working against me*" [Cameron: Interview], as well as how they "*cannot express my gender authentically. My body is in the way*" [Cameron: Diary]. Their words capturing a shared experience for participants of how "*when my body is doing something that doesn't match my internal view of myself, like getting my period, I feel betrayed by my body, like it's an external force, not really part of me*" [Survey respondent #19]. With participants describing a feeling of being at odds with their bodies we again see the construction of the body as 'an external force' that stands in an often uncomfortable relationship with an 'internal view' of oneself.

Morgan elaborated on this experience of their body as having an agency of its own, that the body could interpose upon their will or activity. The unanticipated manner in which the body could ‘appear’ and make itself known left them feeling frustrated at how this inhibited their ability to see themselves as they wished to be seen, as a gap opened up between their internal sense of self and the external reality of their presentation, leaving them exposed and vulnerable:

> “*But sometimes I do see myself. I'll catch a glimpse of myself in the mirror while brushing my teeth, or I'll see myself in a group photo posted to social media. However it happens, I'll see myself, and my brain will choose once in a while to see what's really there. Sometimes, what I see and what I picture in my mind are very close, and everything's ok. Other times, what I see and what I imagine are a world apart, and the disparity is painful*”. [Morgan: Interview]

Ultimately, participants’ experience of betrayal was often expressed through a lamentation of being “*so very tired of being hyper aware*” [Finley: Diary] of their bodies. There was a sense from participants that their bodies were all-consuming, that they “*don’t just think about it some of the time* [they] *think about it all of the time*” [Riley: Diary]. Articulated most frequently in participants’ diaries of their day-to-day living, this intrusion, or imposition, from their bodies clearly connected to their sense of alienation:

> “*My body is not me. There are too many parts that are wrong. It feels like a chunk of my brain, like RAM in a computer being used by that programme that won’t stop running, is used up by the wrongness. I want to be able to delete that programme and free that up but I don’t know how*” [Jordan: Diary]

In the end, the betrayal by their bodies was articulated poignantly by participants. Sharing a sense of their bodies as sites of combat, as participants attempted to manifest themselves they spoke of their bodies as often acting as barriers to self-expression and there was a disappointment that their bodies were not more yielding. There was frustration at their body’s ever presence and its unyielding imposition on participants’ minds; their bodies were all-consuming.

Theme Three: It’s not the kind of ship I want to pilot

There was a sense, from participants, that “*people aren’t static*” [River: Diary], and within the data collected the majority of participants presented themselves as experiencing a degree of gender dysphoria that was “*fluctuating in intensity but continuously present*” [Survey respondent #80]. Tyler, in their diary, offered a description of how this fluctuation could be experienced as an interplay between expression and identity, with each guiding the other:

> “*Spent some time plucking facial hair felt neither gender as I looked and plucked. Went for a run; back to masc. After shower felt femm and put make-up on. Felt like a drifting day (slow shifts between genders)*”. [Tyler: Diary]

When expression was more ‘traditionally’ masculine (e.g. exercise) a sense of masculinity was experienced, whilst at other times their identity being feminine led to a more traditionally feminine self-expression (e.g. make-up). For them “*this is probably the hardest part of being nonbinary. When you notice that your body hasn’t ‘shifted’ with how you feel. It can be disconcerting*” [Tyler: Interview]. Finley, echoing Morgan’s desire to have the “*ability to shapeshift*” [Morgan: Interview], spoke of a life-long desire for a body that can transform itself from one form to another as an answer to their ever changing experience of gender:

> “*I've had alien-body fantasies for years. There are days where a genderless and sexless body feels just right. But a male/female body feels right at times too. Then I'm back at this notion of a shapeshifter*”. [Finley: Diary]

Ultimately, such a fluid experience of themselves was for many “*a source of constant anxiety and frustration*” [Survey respondent #22] and throughout their accounts participants referenced a sense of their gender identity as existing in a state of flux. They reflected on the unpredictability this often presented them with and there was a desire for bodies to be more malleable. There was also an acute weariness in the face of their bodies’ intransigence and the stolid nature of the body was constructed in light of the participants' more dynamic experiences with gender, or as Finley succinctly put it: "*my gender feels explosive, dynamic, shifting, exploring. My body feels stagnant, incapable almost*" [Finley: Interview].

Their sense of a shifting, ever-changing, experience of gender left participants feeling "*ambivalent towards* [their] *body*" [Survey respondent #79], such that "*sometimes* [they] *love it and sometimes* [they] *hate it*" [Survey respondent #19]. They noted that whilst "*gender is different than sex, it's still tied to* [their] *body*" [Tyler: Interview] and thus as their gender identity changed so did their experience of their bodies. This tended to leave participants with a sense that their "*body is out of sync with itself*" [Cameron: Diary], which often left them uncertain as to how to best embrace and express their sense of non-binary identity, and whether or not to modify their bodies through hormones and surgery: "*And though I don't want to lose that softness, I have a strong connection to masculinity that makes what I want or what my goals are, hard to decide*"[Jamie: Diary]. There was a sense that any attempt to modify their bodies "*would just flip the problem, not solve it*" [Survey respondent #27].

This sense of a 'catch-22' captured an oscillation experienced by participants. For Morgan, there was an unsatisfying recognition of no obvious 'solution' to their dysphoria. They experienced an ambivalence with regards their current body, but also when considering their ideal and modified body:

> "*There's no destination I could reach for that would allow me to feel at home all of the time, at rest. Instead, I could have reassignment surgery for example, but I would end up being uncomfortable when I'm feeling masculine rather than when I'm feeling feminine. There's not a "win" there*". [Morgan: Interview]

This lack of 'solution' could leave Morgan feeling "*powerless and helpless*" [Morgan: Interview] and there was a broader sense that, as Finley plainly put it: "*the limitations of my body sadden me*" [Finley: Interview]. Participants experienced their bodies as sites of sorrow and frustration, as the inability of the body to be as pliable as their experience of gender left them feeling ambivalent. Their bodies were conflictual as participants oscillated between the, to paraphrase Hegel (1977), body as master and the body as slave. Inevitably, these experiences lead many participants to compromise; as their gender shifted they would find themselves experiencing varying degrees of (dis)comfort with the disparate aspects of their bodies, which remained static. In the extract below Morgan captures this dynamic:

> "*I've made some compromises to change my body into something that's comfortable for me more of the time. While I love the feeling of smooth shaved legs when I'm fem, I miss the freedom to wear shorts when masc. I love being able to style my long hair, but I miss the simplicity and low maintenance of a short haircut. I love being able to fill a small bra cup with my own natural breasts and the sensations I get when stimulating them during intimate encounters, but binding when I'm presenting masculine is pretty uncomfortable after a while, and I miss being able to sleep on my stomach without the discomfort of squashed boobs*". [Morgan: Interview]

This experience of compromise, however, was joined by an embodiment of defiance. Through the hardships explored above, participants also spoke of the joy, potential and pride with which they could experience their bodies:

> "*But then I cut off all my hair, and got a boy's cut, and oh my god... That's when I felt it. The right-ness. IT felt GOOD. It was euphoric. I saw something in the mirror that had MY face and SHORT hair!! I had it! And when I looked in the mirror I saw someone else. Someone confident. Someone happy. And I embraced myself fully and I felt at home in myself*". [Survey respondent #23]

This freedom to express their identity through embracing a non-binary position offered participants the most rewarding relationship to their bodies. It allowed them to "*feel excited about being able to tell the world to back the fuck off on their gendering*" [Riley: Interview]. Participants gave a proverbial middle finger to both their bodies and socially imposed meanings as they sought to express themselves, and a thoughtful defiance in owning their identity as non-binary could ultimately be read throughout their accounts as they sought to embrace the bracing reality of their liminality.

Discussion

My body is my canvas for self-expression

A person's 'dress' can be considered an assemblage of transformations and supplements to the body and, in line with Eicher and Roach-Higgins (1992), participants emphasised how their bodily transformations (e.g. hormones and surgery) and supplements (e.g. clothing and jewellery) were always in relation to, or potentially in relation to, one another. Participants idiosyncratic bodily ideals also highlighted the heterogenous nature of the non-binary community (Fiani and Han, 2019) whilst adding to the extant literature the utility of categorising non-binary bodies as falling into three forms: ambigender, agender and bigender (Richards and Barker, 2013; Wickham, 2011; Galupo, Pulice-Farrow and Ramirez, 2017).

Previous work on the role of clothing in the experience of trans embodiment is sparse, limiting comparison. However, the heterogeneity of clothing (Factor and Rothblum, 2008) and its potential for validation (Nelson and Hwang, 2021) and congruence (Riggle et al., 2011) are reflected in the current study's analysis. This construction aligns with Holliday's (2010) reflection on the potential duality of clothing as comforting and expressive, especially as these conceptualisations are not considered to be distinct but rather intertwined - to obtain comfort *is* to express oneself. Thus, the current study highlights the importance of supplementation, alongside transformation, in supporting non-binary individuals in feeling recognisably so both to themselves and to those around them.

The drive to be visible has been connected to a sense of individuality, with non-binary identity valued for its capacity to contain and articulate a diverse range of idiosyncratic gender identity positions (Taylor et al., 2019). In this study, participants sought to embody not some shared conceptualisation of what is was to be (un)gendered but to be *themselves*. They utilised their 'dress' to reclaim their bodies from the 'default' setting they felt imposed upon them and in so doing echoed others who have connected an authenticity with their sense of autonomy (Fiani and Han, 2019; Vijlbrief, Saharso and Ghorashi (2020). In this regard, participants reflected the contemporary development within the transgender community towards gender being constructed as individually agentic (Hird, 2002). They spoke to an embodiment of gender free from socially mandated constraints and to the neo-liberal influence on the proliferation of non-binary gendered identities (Zimman, 2019).

Betrayed by the story it tells others about who I am

A prevalent construct across participants' accounts was that of a sense of alienation, an experience of their bodies as belonging less to themselves and more to another. There are hints of this across the literature, for example in Aboim (2016:231), a 27-year-old self-defined non-binary participant reflected on their experience of being a "*stranger in my own body*". In Pulice-Farrow, Cusack and Galupo (2020), participants also described a general disconnect from their own bodies, as though there were something viscerally wrong with them. This embodiment of alienation was accompanied by a prevalent experience of invisibility, as noted in previous work (Cosgrove, 2021; Taylor et al., 2019; Fiani and Han, 2019; Losty and O'Connor, 2018). Outside of academic literature, non-binary individuals have expressed similar experiences across various media platforms; for example, Alxndr (2018) and Elysium (2019) both name the ways they have found themselves to be disqualified or forgotten by a society that does not know how to relate to those who fall outside and beyond the binary. This experience certainly fits participants in this study who spoke of feeling inhibited by binary expectations on clothing and behaviour.

In line with Saltzburg and Davis' (2010) research, there was also an awareness, mainly noted in post-interview comments and member reflections, of the power putting their experience of invisibility into words, or hearing such experiences of others, had on naming the lack of language to articulate and express their identities and experiences. Ultimately, these experiences of invisibility spoke to the reality that within a society that regulates sex and gender to be binary, any individual seeking to embody a liminal space will inevitably struggle to identify a position that recognises their sense of non-identification within existing gendered and sexed norms (McQueen, 2011).

It’s not the kind of ship I want to pilot

Falling in line with Nagoshi, Brzuzy and Terrell’s (2012), Kuper, Nussbaum and Mustanski’s (2012) and Vijlbrief, Saharso and Ghorashi’s (2020) research highlighting the tendency of self-identified non-binary individuals to experience their gender as fluctuating and shifting over time, fluidity of their gender was a central construct of the experience of participants in the current study. Across the current study, and previous studies cited here, participants could be viewed as relating to their bodies as “*rhizomatic, nomadic, a constant journey with no final destination*” (Linstead and Pullen, 2006:1292), with this fluidity lending itself to their embodiment being an ongoing, ever shifting, project.

Alongside this, an experience of ambivalence and limitation in non-binary subjective embodiment has been named by Liamputtong (2020) and Taylor et al. (2019) who noted that many individuals identifying as trans experience some degree of ambiguity with regards to their dysphoria. In the current study, participants appeared to be located on a threshold between their gender identity as fluid and their material body stubbornly resistant to modification through discursive or performative practices. They espoused a ‘fuzzy’ approach to gender that, whilst denouncing an essentialist view, recognised that conceptualising gender as solely a social construct did not account for their experience of a body as an agent beyond performativity (Tauchert, 2002). Ultimately, these experiences may speak to an inevitability of some distress in being non-binary in a world that cannot offer clear embodied solutions to such a gendered position (Taylor et al., 2019; Cocchetti et al., 2020).

These limitations led participants into an experience of compromise, an attempt to, much like participants in Taylor et al.'s (2019:200) study, "*find a practical solution*" to the conflict they experienced between their felt sense of gender and the material reality of their bodies. However, in line with Vijlbrief, Saharso and Ghorashi's (2020) participants, there was also a sense of playfulness in unsettling gender binaries and pleasure in embracing the fluidity of their experiences. A non-binary embodiment was not a passive affair, but an active one of both discovering and defining oneself.

Limitations of the current study

The demographics and breadth of identities collated aligns well with previously established norms for the non-binary community (e.g. Factor and Rothblum, 2008; Wickham, 2011), with most of the participants identifying as AFAB, White and from a Western nation state. These facets of participants' identities will inevitably have influenced how they have come to construct their experiences around being non-binary and had I been able to recruit more individuals from outside of this limited demographic, the narratives I constructed around non-binary gendered subjective embodiment may have been very different. Alongside this, several survey respondents reported experiencing little to no bodily dysphoria. However, none of these opted to record journals or be interviewed and therefore their experiences could not been explored further. Thus, this research is limited in its scope of speaking about the embodied experience of those numerous (e.g. Fiani and Han, 2019) non-binary individuals who do not wish to modify their bodies. Given the fluidity emphasised by participants, it may also be limited to speaking on a genderfluid experience at the expense of an agender one.

Conclusion

Participants' subjective embodiment is constructed here as a reach for individuality and agency against a world experienced as imposing socially embedded meaning onto their bodies. It presents non-binary embodiment as a conflict in which the dynamism of gender is pitted against the limitations of the material body. This conflict left participants ambivalent about their bodies and bodily modifications, yet honest reflection did support the development of pride and joy. Ultimately, non-binary subjective embodiment is a story of two halves, of how bracing it is to experience one's body in conflict and yet how by embracing a non-binary identity this experience can be more easily navigated.

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Appendix nine: Reflective statement

Reflexivity can be considered a keystone of qualitative research (Fontana 2004); one that relates to the degree of influence a researcher exerts, either intentionally or unintentionally, on the findings. In phenomenological research, it can be considered akin to exploring various layers of interpretation (Knaack, 1984), such that bracketing can be better undertaken. Through its ability to extend our understanding of how our positions and interest as researchers affect all stages of the research process (Primeau, 2003), a reflexive statement can play an integral role in encouraging such rigour within qualitative research (Jootun, McGhee and Marland, 2009). To this end, a reflexive statement was included in this project. However, due to its highly personal nature, it was redacted following the viva.