

TRANSGENDER AND GENDER-NONCONFORMING EXPERIENCES WITH
EXPANDING IDENTITY LANGUAGE: AN EXPLORATION INTO THE USE AND
FUNCTION OF IDENTITY LANGUAGE IN THE LGBT+ COMMUNITY

by

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I would like to dedicate this to anyone who has felt alone because of who they are or who they loved. And to the people who have put so much time and emotional energy into making sure accessible information is available for those people who have felt alone. For those who have been in both places, I cannot be more grateful.

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ABSTRACT

Although identity language is recognized in social psychological literature as fundamental in the formation of social identity, there has been an absence of research on alternative language use and its role within LGBT+ communities. Using narrative design, I interviewed 12 transgender and gender-nonconforming people, to explore how sexual, gender, and romantic minorities use nonconventional language, how they are affected by it personally and within their communities, and how the relationship with language and identity development interacts.

In the findings, there was consistency in association of this language with a group of people with shared experiences. Themes developed around the impact that these terms had on identity development, the definitions of the terms, and how the terms are used (or avoided) depending on interpersonal contexts. These findings demonstrate the important role that identity language plays for the identity process for these participants, as well as the role of community and technology.

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INTRODUCTION

Although identity language is recognized in the social psychological literature as fundamental in the formation of social identity, to date there has been little research done on language and identity and its effects on those within the LGBT+ communities. While there is a diverse range of language used among community members, alternative terms for describing identity are not well represented in the academic literature (Xie 2015; Forrest-Stuart 2016; Mardell 2016). When diversity of language is present, the relationship between the people and the language is seldom the center of study (Morgan 2012). Similarly, there is a lack of literature on transgender and gender-nonconforming people in relation to language used to describe aspects of sexuality and gender. In this research I study language related to identity and how sexual, gender, and romantic minorities use nonconventional language, how they are affected by it personally and within their communities, and how the relationship with language and identity development interacts.

Given that symbols and language are at the heart of meaning construction, the creative use of language sheds light on the importance of community support in shaping its use in the day-to-day lives of the LGBT+ people. Information on language use may be particularly important for human service and healthcare providers, among other professionals who may work with transgender and gender-nonconforming people. By looking at transgender and gender-nonconforming people's experiences with nontraditional language, we can gather information that will not only benefit health professionals, but it could benefit the LGBT+ population as a whole. As language use is

fundamental to development of both personal identity and culture, a specific inquiry into its use within the LGBT+ community may shed light on the processes by which solidarity and support can improve resiliency, healthy lives, and transformative social change in the wider society as well.

LANGUAGE AND IDENTITY: REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

LGBT+ Language through US History

Identity language or labels are words used to discuss ones inner sense of self as it relates to the wider society. In particular, this research explores language as it relates to sexuality and gender. While *gay* and *lesbian* were initially used to discuss action rather than concrete identity in earlier history, when homosexuality became more medicalized, the heterosexual/homosexual binary became widely accepted as truth and *gay* and *lesbian* were increasingly seen as essential parts of the self rather than a behavior (Foucault 1978; Callis 2014). From this also came words such as *bisexual* to refer to people outside of the binary homosexual framework who were deemed more open to relational partnerships with either men or women (Callis 2014). Of course *gay*, *lesbian*, and *bisexual* weren't the only words used.

Early in the 1900's some people in urban New York had identities that were based in gender or gender expression as well as their sexuality (Chauncey 1994). Self-proclaimed *fairies* would refer to themselves with feminine names and pronouns, have more feminine mannerisms, and take on pieces of bright colored clothing or jewelry and often took on the more feminine role in interactions with other men – some of whom acted so because they felt as though it was natural, while others did so in a performative way in order to find a partner (Chauncey 1994). Similarly, *drag queen* has been used historically to mean a number of things. While it did originate from people who cross-dressed during the drag balls of the late 1800s, throughout time, it has been used to reference people who cross-dress for performance, but also used as an individual identity that can refer to a mix of their gender, gender expression, and/or sexuality (Marcus 1992;

Chauncey 1994). The word *transvestite*, while there are now connotations relating to kink and paraphilia, was used to discuss crossdressers, drag queens, or those who were transgender during the mid-1900s (Stryker 2008). Similar lines were blurred between gender, gender expression, and sexuality within the lesbian community. In the 1950s and 1960s, many working-class lesbian spaces identified as *butch* or *femme*, referring to the role that they played and gender expression that they maintained within a same-sex interaction (Gibson and Meem 2002). Many people who identified within this framework were silenced by the critique of feminists of the 1960s and 1970s, but resurfaced once more in the 1980s, bringing the queerness of butch masculinity into academia (Gibson and Meem 2002). Within drag culture as well as lesbian culture and throughout other marginalized corners of the LGBT+ population, many other terms have been established in various subcultures to talk about gender, gender expression, and/or sexuality in this way (e.g. bulldagger, stone butch) (Gibson and Meem 2002; Stryker 2008). From the beginning, we can see that there were individual nuances in how people related to themselves, their behavior, and the words that they chose (Chauncey 1994).

People who behaved or felt outside of the gender expectations that they were assigned did not only appear in these contexts. There is a history of people who began living as another gender, but this was not brought to national attention until 1952 (Stryker 2008). During this time, Christine Jorgensen's gender-affirmation surgery was discussed in newspapers across the US, bringing light to the existence of trans people, and letting other trans people know that they were not alone (Stryker 2008). During this media frenzy, different words were used to refer to Jorgensen – hermaphrodite, transvestite – before mental health professionals produced the word *transsexual* to refer to those, like

Jorgensen, who went through physical transition (Stryker 2008). Since then, use of the term transgender and transsexual have changed within the community, with some people rejecting the word transsexual altogether because of its origins in the scientific community, which pathologized trans people (Stryker 2008; Bradley 2010; Forrest-Stuart 2016).

Pronouns have also been an important part of language for many who were trans and gender-nonconforming people. Fairies, drag queens, and similar groups would frequently utilize feminine pronouns (she/her/hers) or mix pronouns (Marcus 1992; Chauncey 1994; Stryker 2008). Additionally, use of pronouns that align with their identity has historically been important for transsexual and transgender men and women (Stryker 2008). Use of accepted neutral pronouns or other nontraditional pronouns have also been used throughout this history. Outside of context of the LGBT+ community, the absence of an explicitly singular gender-neutral pronoun has prompted discussion among language and feminist scholars around existing pronouns, such as “they,” “one,” and “it” as well as new pronouns such as “E” (E/Em/Ers; Greenfield and Youngblood 1979; Martyna 1980; Baron 1981; Spivak 1990). Similarly, the discussion from the LGBT+ community moves beyond grammar or group language and into specific identity, such as “ze” (ze/hir/hirs) or “s/he” (Stryker 2008).

Historically the terms *gay* and *lesbian* became more common within the mainstream but in the 1980s radical groups grew and gained traction as a response to the AIDS epidemic. Words such as *queer* were re-appropriated thereby questioning, not only the language, but also the very power dynamics that created various distinctions thus taking back the tools used to marginalize the gay community (Marcus 1992; Blumfeld

2012). The idea of queerness was prevalent in discussions of gender as well, particularly through the emergence of the term *genderqueer* (Stryker 2008). Of course many individuals and organizations did not join in this reclamation, but there nonetheless were language shifts as various identities became recognized as a part of the community through the 1980s and 1990s, resulting in the commonly used acronym “LGBT” as well as acronyms far larger and more encompassing, even including queer in the acronym (e.g., LGBTIQQA for Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Intersex, Queer, Questioning and Asexual (cf. Phelan 2009; Stryker 2008; Wilcox 2014)). However, there is still discussion about who is included in the LGBT+ community. There is still some resistance to the inclusion of bisexual and transgender people, despite the wide usage of the acronym (Phelan 2001). There is also frequent discussion and argument about inclusion of other groups, including asexuals (Scherrer 2008). This has led some people to want a very limited acronym, while others are advocating for a more inclusive term with fewer letters, such as GSM (gender and sexual minority), GSRM (gender, sexual, and romantic minorities), MOGII/MOGAI (marginalized orientations, gender identity, and intersex), or MSGRI (marginalized sexual, gender, and romantic individuals (cf. Forrest-Stuart 2016; Goodrich 2016; Xie 2015)). This debate continues as creation of new identity-language terms continues to thrive in online communities.

As previously mentioned, there are many divides throughout the movement – one of which was whether or not to reclaim and use the term queer. Some chose not to engage in this language as a political choice, while others still see the word as a slur (Callis 2014; Coleman-Fountain 2014; Budnick 2016). Within both of these camps, there are people who have been able to begin to create language themselves as space has opened to

discuss a variety of experiences, particularly with lessened stigma and advances in technology (Mardell 2016).

Identity Language and Research

Language surrounding identity continues to grow, particularly with the emergence of the internet (Bradley 2010; Xie 2015; Goodrich 2016; Mardell 2016; Oakley 2016). However, there is limited literature on language development or its social and/or personal effects on diverse communities (Shapiro, Rios and Stuart 2010; MacNeela and Murphy 2011; Morgan 2012). Studies regarding LGBT+ labels and the perception of such labels focus on multi-sexual identity such as bisexual, pansexual, or queer (Gonel 2013; Callis 2014) as well as research on the asexual community (Scherrer 2008; Chasin 2014; MacNeela and Murphy 2015; Robbins, Low, and Query 2016). While research on transgender identities exists, most studies that address identity language do not focus specifically on language and tend to be quantitative (Factor and Rothblum 2008; Kuper, Nussbaum, and Mustanski 2012). Xie (2015) does focus on gender identity language; while they do analyze the language, they do not ask participants directly about the personal meaning derived from language or how they use language outside of their blog. Levitt and Ippito (2014) provide one of the few qualitative studies of psychosocial development, which uses a grounded theory approach noting the importance of language in some participants' experiences. Other research, which focuses on transgender experience, is generally about medical transition (Katz-wise and Budge 2014), risk or resilience (Riggle et al. 2011; Galupo et al. 2014), or various factors of navigating identity and society (Sevelius 2012; Wagner, Kunkle, and Compton 2016).

There have also been studies focused on collective identity language and framework, which mention a variety of personal identifiers (Bradley 2010; Forrest-Stuart 2016; Goodrich 2016). Oakley's (2016) quantitative research addresses specific aspects of usage of certain sexuality and gender-related language online, but without a focus on how participants define the words or use them outside of a specific context. Other literature does not focus specifically on language, but does discuss central components of the LGBT+ experience, which often includes language. Some studies look into issues and positive aspects involved in LGBT+ psycho-social development (Morgan 2012; Higa et al. 2012).

A growing body of research addresses identity development among LGBT+ people. Typically, these models are social psychological in nature and seek to better understand how sexuality and gender identity are formed and what impact environmental surroundings can have on self-understanding and ability to develop. One of the first was the Cass model, which focuses on gay identity development (1979; 1986). The Cass model includes six stages: identity confusion, identity comparison, identity tolerance, identity acceptance, identity pride, and identity synthesis (1979; 1986). McCarn and Fassinger focused on incorporating aspects from a more intersectional perspective to fill in gaps that they saw in Cass' work (1996; Gervacio 2015), while the other was a more recent "dynamic, non-linear, and contextualized" model based on a study of lesbian women (Shapiro, Rios, and Stewart 2010:1). Other models have come out that encapsulate the experience of other sexual minorities, such as the stages for asexual identity in the research by Robbins, Low, and Query (2016). The Lev model (2004) of transgender development was created in a mental healthcare setting, focusing on

transgender people, which gave more insight into the needs of those in various stages of gender development, rather than past models focusing primarily on sexuality. Both Lev (2004) and Robbins et al. (2016) include a stage that discusses expression, including language. Robbins' framework explicitly addresses language as necessary to one of the stages of development (2016). Kauffman and Johnson created a gay and lesbian identity model that was based in symbolic interactionism, in a sociological rather than psychological setting (Kaufman and Johnson 2004). This model and related research shows how people's self-expression and self-understanding can differ depending on the social situation that they are in – which is reflected in several of the studies that focus on multi-sexual labels and gender fluidity (Kauffman and Johnson 2004; Gonel 2013; Callis 2014).

Developmental models have also been criticized in the literature particularly as presenting overly simplistic and stagnant models of behavior or identity. Several studies reviewed the validity of the Cass model during different times or with different populations (Cass 1984; Van de Meerendonk and Probst 2008; Adams and Phillips 2009; Kennedy and Oswalt 2014). One study reviewed the Cass and Fassinger models to compare them and identified several common processes of identity development (Gervacio 2015). Mosher (2001) conducted a literature synthesis on the “coming-out” literature and common themes. Much has been written on various aspects of development and many have taken care to look at the gaps in these models and the research broadly. Some of this research has mentioned language, but little has focused on language explicitly and even less on newer identity-language. Taken together, this research suggests the need to fill a gap in knowledge about how language shapes or is of symbolic

importance in the psycho-social development of transgender and gender-nonconforming people.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

My primary research question is: How does diversity in language surrounding sexuality and gender shape development and perceptions of personal identity and community relationships among transgender and gender-nonconforming people? Sub-questions include:

- What identity language do participants use and what do those words mean to them?
- Why do people choose specific identity-related words (or choose not to use them)?
- What role, if any, does identity language play in the development or understanding of gender and/or sexuality?
- Does (or has) identity language usage affect(ed) participants inside the LGBT+ community? Does identity language affect participants outside of the LGBT+ community?

METHODS

Design

The research for this project uses a narrative life-history approach (Creswell 2013) designed to understand participants' experiences of gender and sexuality throughout their lives. Creswell (2013: 70) describes narrative research as coming from "experiences as expressed in lived and told stories of individuals." Typically, the narrative is either a spoken or written accounting of an event, phenomenon, experience, or actions that are connected chronologically. Data are gathered through a collection of stories told by one or more individuals each reporting experiences, which are then chronologically re-ordered in summary or narrative story to give meaning to those experiences. Narrative stories are important to this research topic, as "they may shed light on the identities of individuals and how they see themselves" (Creswell 2013: 71). Although there are different approaches to narrative research Polkinghorne (1995:12) suggests assessing text for themes that hold across stories or taxonomies of various types of stories, which may be re-storied into a plot line. This approach is appropriate for events that occur over the life of an individual or a few individuals (Cresswell 2013:73), therefore is appropriate for this research.

This project began as a class project in my qualitative research methods class where I developed a research protocol, developed the interview questions, informed consent script, and gained institutional review board permission to collect data (Appendix A). I conducted semi-structured interviews (Arksey and Knight 1999) in the spring and summer of 2017 with 12 participants. I asked participants questions about their gender and sexuality, how they discovered their identity, and how they initially recall learning

about LGBT+ identities (see *Interview Guide* in Appendix A). By leaving room for participants to discuss their experiences and thoughts on the language that they brought into the conversation, I was able to probe further about participants' recollections on learning terms relative to their experiences. Additionally, consistent with the narrative design I asked participants to share any literature, posts, videos, or other materials that they may have found particularly impactful or anything they had written or posted that is relevant to understanding their experiences (Creswell 2013). I conducted interviews with a hand-held recording device both in person and with the assistance of the computer program, Audacity, when conducting interviews over chat. After the initial interviews, I transcribed the data creating an interview transcript for each participant. I then searched the transcribed data for themes before organizing the data in chronological order, noting some prominent themes that arise throughout the participants' experiences of self-discovery. I then took a few of these "restoried" (Creswell 2013: 74) narratives and met (in person or online) with participants and let them look over the restoried interview summary, to verify that I was properly representing the data and their respective experiences. The participants that did go over their restorying only made minor changes, if any, and most made comments about how certain things had developed since the initial interview.

I interviewed 12 transgender or gender-nonconforming individuals who are 18 and older and who currently use or have used non-traditional language to discuss their gender or sexual/romantic identities. "Transgender" refers to anyone who does not identify with the gender that they were assigned at birth. "Gender-nonconforming" refers to individuals who identify outside the gender binary (including, but not limited to

genderqueer, agender, or non-binary people) or people who embrace the label of gender-nonconforming and express themselves outside of the gender binary, even if they may not associate it with a specific gender identity. “Non-traditional” is intentionally broad, though it includes anyone who identifies themselves outside of the primary four identities in “LGBT+” (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender) but can also refer to people who discuss the nature of their gender, sexuality, or relationships in terms that they feel are unfamiliar to most people (for example: someone engaged in queer-platonic relationships).

Sampling

For this research I sampled using word of mouth informal recruitment (Arksey and Knight 1999; Creswell 2013) through personal contacts in the LGBT+ community in the southern region of the United States. Because some of my contacts are in groups in which I have a leadership role, I did not advertise directly to the group, but rather through informal recruitment. I also advertised the study online, posting on LGBT+ specific Facebook pages and Tumblr tags.

Analysis

I analyzed the interviews and other artifactual data supplied by participants as appropriate to deepen the context of the narrative stories. I searched the data for the themes identified in the literature, as well as other emerging themes that had not been identified previously. These initial themes included: the salience of identity language, community support, knowledge acquisition/creation, intersecting identities, and expression. I then re-storied the interviews collectively by putting the individually described events in chronological order, listing the events in accordance to some of the main themes observed. After, I reassessed themes in chronological order to see if any

common themes arise among participants. Then I assessed the various interviews and restorings to compare themes. I took the themes that related to my questions and organized them respectively.

As the researcher, I must be aware of my surroundings and biases. I have experience within the community both online and offline. I have sought out educational materials and discourse around a variety of identities and have engaged in creating educational materials and discourse pertaining to some identities. This was useful in developing questions and in understanding various things that participants described without asking questions that could potentially derail the interviews or accidentally make a participant uncomfortable; however, it could have potentially allowed me to assume that I know more about the person's meaning without asking for clarification. Therefore, I made a conscious effort to be thorough in asking participants to define terms. I was also conscious in separating my opinions concerning parts of the community when interviewing and analyzing participant data.

Similarly, I was aware of my position within the community when I was gathering and analyzing data for this project. Because of the privilege that I have as white and educated, some people that I interviewed may disclose differently (or less) to me than others. The amount of time that I have spent in the community and engaging with people about identity language helped me in gaining access to the community and in building rapport. I also recognized that because of my experience, I had to make every effort not to use my own limited understanding when analyzing the respondents' experiences. Additionally, my status as a mentally ill person should be acknowledged, as it shapes my unique perspective and emotional sensitivity that someone who has not encountered

mental illness may not share. This is particularly important because, while I was not looking specifically for experiences with mental illness, transgender and gender-nonconforming people are more likely to have mental illnesses or struggle with emotional distress (James et al. 2016). Five participants did mention struggling with mental illness, some talking about it at length. This understanding was beneficial for building rapport, understanding how to ask probing questions, and in analysis of participants' stories. Because I identify with non-traditional language and use multiple terms, I was able to gain rapport – but this also meant that I needed to verify that I was not projecting my own meaning of identity onto what the participants said.

Ethical Considerations

There is risk of emotional distress because the topic of sexuality and gender can be sensitive for some people or bring up sensitive memories. Because of this risk, I gave participants phone numbers and websites of LGBT+ friendly crisis centers. Additionally, I took precautions with some language. For example, while “queer” is widely used, it can be emotionally triggering for many. I did not use this term on any advertising and only used the term if those I interviewed used it openly as well. I took several precautions to minimize any power differentials between myself as the researcher and my participants. I avoided formally advertising at organizations that I have a leadership position in. Participants chose where our interactions took place to give them a sense of security and agency. Additionally, I encouraged participants to engage in part of the re-storying process, in hopes that they would feel more like collaborators and that their voices were more properly heard. To ensure confidentiality I recorded the audio during the interviews, which was stored on a password-protected thumb drive. To improve safety of

all participants, all reporting and notes used a participant-selected pseudonym. No identifiable information was kept in my notes or transcriptions. Further to ensure consent was maintained, I verified consent upon sharing of documents and stories outside of the main interview (e.g. when discussing the re-storied data) when interviews or conversations were not being recorded.

Although discussions of sexuality and gender can be sensitive, there is also potential benefit for participants. As one participant noted, this is a topic that participants may not typically get to discuss in depth. There are additional benefits for people within the LGBT+ community who use non-traditional language to discuss their identities bringing their voices into the larger academic conversation and promoting understanding of the community more widely. Studying language and identity in this way may lead researchers to solutions for individuals in the LGBT+ community in a variety of ways through human service professionals, educators, or policy makers.

FINDINGS

Participant Overview

Participants were asked to describe themselves at the beginning of the interview although some participants additionally discussed various identities later in the interview. Everyone noted their age, gender, and sexuality. Many of them also described race, pronouns, area of work, and status as a student. A few also described religious identities or backgrounds, activity within media fandoms, and status regarding ability, mental health, and neurodivergence. Participants' sexual and romantic identities, genders, and pronouns are described in Table 1 of Appendix B. Eight participants used multiple labels to describe their gender. Two participants described identifying with a binary gender – though one of them also used terminology associated with their religion to describe this. Three participants described identifying partially with terminology associated with a binary gender. One participant, Sapph, noted that xyr identity as femme is related to the feminine, but is not in line with womanhood. Five participants did not use binary language to identify their gender. One participant, Andy, did not use any identifier. Three participants described not identifying with any other gender terminology, outside of what they were assigned, before coming to their current identity.

Seven participants used the neutral pronouns they/them/their. Of these seven, two also used other pronouns. Maria, who used they/them/their, also will use she/her/hers. Sapph used they/them/their for ease of conversation, but writes using xe/xem/xyr pronouns. Diamuid and Vick used he/him/his pronouns and while Chandler and Kefira used she/her/hers pronouns. Andy was the only participant without any pronoun preference.

Six participants used multiple labels to describe their sexual and romantic orientations. Seven participants described being on the asexual spectrum. Eight participants identified with a term that described sexual or romantic attraction to multiple genders. One participant, Chandler, described having a monosexual sexuality (gay). Hedge described having relationships with people of multiple genders, but did not indicate their romantic identity. Andy did not use a label to identify their sexuality. Only one participant, Hedge, described not changing the label of their sexuality, outside of the initial change from being assumed to be straight.

Participants were between the ages of 18 and 28. All but one participant described themselves as white. Elliot, who identified as white, also identified as Native American. One participant, Maria, identified as black. Seven participants were from the southern region of the United States. Sapph and Kefira were from other regions of the United States, and Diarmuid was from Norway. While Diarmuid was from outside of the US, he noted some of the same social problems and experiences and was active in similar online communities as the other participants.

Seven participants were currently in college or about to start college. Three others had various degrees: R2D2 had three associate's degrees, Maria had a bachelor's degree, and Sapph had a bachelor's and master's degree. Two participants – Jay and R2D2 mentioned being employed but did not specify where. Kefira and Sapph described being currently unemployed, though Sapph spoke of xyr previous employment as a social worker. Elliot and Hedge work in the childcare industry. Andy worked as a student worker at their university and Maria worked with an airline. The other participants did not discuss the workplace.

While most participants did not mention religion when discussing their own identities, it did play a part in the backgrounds for many of them. Vick, Elliot, Maria, Hedge, and Andy mentioned that their families had been engaged with Christianity. Maria mentioned being Christian, but not anti-LGBT before she knew much about the community. Andy discussed some problems of alienation at a Christian school, as well as serious problems with their parents for a time. Elliot and Hedge discussed not disclosing to their parents because of their religious affiliation, which they related to anti-LGBT attitudes. Vick described his foster parents who were Christian and strongly anti-LGBT whose sentiments lead to abuse and neglect.

Three participants did describe their religious affiliation; Kefira who is Jewish, Sapph who is a witch, and Diamuid who is a neo-pagan witch. Kefira discussed finding her faith after being a staunch atheist through learning more about Judaism and the interpretations of various texts that shows six genders; now she identifies as a transgender Jewish woman and as Saris Adam, a term found throughout Jewish texts that refers to a eunuch made by man (Kula 2006; Lev 2010). Sapph discussed having to hide xyr witchcraft from the community around xem, but in the online community xe noted that many of the people who participated in the witchcraft community were also LGBT. Diamuid also described being a witch – differentiating clearly that he was neo-pagan, not Wiccan; his experience with religion was important as a nonbinary person, in part, because of the representation that he saw in his religion, mentioning Loki (who he noted as genderfluid) and Dionysus (who he noted was the god for being gay and transgender).

Five participants mentioned mental illness. Jay and Elliot said that their mental illness inhibited their development. Sapph described their mental health worsening as a

result of feeling alone because of lack of knowledge and improving after being able to fully come out and express xyr gender. Maria mentioned mental illness briefly as a barrier to identity development, but also noted that there was more she could talk about in terms of identity and mental illness. Indeed, mental illness is more prevalent in the LGBT+ community than on average. The National Center for Transgender Equality reported in their 2015 report of 27,715 transgender participants across the United States that 39% had experienced serious psychological distress in the last month (compared to 5% of the US adults) and 48% reporting seriously considering suicide in the last year (compared to 4% of US adults) (James et al. 2016).

Six participants were also engaged in fandoms, which are communities formed of people who enjoy a particular form of media and come together to discuss it and often create various kinds of art based on the original media. For most of those who discussed engaging in fandom, this served as either a gateway to learning about the LGBT+ community or a means to discover or express themselves. Some elements of fandom that participants described as relevant to their experiences include cosplay, fanfiction, and headcanons.

Some participants had other attributes or identities that they voiced that are also important to their experiences. Sapph had recently discovered that xe is intersex. Xe also voiced that xyr identity as disabled was important to xyr experience. Additionally, xyr involvement in the body positive movement was something that xe saw as imperative for xymself as a trans person and as a disabled person. Diarmuid mentioned that his experience in an art school likely made him more open and the people around him more accepting. Additionally, he discussed his identity as an autistic person and how that

influenced how he navigates social situations and speculated about how it relates to his LGBT+ identities, as he noted that many autistic people that he knew were also LGBT+.

Meaning of Labels

All participants were asked to define the labels that they use. All of these definitions are summarized in Table 2 of Appendix B. Each participant defined the identity terms that they used. Some of those who used the same term had similar definitions, but there were some differences as well. Some notable differences were in the definition of bisexual. While several people defined bisexual as inclusive of nonbinary genders, one person explicitly defined it as indicative of a gender binary, while two other people also discussed the disagreement within the community about whether or not bisexuality was inclusive of nonbinary genders. People also discussed different points of importance of the term pansexual. While some discussed the term as attraction *regardless* of gender, some saw it as simply attraction to all genders, and some participants valued it because it deemphasized their own gender or gender as a whole.

Fluidity in definitions.

When participants were discussing label definitions two themes emerged. Many of the participants noted a changing or personal nature of the definitions of labels, while others noted their own belief of stable definitions. Though few participants saw definitions as unchanging, several of them mentioned groups of people who did see these definitions as fixed.

Four participants noted the importance of fluidity in definitions of sexuality in passing while defining or talking about their labels by emphasizing “that’s *my* definition” or “that’s how *I* use the terms.” Some participants addressed the importance of personal

definitions more explicitly. For instance, as Maria discussed her understanding of her own bisexuality shifting as influenced by her choice to use the term “pansexual,” she noted “when I made this decision at this time, I wasn't aware of the discourse with bi also meaning one and many, which is a perfectly valid way to interpret the definition in my opinion.”

Not all participants agreed about the nature of definitions as changeable. Sapph, like Maria, decided to move from using bisexual to pansexual upon learning of nonbinary genders. However, unlike Maria, Sapph noted xyr disagreement with the way some people have changed what xe saw as the meaning of bisexual: “I know some people are trying to, like, make bisexual more inclusive. I don't understand that.” So, while many participants did discuss the fluidity of definitions, not all participants agreed with this flexibility.

Social Association of Labels

Many participants explicitly noted a social connection with their experience of labels. This general theme of social relations and labels being tied was directly reflected by Andy's active choice not to use labels: “I don't like the concept of *identifying* with it. That's where I personally draw an issue because that involves group dynamics. And I don't want to be part of a group.” This association of labels with people was presented in several ways through the participants' experiences. All participants discussed the social nature of how they learned about or understood the labels. There was also discussion from some participants about who can use certain labels because of social association.

Exposure to knowledge and community.

All participants reported learning about the LGBT+ community and nontraditional terminology related to the LGBT+ community from LGBT+ people either directly in person or through the internet. Many participants described seeing or reading about other people's experiences with certain labels as a part of their process of understanding those labels and their own relationship to them.

lgbt+ people.

Vick describes meeting a gay friend in choir and quickly going from sharing his foster parents' anti-LGBT beliefs to learning and engaging more through his friend. However, a few participants reported negative experiences around LGBT+ people early on, which impacted their development and coming-out. Maria for example discussed a gay friend from early on in her schooling. She described the negative experiences that this friend had and how it impacted her understanding of the gay experience:

I had a friend, coming out of grade school, going into middle school that realized that they were gay early on. [...] maybe that's another reason why I never really admitted to anyone else that I was gay because the bullying was relentless. This particular kid was black and we lived in the same really black neighborhood and commuted up the buses to the white school we went to. And I remember specifically his identity - he went from being gay to straight, to bi, and then finally back to gay. And I remember that journey and how he had to fight. He *fought* to have to identify as gay and that was the early hallmarks of my first experiences with LGBT people. [It] was just pain.

LGBT+ groups were also discussed as a form of exposure and source of knowledge. R2D2 discussed their experience in their high school Gay-Straight-Alliance (GSA). While they were not out at the time to more than a few select friends, they were still active, even running for officer positions. Andy, Maria, and Jay all mentioned

belonging to college LGBT+ groups. Andy cited their college LGBT+ group as a large source of information when learning about various identities:

In high school [...] everyone there kind of knew what gay was. [...] there just wasn't terminology going around. Then once I got to college, I started to realize there were more letters. Then, when I got to [college] specifically is when I realized 'holy shit, there's a lot more to this than I thought.'

Maria and Sapph both discussed being involved in local LGBT+ groups, though only Sapph noted this as one of the initial places that xe learned and engaged with the LGBT+ community.

Another place that participants mentioned that facilitated knowledge in person were conferences. Maria described a university LGBT+ conference as a turning point in her experience:

I attended a LGBT conference ... at this university. I had the chance to meet [...] people that I knew and recognized as transgender. And after listening to their stories and learning about how they identify and what the word 'trans' meant to them, that's when I realized that I didn't just have to feel nonbinary. I could actually be nonbinary.

Sapph also discussed the importance an LGBT+ conference had to xem:

It ended up being a fantastic experience of being completely out in front of a bunch of strangers that I would never see again [...] I wrote my name and pronouns on a sticker. But the best part of it was, the woman who runs the program, purposefully sat me next to another nonbinary person. [...] we just sat and talked so much, on and off little whispers during the conference, like 'look at all these cis people and they don't understand, you know?'

While their experiences came at different points in their development, both saw these opportunities for connection as integral to their experience.

the internet.

Clearly social media was an important form of education about identity-language. Most of the participants mentioned the internet as having an impact on their experience in the LGBT+ community (see Table 3). The most frequently mentioned were Tumblr, Facebook, Google, and the Asexual Visibility and Education Network (AVEN). Most participants found terms through Tumblr and observed people discussing various identities and what they meant to them through Tumblr, Facebook and Instagram. Participants reported learning about language through websites and observing other people discuss their experiences with new terms. These websites were also a place where they were able to share their own experiences with others. All of these forms of interaction were described as important to the experiences and validation of for these participants. Diarmuid said of his experience with social media:

Definitely tumblr shaped a lot of my coming out experience. [...] I'd never heard about nonbinary before and I was like '*What? You can be something else? You don't have to be a girl or a boy? That's amazing.*' But it made sense because I could identify with it. [...] Without tumblr I never would have heard about all that."

Many participants did seek out this validation and enjoyed hearing various people's experiences – especially when they aligned with or were similar to their own. Maria discussed the distress that she felt, knowing that so many people were discussing shared experiences while a large part of hers was missing because of the lack of black trans women and femmes that were easily accessible online: "While other trans kids compared hairstyles and traded pictures of the bodies and manes they wish to acquire one day, I distinctly remember looking at the pictures of those who were murdered on our streets for ideas on how to style mine." From this, it is clear that shared experience is important and

the internet is a key way that many can connect, so it is important that people can see themselves in these communities.

Additionally, a couple of participants reported using writing online as a means of learning about others' experiences. Writing allowed them to express their own identities, or alternatively it allowed them to create media representations to ensure that their perspectives were seen. Specifically, R2D2 discussed reading stories on Wattpad by and about LGBT+ characters. Similarly Diamuid found LGBT+ representation in fanfiction and spoke in detail about people utilizing headcanons as a way to create and disseminate LGBT+ media representation. One example he gave was through the character Elsa from *Frozen*:

A lot of people used to say that 'oh Elsa is a lesbian.' [...] For me, Elsa is a trans boy. 'Don't let them in, don't let them see, be the good girl you always have to be.' And sort of 'Can't hold it in, so now I don't have to hide it anymore. That perfect girl is gone' and that - having that realization, that was really fun because I can relate to the song a lot. I think just making headcanons is necessary because there's no representation whatsoever, so you've got to make your own. Make your own headcanons and find tiny little things [...] You have to be conspiracy theorists because nothing is going to work. But that's fandom experience. You never get representation, so you just gotta roll with it and make your own representation in a way.

YouTube was also used to learn more about or interact with the LGBT+ community. Vick described YouTube as a major tool for him to see other transgender men thrive and have access to transition. Sapph mentioned making YouTube videos as well as watching them, as a way to express xyr thoughts and feelings about various topics, including those related to the LGBT+ community.

AVEN was mentioned by both Elliot and Jay, who initially found the website because it discussed asexuality - but, they both mentioned the website because it gave them information on nonbinary identities. Elliot said:

At the time, I was identifying as asexual and I was actually on AVEN, the asexual website, and I came across a community that was talking about gender on there and I came across the term genderqueer and they described it on there and I was like ‘Oh my god! That makes so much sense!’ So, I pretty much used that label since I came across it.

A few participants used Google as a means to find other websites to find information on different identities. Some participants, like Hedge, described searching questions directly: “I was talking to a friend about how I didn't really feel sexual attraction towards people and they thought it was weird. And so I Googled ‘is this weird?’ and Google popped up a bunch of results like ‘It's not! Here's why.’” The websites found through Google were not always directly discussed, but some included Wikipedia and AVEN.

Some participants utilized the internet after another encounter offline. Kefira, for example, mentioned finding specific resources for how their gender is viewed within religion after hearing more about Judaism and transgender identity in a class:

I was in a lecture on psychology and religion and I wasn't paying attention because before that class, I was an asshole atheist. [...] I was looking up trans stuff and I got linked to [transtorah.org]. And after that lecture, I was a devout Jew. In part because of those terms for trans Jews, and then in part because of a prayer I found on that website.

Kefira also used Wikipedia, rather than Google to search some terms after her friend came out as nonbinary;

I just went on Wikipedia and I searched ‘nonbinary’ and then I just like ‘portal to LGBT topics’ and then start looking and ‘oh look there's all these weird esoteric identities like two spirit and agender and bigender and *trigender*.’ [...] But that's

how I figured out about all the identities. I'm pretty sure I tried on every single one in turn before I settled on genderfluid for a while.

Who can use terminology?

Another way that the theme of social association with labels was presented was through discussion on who is seen as included in the LGBT+ community. Diarmuid described concern with broadening the range of identities within LGBT+ to include asexual because of this social association. He described not wanting to invalidate asexual as an identity, but feared including people who he perceives as closely aligned with straight people. He says “I think that if you are cisgender and you are heteroromantic and asexual then [...] you are cishet. [...] I feel unsafe having cisgender, hetero people in my LGBT spaces.”

While other participants did not express this same sentiment, some did mention experiences with people who have exclusionist attitudes. Exclusionist views were generally more extreme than Diarmuid described. While Diarmuid explicitly described engaging politely when having discussions related to asexuality, there was an awareness among other participants that ‘asexuality’ was a controversial status within the LGBT+ community. Jay who identified as asexual for example, stated that, there was a recent influx of anti-asexual and anti-romantic sentiment online. Jay described how the conversations around asexuality varies, but that the conversation and rhetoric has been altered by the more extreme anti-asexuality discussions:

[Increasing negativity towards asexuals] has complicated discussions around those identities, both with people who believe they are valid, who believe they *aren't* valid, and with people who hold those identities themselves. Because my experience, at least, is that a lot of people who have been involved in that discussion - even if they agree on everything - their perspectives on certain topics have been shaped by negative experiences through those bad discussions on

Tumblr. And therefore, things that we used to be able to talk about two years ago now have kind of, like, a cloud of negativity around it that wasn't there before.

Participants mentioned other groups that they saw as having specific and more rigid definitions with the intent to exclude certain people from particular spaces. Three participants for instance described a group that they called “truscum” who identify based on their definitions of transgender. Maria described criteria requiring gender dysphoria, while Sapph noted the criteria of requiring hormonal transition to be seen as transgender within the community. Participants also mentioned a group that they identified as TERFs, or trans exclusionary radical feminists, who contest many trans people’s definitions of gender, insisting on a biological definition of “woman.” Kefira discussed TERFs specifically within the lesbian community, while Diarmuid and Elliot mentioned them in online communities more broadly. These groups that the participants experienced as enforcing definitions on others or serving a “gatekeeping” function in defining communities were discussed at length by some of the participants (see: *Social negativity* and *Dating*). Maria and Diarmuid for example both mentioned “the discourse,” when referring to the discussion around exclusionary practices, as well as general discussion about identities. This type of controversial discussion around terminology, true identity, and community membership within ‘safe spaces’ all reflect how language functions in complex ways to socially construct the experiences, collective understandings, and community relationships among LGBTQ people. It also demonstrates the fluidity of language and its evolution over time as reflective of political, personal, and power dynamics among groups in interaction.

Attachment to Labels

The primary ways that participants discussed finding an attachment to identities and labels included: epiphany, gradual processing, and gradual ownership. Most participants described experiencing multiple forms of attachment at some point during their process.

Epiphany.

Several participants described a “brick-to-the-head moment,” as Sapph described it, when they realized a connection to a label or concept. Participants experienced this kind of moment in regards to various parts of their identity. Some respondents reported feeling this epiphany in response to terms that fit them well, such as Elliot’s experience finding “genderqueer” and R2D2’s experience finding “demisexual.” While she no longer identifies with the term that she experienced an epiphany moment, Kefira described the experience of her friend coming out as nonbinary as an epiphany moment that was important in her development: “when I was 15 and my friend came out and said ‘hey I’m nonbinary, I’m not actually a woman,’ I said ‘Oh, I can be not a man? Cool, I guess I’m nonbinary too.’ ” Other participants described having epiphanies in relation to certain feelings and concepts that were not necessarily identity labels. Diamiud described an epiphany moment upon realizing that he was feeling attraction towards a girl at around age 12, before finding the language of bisexual. R2D2 had an epiphany in relation to attraction also, but their epiphany was when they realized that girls could date other girls. Sapph described an epiphany, after knowing much about various identities; xe had a realization that what xe had been researching and creating content about related to xem.

Gradual processing.

A number of participants described gradually processing various terms, using terms, or understanding them before finding one that fit. This was especially the case when reading extensively about terms and people's experiences before realizing that the terms applied to them. Jay described this process and discussed the benefit of being able to gradually learn nontraditional terms:

I think since I learned about the concepts behind the nontraditional terminology a while before I started actually exploring my own relation to them, that it was easier to start identifying with the nontraditional terminology because that felt the most accurate to me. I think it was also useful in that I had to look up the nontraditional terminology instead of just having a preconception in my head because the stuff I already knew I kinda never looked up, but the stuff I didn't know, I did look up and that's what helped me first start realizing that there might be a connection there.

Similarly, Chandler experienced identifying with the term "demigirl" through a gradual process before taking full ownership of the term. She looked at language and began using the term "demigirl" because it seemed to be the best fit, though she did not describe the same initial connection as the other participants:

I actually didn't like that term much when I first heard it or, at least, I didn't feel any connection to it. I remember just not finding anything better to describe what I wanted so I settled for that, but once it was mine and my identity, I really grew into it and became connected and proud of the term.

Changing Labels

All but one participant, Hedge, changed labels they used to describe their gender or sexuality. Two participants - Elliot and Simon - did not change their gender label, though they did change their sexuality label. Three main subthemes emerged regarding what facilitated the changes that most of the participants experienced: language experimentation, new information, and new experiences.

Language experimentation.

Several participants mentioned going through many labels as a part of their process, particularly as a way to gain more self-understanding. Elliot mentioned the importance of understanding language around sexual and romantic attraction for fully understanding their own sexuality. Changing the use of personal sexuality terms was attributed to a lack of understanding of their own gender as well as having internalized biphobia. Regarding the frequent change in terms used, Elliot stated, “If you can find the identity, I probably tried it out at some point.”

Jay described using more specific labels – such as agenderfluidflux, aroflux, and aceflux – for self-understanding, while still being comfortable using more general labels – such as nonbinary, trans, asexual, and aromantic – when talking to others for ease of communication. Kefira described doing research on nonbinary identities, frequently trying out various labels. She used genderfluid and when thinking about her fluidity, how feminine she did feel, and how she felt emotionally when she felt more feminine. This reflection lead her to identify with being a transgender woman. A few participants discussed rapidly changing or “trying on” various labels as they began learning about them as a part of this process. Some participants, such as Chandler, saw this as a normal process: “Of course you start out picking from, like, every camp at the very beginning.” While many participants reported positive experiences using a variety of language, one participant discussed experiencing some trouble with changing labels. Diarmuid discussed having trouble utilizing some of the tools put forth by the community, complicating his experience:

I was introduced to MOGAI - which I have to say, I don't really like because of the micro-labels and sort of making it more difficult to figure yourself out in a way - [...] That sort of halted my process for a while because it was like 'oh, you have to fit as many strange labels as you can because that's the most progressive' [...] You have to have a separate romantic and sexual identity and you have to have a separate gender and a separate platonic attraction and stuff like that and I was like 'Jeeze, I have to figure all this out?' So it took me a while to get over and think that 'you don't have to split your attraction unless you feel like it's necessary' and stuff like that.

While Diarmuid had addressed testing various gender labels as fairly positive (similar to other participants), overall he saw his experimentation with sexuality labels as negative. Based on the diversity of experiences among participants it is clear that there is also a great diversity of opinions, even when it comes to conceptualizing the very meaning of gender and sexuality.

New information.

Several participants described changing their identity labels in response to learning new information. Maria and Sapph both shifted their labels from "bisexual" to "pansexual" when they learned that there were more than two genders. While Simon also experienced this, they also changed their label quickly back to bisexual, upon discovering that most people do not know what pansexual means. Vick recalls identifying as lesbian, then briefly as genderqueer, before understanding what transgender meant. Jay noted that he added more nuanced labels as he learned them and heard more people share their experiences. Elliot adopted new labels after gaining knowledge about sexual and romantic attraction, allowing them to identify as aromantic.

New experiences.

Similarly, participants also reported changing their language because of new experiences. Some of these experiences included attraction, changes in hormones, experience with partners, and other experiences that shifted their self-understanding. In xyr decision to move from “bisexual” to “pansexual,” Sapph also discussed that shortly after learning of the different genders, xe found xemself attracted to some nonbinary people, which contributed to xyr switch in language. Andy recalled that, when they did use labels for themselves, they chose to change labels because of how they understood themselves. Kefira discussed a new attraction upon starting hormone replacement therapy, which prompted her to shift from the label of “lesbian” to “queer.” Vick discussed reflecting on his sexual experiences with partners that he had been emotionally connected with on different levels; this introspection is what lead him to adopt the label of demisexual. Andy preferred terms that gave them the most space for the possibility of change. When they moved from using “gay” to “pansexual,” for instance, they said, “I used that term specifically because it doesn't denote that I am a gender, it doesn't denote that the other person that I fall in love with is a gender and, for me, that frees it up so much that I can be with whoever I want to be with.” For similar reasons, Andy used queer to identify their gender. Maria also discussed changing labels because of a series of experiences that lead her to engage in more introspection, after which she moved from identifying as a transgender woman to identifying as nonbinary and trans-feminine.

Lacking Knowledge

All participants described a time when they lacked a language for understanding and identifying their feelings about gender and sexuality. Most participants cited specific instances where their own lack of information about the LGBT+ community impacted them negatively, though some were able to cope temporarily, using the language that they did have. Three subthemes were identified within lack of knowledge: stifled self-understanding, social negativity, and using available language.

Stifled self-understanding.

Several of the participants explicitly cited a lack of knowledge about the trans or gender non-conforming experience as negative or hindering their identity development. Elliot identified a lack of knowledge and understanding of the difference between romantic and sexual attraction as a barrier to finding the language that fit their experiences best. Elliot also described spending more time going through various sexualities, in part because of a lack of knowledge about gender as fluid, which impacted how they understood their sexuality. This lack of information along with negative views of bisexual people hindered their understanding of their identity:

Before I really understood that my gender was fluid, it would just change over long periods of time and I would think, 'Oh this is what I actually am, I just had it wrong,' so you know when I felt like a woman, I flipped between a couple of different sexuality labels including lesbian and, asexual. Basically I was struggling with a lot of internalized biphobia and I didn't wanna admit that's what I was so I kinda flopped around with different identities.

Social negativity.

Several participants similarly discussed how lack of knowledge and negative attitudes towards LGBT+ people worked together to build obstacles to a healthy sense of self and development. Jay discussed their experiences of internalizing transphobia and dealing with coercive heterosexuality which were a result of lack of knowledge and exposure to LGBT+ people. Participants identified several ways in which they experienced this negativity. Kefira described negative images of transgender women that she encountered in her formative years from multiple sources: “The only conception I had of [trans women] [...] they're creepy straight guys who want to rape women - TERF logic - or they're creepy gay guys who want to rape men - Hollywood logic.” Family was another place where social negativity limited participants’ knowledge and understanding. Elliot described attending a church with their family which spoke out against LGBT+ people; as a child Elliot was even taken to protests against pride parades. Sapph spoke of anti-gay hostility from classmates and anti-bisexual hostility from an online forum which, combined with a lack of knowledge or understanding that there were other people who were also attracted to multiple genders, lead to suicidal thoughts.

Using available language.

Some participants described that, while they did lack language to talk about their gender, they attached to other labels that they could express their gender through, as well as their sexuality. Vick, a transgender man, discussed his experience identifying as a lesbian as “trying to grasp at some sort of masculinity. [...] I was 15, I thought ' if I identify as this, I can be butch and I can be masculine.” Kefira also described identifying

with the term lesbian before having full knowledge of transgender people, though she is a transgender woman:

Since well before I even realized that I was trans or that being trans was even an option for me, I identified really strongly with the idea of being a lesbian, of being a woman who was attracted to women. And that took some getting used to because [I lacked] a way to synthesize the fact that I felt really strongly with this community of women who are attracted to women and also with the fact that I didn't have the words to describe myself as a woman yet.

It's important to note as well that both described having a vague idea of what transgender was, but at the time, they did not have the full knowledge and understanding of the terms. While Vick only had passing knowledge, Kefira describes specifically negative media images contributing to her misunderstanding and internalization of transgender women.

Non-disclosure

All but two participants discussed currently utilizing selective non-disclosure to some degree. Some participants discussed not disclosing their identity at all, while others discussed disclosing based on perceived tolerance based on their situation. The specific groups that participants most commonly avoided disclosing to were: family, co-workers, and potential partners. Some participants had spaces where they chose to use different language rather than disclosing altogether. Andy discussed how they do not disclose their identity often, but not intentionally as other participants described.

Tolerance-based disclosure.

Many of those who practiced selective non-disclosure did so with groups who they perceived as less tolerant. Jay expressed that, while they were out to friends, they only selectively discussed gender and sexuality with acquaintances and strangers who appeared to be tolerant. Simon also discussed avoiding the conversation with many

strangers, despite being out to their family and friends. Kefira, who is out in most spaces in her life, described avoiding most spaces that she would not feel comfortable being out in; though in one online gaming group, she does participate, but remains stealth:

No one is ever to know I'm trans there. As far as they're concerned, my microphone is broken and I'm not keen on fixing it because either I'm too broke or it's too much trouble. Whichever. I don't care just as long as they don't... just as long as they don't know. Because that is a community that there is no good way for this to happen. There is no way this doesn't end in tears, so I'm just not gonna try it.

Other participants described explicitly avoiding the topic of gender or sexuality around non-LGBT people because of past experiences or assumptions that the general population is not educated on LGBT issues. Those who were not willing to disclose to any groups outside of the LGBT community, addressed negative beliefs held by the people in the community around them. Vick described being stealth when he is in situations with the general public:

I don't really tell a lot of people about my trans identity. I mean, I do but only people in my friend circles or someone that I'm dating, like I don't really tell anyone outside of that that I'm trans because I pass as a cis man now. So, it's really none of their business and I can just live my life without having to have all that complicated shit. Inside the LGBT community, I feel like, you know, I'm kind of - it's not that big of a deal, we're just kind of like sharing experiences and a lot of my friends are trans or they are demi or, you know, outside of the, the L and the G and the cis.

Maria also discussed discomfort with and even avoiding discussion of her sexuality and pronouns within parts of the LGBT+ community because of their lack of knowledge or attitudes:

One of the groups that I go to [...] that specifically focuses on trans females and, or trans women and one of the things they don't do in the group is talk about their pronouns and I really, really, really, really don't like that. And I brought it up one day [...] and the topic just blew their minds. Like it literally just knocked them right out of their seats [...] in places like that, even though they're part of the

community, I wouldn't feel as safe talking about my identities there as I would in other places.

While Maria was the only one who mentioned changing language around people in the LGBT+ community, several others expressed avoiding people in the LGBT+ community who were not inclusive of non-binary people or various other identities, such as asexual or aromantic.

Over-all selective disclosure.

A few participants described being closeted to most people about various parts of their identity. While Chandler was open about having a girlfriend, she was not open about her gender to most people, only coming out selectively when the topic came up around people that she was comfortable telling – such as her partner. Elliot described coming out in person to select friends but with poor results. Hedge described being mostly out about their multi-gender attraction, but they have only discussed their gender selectively, only to their roommate, partner, and online spaces. Additionally, Hedge did not discuss disclosing their asexuality beyond their partner and online spaces.

Family.

Some participants described intentionally not talking to their family about their gender identity. Parents were often described as having anti-LGBT+ sentiments in a variety of ways, many of which were tied to religion. Elliot described memories of parents bringing them to protests against LGBT pride events as a child:

I grew up in a home where, I mean technically my first time hearing about [LGBT people] was when I was a small child and my parents *dragged* me out to a protest at a pride parade. So, I grew up in that kind of area where, I grew up in a church and one of the leading pastors at the church writes book on, the '*gay agenda*'.

Hedge shared that, while they were out about their multi-gender attraction, with positive reaction from their mom, they are not out about their gender because of their dad's anti-LGBT sentiments.

I haven't told anyone in my family yet [about having a fluid gender] because I'm worried about how my dad is going to react. He doesn't believe in transgender. He doesn't want to meet my friend because he thinks we're secretly dating, even though she's been in a committed monogamous relationship for most of our friendship. [...] I guess, to summarize, my family is mostly southern white Christians.

Other participants discussed their families' reactions to some parts of their identity as a reason for not disclosing other aspects of themselves. Chandler, who is not out to her family about her gender, described her family's reaction to a part of her sexuality: "My family was not the most supportive in the beginning. Supposedly they are now. [...] I certainly felt some kind of resistance to it. It wasn't very outward or external, but it was more like, quiet disapproval." Maria, on the other hand, was out to her parents about her gender, but said that her parents likely know that she is attracted to multiple genders, but neither her nor her parents discuss it, nor will she be likely to discuss it unless she introduces them to a male or nonbinary partner.

Sapph also described a level of non-disclosure with xyr parents but, unlike the others, xe did come out about both xyr sexuality and gender. Xyr parents were affirming of xyr sexuality, but did not understand xyr gender, so xe still practices a certain amount of nondisclosure with xyr parents.

When I came out again with the gender stuff, they still struggle a little bit. Sometimes when they say 'girl' or 'lady' or things like that, I say 'person' and they just, 'oh yeah, oh right, right, right.' I haven't tried anything, like, name or pronoun with them because they're both in their 60's and they're dealing with retirement and everything like that and I don't want to throw them another curveball.

Workplace.

Several participants discussed not disclosing or selectively disclosing in the workplace. Hedge, who is a childcare worker, described avoiding disclosure in the workplace: “Work doesn't recognize [my gender], but the kids call me whatever they want. And no one's said anything about it yet, so that's been nice. I usually use she/her pronouns because that's what people are used to now.” Sapph and R2D2 both indicated that they disclose some at work, but only selectively. R2D2 will disclose in passing conversation with the right people. Sapph used caution when choosing to disclose and was advised to not disclose to xyr boss or clients by those that xe did come out to:

The last place I worked was at, a veteran's home and that was way out in the sticks. But, the people in the social work department, I could tell just within a few days that they were very liberal. [...] I was open with them and tried to get them to use they/them pronouns, but I guess it's hard to get people to get used to. [...] But they were pretty cool about it. They wanted to make sure that I wasn't too open about it because of where the place was [...] and it was owned and operated by staunch republican people. [...] I still am really cautious about it. I think I waited at least a month. And I only worked there two months, so I didn't get much of a chance to, get comfortable about it, but I think as a whole, social work is really understanding.

Others did not disclose, but also did not actively hide their identity either. Jay discussed not intentionally coming out in the workplace, but also not working to intentionally hide their identities. While she does not have a job currently, Kefira did note concern about the idea of being out in the workplace when she does get a job.

Dating.

While several participants did mention partners or dating generally, only one person discussed the issue of disclosing gender when dating. Kefira spoke in detail about the dilemma she faces while dating in the lesbian community:

I was scrolling on Okay Cupid a while back and I told a friend like ‘you know, I’m just looking through these pictures and I can sort of - at this point I can almost pick out whether someone is potentially willing to talk to me, whether someone just *isn’t ready* to deal with dating a trans person yet, or whether someone actively wants me dead.’ Because those are all three things that I have encountered trying to interact with the lesbian community. [...] The Trans Exclusive Radical Feminists, or Trans Exterminatory Radical Feminists depending on who you ask, they center themselves on lesbian communities, so there’s a sizable portion of the lesbian community in whole or in part with their rhetoric. And that’s frightening.

The issue of whether or not to come out to or engage with someone goes beyond fear of rejection. While being unsure if someone would want to date her because she is transgender is a part of her fear, there is also an awareness that the interaction could end in violence. Because of these fears, Kefira described being very selective with who she interacts with when dating.

Altering language.

Two participants, who also engaged in nondisclosure in other ways, discussed altering their language depending on who they were talking with. Vick discussed being wary of discussing their sexuality with groups of people who are not educated – or do not appear to be educated – on the labels:

I don’t even bring out that I’m demisexual to people outside the LGBT community because they don’t know what it means and I don’t feel like explaining it. And I don’t even say that I’m *pansexual* because I don’t feel like explaining it because not a lot of people know what it means and if you try to explain it, they’ll be like ‘Isn’t that just *bisexual*?’ So, I just tell people that I’m bi basically because they don’t understand it.

Jay also discussed using different terminology for ease of communication in general.

While they used nuanced terminology for their own benefit, they began using more basic terms in conversation:

I mostly stuck to nonbinary and ace and aro at first. And the specific terms I used to describe those in a more detailed way change over time. [...] As I figured more things out, I would use different terms. Now I use whatever terms whenever most convenient for that specific term because... um, I don't care as much about labels themselves. Um, They're more useful in general.

Jay described choosing different terminology for their own convenience, not necessarily because of an assumption about others. They described more nuanced language as a tool to help facilitate self-understanding, not for communication.

Indifference and non-disclosure.

Andy did not discuss intentionally avoiding conversation but did express feeling as though people did not care as much about other people's sexuality. "If I said I was gay to any random person on the street, they'd be like "oh, cool. Why are you telling me this?" And if I started telling them that I didn't care what they thought of me, they'd be like 'why are you telling me this?' " However, this was not always the case. Andy described being a part of religious schools and organizations as a child early on. Rather than engaging with people who they felt would be upset, they chose not to bring up the topic.

Identity Development Foreclosure.

Cass noted that identity foreclosure can occur at any stage in identity development (1979). Levitt and Ippolito (2014) similarly acknowledge suppression as a possibility early in gender development, similar to the experience of some participants in this study. Hedge for example discussed how they encountered this temporary foreclosure twice during their process. The first time, they noted during their childhood: "I've always felt like not a girl, since I was a kid, I used to pretend to be a boy. Then I hit middle school and I thought, and everybody thought it was weird, so I stopped thinking about it. I just

kind of pushed it all back.” Later on, in high school, the question of gender came up again when Hedge developed feelings for someone who was nonbinary, but did not feel comfortable approaching them with questions about their gender. Hedge said,

I couldn't talk to [them] about it. And then none of my other friends identified as anything - at the time - none of them identified as anything other than cis, so I was just... I was scared to google it because it was the family computer and I didn't want to get in trouble, so I just didn't think about it for a long time.

In both of these instances, Hedge had to actively ignore their feelings about gender because of attitudes from their peers and their parents. However, they were able to come out of this foreclosure when they had more independence in college. When Hedge allowed themselves to explore their identities later in life, they noted the mental drawbacks that they had, noting the need to hear about a diversity of experiences with identity:

It's normal enough to question your gender and sexual identity. Everyone does it. And I felt like I couldn't question it because I was older figuring it out. Like I realize, I'm only 22, but a lot of the people that I know who identify as somewhere on the LGBT spectrum, they just they've known for a long time. So I thought it's too late for me. That's not really how it works. You realize it when you realize it.

Maria noted stalling her self-development later on in the process. She discussed this in depth, relating her resistance to self-exploration directly to a reluctance to feel marginalized. At the time of the interview, she discussed this self-denial of exploration:

I already claim so many marginalized identities, I don't want to *claim any more* [...] if I really wanted to play the oppression Olympics, I could say that I'm black, I could say [...] I'm black, pan, I'm trans... I identify as a girl, and ... when I identified as nonbinary identity [...] I think a lot of the reasons I haven't talked about my own mental illnesses is because... I look at myself in terms of my identities and how they marginalize me in society and [...] you don't win anything from being the most miserable person in the world.

After the interview, upon contacting her to review her restorying, she discussed more about her demisexuality, as well as how she felt that her gender was more nonbinary. In the research process, I was able to see her thought process coming out of a period of foreclosure. In particular, she noted the experience of regularly being given the opportunity to write in her gender on the sign-in sheet at an LGBT+ group she frequents. Also noted was hearing more people in her life talk about looking at their own gender:

If it's a bubble, just 'male/female/other,' I usually end up checking female. But, like, they give you the space to write in your own gender, and I think that the act of writing it in is something that's more personal and more affirming than just checking a [...] box. [...] That act of having to, write and commit to, what you put down. It's always made me stop and think about, you know, how do I really identify? Like what's really my gender?

Language is relevant to this issue of foreclosure because of its social nature.

Almost all of the participants associated identity-language with belonging. Since the issue of foreclosure is related to perceived attitudes, knowledge and access to various identities could prove beneficial for preventing stifling or foreclosure early on in identity development, as well as preventing general confusion in finding one's identity. Even later in development, access to alternative language can be beneficial. Additionally, people need a space in which to use the language. We can see in Maria's experience, lack of social support can be harmful to development, even if people have the needed linguistic tools.

Throughout these interviews, a variety of themes emerged about the meaning and usage of identity labels. In these, there is a clear social component to these terms that are present from the context that the language is learned up to how participants use the language and who they think should be able to use it. This social connection is relevant

within the LGBT+ community and outside of it, particularly in regard to nondisclosure. There were also patterns that emerged in regards to the meaning of the terms and how participants became attached to labels and decided to change them. Participants also discussed the obstacles that they faced in self-discovery before understanding the language and how they attempted to develop without the language. The issue of lack of understanding internally and social negativity of others culminated in themes of foreclosure and intentional identity stifling.

DISCUSSION

The diversity of identity language impacted all of the participants to some extent. All participants discussed learning or understanding identity language throughout their development. Many participants benefited from general knowledge of people who used the terms that described them best, or from people who experienced same-sex attraction, or who did not identify with the gender that they were assigned at birth. Learning from experiences that varied from the norm and were similar to their own was important. Similarly knowing and processing the language and others' relationship to it was important. This is consistent with development literature which features exposure to or knowledge of LGBT+ people as a key part of sexuality and/or gender identity development (Cass 1979; 1984; McCarn and Fassinger 1996; Kauffman and Johnson 2004; Lev 2014; Levitt and Ippolito 2014; Robbins, Low, and Query 2016). Limited exposure to language use and having exposure to negative attitudes also had ramifications for development.

Some negative social impacts were discussed throughout the interviews, but one in particular was directly related to identity development itself. Stifled self-understanding and social negativity due to a lack of knowledge led to the phenomena of "identity foreclosure," as described in Cass's model of homosexual identity formation (1979; 1984). Cass describes identity foreclosure as when an individual chooses to stop progress at any stage of identity development (1979; 1984). While Cass designed her model around gay men, themes around identity foreclosure similarly arose from gender nonconforming participants in this study. While complete foreclosure was not acknowledged by any participants, a sense of stifled development as the result of others'

negative perceptions was consistent with Cass' discussion of identity foreclosure (1979; 1984).

The social nature of discovering language and various identities is also consistent with many stage models which list a need to know about the LGBT+ community in the early stages (Cass 1979; Cass 1986; McCarn and Fassinger 1996; Lev 2004).

Additionally, the way that some participants "tried on" various labels is also consistent with early stages of confusion and discovery that exist in many models (Cass 1979; Cass 1986; McCarn and Fassinger 1996; Lev 2004). However, there seems to be some amount of movement between stages for some participants – particularly those who discussed reframing their sexuality in terms of a newly discovered gender. While some models account for this fluidity (McCarn and Fassinger 1996; Kauffman and Johnson 2004; Lev 2004; Shapiro, Rios, and Stewart 2010), others do not (Cass 1986). Future research on identity development with more attention to how sexuality and gender interact, as well as the impact of foreclosure on identity, may give research more insight into patterns that might exist regarding how people fluctuate through stages, particularly in the more linear-oriented models.

Most of the participants discussed using the internet to connect with others or understand themselves at some point in the process of understanding their identity. The role of the internet in the experiences of LGBT+ people – especially in more recent years, has been acknowledged throughout a variety of recent publications, including studies of various LGBT+ populations (Bradley 2010; Chasin 2015; Green, Bobrowicz, and Ang 2015; Xie 2015; Oakley 2016; Robbins, Low, Query 2016) and methods for working with LGBT+ populations (Jacobson and Donatone 2009; Quinn and Reeves 2009).

Several participants describe finding out information about identities through online communities and websites that were not necessarily geared towards those identities. AVEN, a website for asexuality, for instance, was the place where they found information about nonbinary genders. While AVEN does exist primarily for discussion on asexuality and aromanticism, website users also identify as nonbinary in their gender or as transgender (Bauer et al. 2017). Tumblr, a blogging platform, was similarly used to find information on LGBT+ identities. Some of these participants described first finding this information through the fandom community on Tumblr or by using the site for other reasons not related to LGBT+ content. Tumblr has been noted by other scholars as having an active LGBT+ community (Xie 2015; Goodrich 2016; Oakley 2016). Several participants similarly cited fandom as a way of finding out more about LGBT+ identities. While few studies have been done about LGBT+ involvement in online subcultures as a whole, this research provides support for the importance of online LGBT+ communities in identity development and language use. Fanfiction, also mentioned by participants, is a common way that people participate in fandom and that they learned more about the LGBT+ experience and creating self-representations. Similarly, Archive of Our Own is a website where gender, sexual, or romantic minorities often share and read fanfiction (Centrumlumina 2013).

The importance of the internet in the lives of some members of this community has implications for professionals working with them, which has been discussed in some literature (Jacobson and Donatone 2009; Quinn and Reeves 2009). Noting the prevalence of LGBT+ people in this creative realm of fandom – and possibly others, such as the cosplay community – these internet communities could be a source for finding more

information on identity development. Importantly, these spaces functioned for some participants as a space to discuss, explore, and learn about identities safely.

A large point of disagreement in participants' definitions and discussion of various definitions was the nature of the definitional terms. Some participants saw definitions and difference as fixed and more or less intrinsic to specific labels. Others recognizing the fluidity of experience viewed most definitions of terms as limiting. This difference in perception of terms is important to understanding how the terms are used. As researchers, we need to be aware of differences when working with this community. While basic definitions may be appropriate for some work, if we are to be thorough about definitions, asking individuals their specific meaning of definitions is fundamental to both research and professional practice. Knowing similarities and differences in how terms are used can create better access to communities in different ways. For example, if we want to know about the experiences of people who are attracted to multiple genders, a call for bisexual participants in research may not include people who are pansexual and queer, even though they would likely have similar experiences of attraction as bisexual people. This is also important for professionals who work with LGBT+ people. Rather than assuming what these words mean, discussing the meaning with individuals can bring a better understanding of client needs.

Additionally, being aware that there is internal disagreement about terms as fixed versus flexible can give more perspective on disagreements within the LGBT+ community. While the issue of definitions of so many terms has not always been a large cause for in-fighting, the definition of what it is to be gay, transgender, or LGBT+ is a historical argument within the community that continues today (Phelan 2009; Bradley

2010; Forrest-Stuart 2016). The focus on legitimacy, validity, or “realness” is an important theme that is politicized as well as social in nature. Concerns of legitimacy, validity, and “realness” extend far beyond the reaches of these conversations. Multiple participants discussed hearing or participating in debates and personally feeling their effects, particularly on their own self-perceptions. Researchers or professionals working with this community should be mindful of the potential affects language use by focusing on what the language means to the individual.

Many participants were concerned with how using their identity labels publically would have on them socially. One reason participants engaged in selective disclosure or altering their language was because of perceived lack of knowledge or understanding by certain groups. This is consistent with the literature on coming out (Mosher 2001; Gonenl 2013; Chasin 2015; Robbins, Low, and Query 2016). The ways and reasons that participants practiced nondisclosure were varied, but many were consistent with other research on barriers that LGBT+ people face when coming out. Some participants discussed family and the workplace when mentioning non-disclosure. These contexts are consistent with literature on coming out for LGB people (Mosher 2001; Schilt 2010) and are also the contexts in which many transgender people prefer not to disclose (James et al. 2016). Delayed or troubled coming out for transgender and gender-nonconforming participants in the family setting and dating settings for fear of repercussions is also substantiated by rates of rejection and even violence and abuse for those who have come out (James et al. 2016). Others described various other groups that they do not disclose their full identity in because of past experiences or perceptions of the group lacking

knowledge or being hostile. The issue of coming out to people or even approaching them is one that is a prevalent issue in the transgender community (James et al. 2016).

LIMITATIONS

Some limitations are present in this study, due to the nature of the methodology. As this research is qualitative and the data was collected using non-random sampling, it is not generalizable. This sample is over-representative of white participants living in the southern US. Most of these participants were recruited from Tumblr, and therefore is over representative of people who use this platform. It was also difficult to reach certain portions of the population due to lack of internet access or because some people in vulnerable situations were unable to participate because they live with non-affirming family or roommates. Minors were also not included in this research, though this is an important population to study because of their unique needs.

Given the time constraints, I was unable to meet with all participants to verify their restorying. While there did not seem to be any problems with the restored interviews that were reviewed by participants, those who were able to review gave additional feedback related to changes since the interviews took place. This was an indication to me that more studies like this should be conducted longitudinally. Another way to gain more perspective would be to include LGBT+ people who only use traditional language.

There were many additional topics that could be studied with this population. The definition of and experiences regarding transition is a topic that came up in several of the interviews; one participant in particular articulated that they would like to see research on how HRT impacts emotions. Additionally, the discussion and disagreement between various online groups (such as the exclusionists, truscum, and TERFs) would be an important area to study, as well as the impact that these disagreements have on people on

various sides of these arguments. Fandom was also seen as important for many participants and given the heavy LGBT+ presence in parts of these communities, fandom communities would be an important community to study to gain understanding of certain LGBT+ people. These are only a few of the many research topics that could potentially benefit this population.

CONCLUSION

There is much diversity in the way that various nontraditional LGBT+ identity terms are defined as well as different beliefs on the constructionist versus essential nature of the terms and labels used. There is also discussion within the community about who is allowed to use various terms. Additionally, a broad variety of experiences are described in this research for finding terms that fit. While most participants went through many terms to see which fit, some simply found one that resonated and described them. However, all participants described or mentioned some aspect of a social process associated with the use of language in discovering their identities. While a small minority of participants were ambivalent toward or even against the social aspects of the language, most of them saw the social dimension as important to their development or even their mental well-being on the whole.

All participants discovered nontraditional terms through LGBT+ people directly or online. Most participants saw the existence of these terms as affirming that “they are not alone” or the only person that feels the way that they do. Additionally, the language had social ramifications and because of potential ramifications, most participants practiced selective non-disclosure around people who they perceived as less tolerant or whose negative reaction could be threatening to their physical, emotional, or financial wellbeing.

Understanding the diversity of experiences associated with these terms can provide for a deeper understanding of how language is connected and how it can be used to better the lives of LGBT+ people. More information on identity language and its social impacts, not only gives researchers insight into a community, but can also be a starting

point for health and human service providers to better serve LGBT+ people, including helping them in regards to identity development.

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APPENDIX A

Interview Guide: Primary and Probing Questions

Introduction: Thank you for being a part of this study. We are now starting the official interview. I will be recording this and taking notes. Please answer freely and honestly. You are encouraged to incorporate any pertinent information during this interview and elaborate where you see fit. You may stop or skip any question at any time.

Questions:

- How would you describe yourself?
 - a. Age, race, job – anything you see relevant?
 - b. How would you define your gender/sexuality?
 - c. How would you define (INSERT TERM)?
 - d. Why do you use the terms that you use?
 - How long have you identified this way?
 - Have you ever used different terms to describe your sexuality?
 - Why did you change the way that you talk about your identities?
 - Tell me about figuring out your identity. What process did you go through?
 - Did you encounter any obstacles?
 - What has coming out been like if you have done that?
 - (If books/blogs/websites mentioned) Were there specific posts/books that facilitated a turning point in self-understanding? What about them helped you? What was the book/website OR can you send me the post/video in question?
- (If not addressed, continue)
- When and where did you first start hearing about LGBT+ people?
 - When and where did you hear about non-traditional terminology?
 - Have you always embraced non-traditional terminology/what made you embrace it/why do you no longer embrace it?
 - What has been your experience been with interacting with others when talking about your identities?
 - Within the LGBT+ community?

- Outside of the LGBT+ community?
- (If they mention tech or media) What media, posts, etc. had an impact on you and why?

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Protocol ID

17-2190

Dear Investigator(s),

The above identified research proposal has been reviewed by the MTSU Institutional Review Board (IRB) through the **EXPEDITED** mechanism under 45 CFR 46.110 and 21 CFR 56.110 within the category (7) *Research on individual or group characteristics or behavior*. A summary of the IRB action and other particulars in regard to this protocol application is tabulated as shown below:

IRB Action

APPROVED for one year

Date of expiration

4/30/2018

Participant Size

20 (TWENTY)

Participant Pool

Adult LGBT+ volunteers who 18 years or older

Exceptions

- Recruitment through social media (like Facebook) is permitted.
- Digital voice recording permitted with restriction (refer below).
- Verbal consent is permitted.

Restrictions

- **Mandatory informed consent**
- **Permitted to retain digital voice recording for analysis purpose but the identity must be stripped immediately upon data collection. 3. The digital files must be destroyed before the date of expiration of this protocol.**

Comments

NONE

This protocol can be continued for up to THREE years (**4/30/2020**) by obtaining a continuation approval prior to **4/30/2018**. Refer to the following schedule to plan your annual project reports and be aware that you may not receive a separate reminder to complete your continuing reviews. Failure in obtaining an approval for continuation will automatically result in cancellation of this protocol. Moreover, the completion of this study **MUST** be notified to the Office of Compliance by filing a final report in order to close-out the protocol.

IRBN001 Version 1.3 Revision Date 03.06.2016 Institutional
Review Board Office of Compliance Middle Tennessee State University Continuing
Review Schedule:

Reporting Period

Requisition Deadline

IRB Comments

First year report

3/31/2018

TO BE COMPLETED

Second year report

3/31/2019

TO BE COMPLETED

Final report

3/31/2020

TO BE COMPLETED

Post-approval Protocol Amendments:

Date

Amendment(s)

IRB Comments

06.14.2017

Request to modify the recruitment device has been reviewed and approved to use the submitted flyer

Administrative approval

The investigator(s) indicated in this notification should read and abide by all of the post-approval conditions imposed with this approval. [Refer to the post-approval guidelines posted in the MTSU IRB's website](#). Any unanticipated harms to participants or adverse events must be reported to the Office of Compliance at (615) 494-8918 within 48 hours of the incident. Amendments to this protocol must be approved by the IRB. Inclusion of new researchers must also be approved by the Office of Compliance before they begin to work on the project.

All of the research-related records, which include signed consent forms, investigator information and other documents related to the study, must be retained by the PI or the faculty advisor (if the PI is a student) at the secure location mentioned in the protocol application. The data storage must be maintained for at least three (3) years after study completion. Subsequently, the researcher may destroy the data in a manner that maintains confidentiality and anonymity. IRB reserves the right to modify, change or cancel the terms of this letter without prior notice. Be advised that IRB also reserves the right to inspect or audit your records if needed.

Sincerely,

Institutional Review Board

Middle Tennessee State University

Quick Links:

[Click here](#) for a detailed list of the post-approval responsibilities. More information on expedited procedures can be found [here](#).

APPENDIX B

Table 1: Participant Identities

	Age	Pronoun	Gender	Sexuality	Former Gender	Former Sexuality
Andy	26	Stated no preference	No labels	No labels	Queer	Gay; Pansexual; Queer
Chandler	18	She/Her	Androgynous Demigirl	Gay	Genderqueer; only Demigirl	Bisexual; Pansexual; Demisexual; Bisexual and homo-romantic
Diamuid	20	He/Him	Nonbinary Trans Boy	Bisexual	Agender, Genderflux	Aromantic-spectrum
Elliot	21	They/Them	Genderqueer	Aromantic Bisexual	N/A	Lesbian; Asexual; many others
Hedge	22	They/Them	Fluid	Asexual	N/A	N/A
Jay	20	They/Them	Agender-fluidflux; Nonbinary; Trans; Agender	Asexual Aromantic; Grayasexual Grayaromantic; Aceflux Aroflux	Nonbinary	Asexual Aromantic
Kefira	22	She/Her	Transgender Woman; Saris Adam	Queer	Nonbinary; Agender; many others	Lesbian
Maria	22	They/Them or She/her	Nonbinary Trans feminine	Pansexual; Demisexual	Genderqueer; Transgender Woman	Bicurious; Bisexual
R2D2	20	They/Them	Nonbinary; Agenderflux; Androgynous; Gender-nonconforming	Pansexual, Demisexual, Demiromantic	Agenderflux (used more frequently)	Lesbian; Asexual; many others
Sapph	28	They/Them or Xe/Xem	Agender; Nonbinary; Agender Femme	Pansexual; Autochorissexual/ Anegosexual Autochoris-romantic/Anego-romantic	Tried some other labels	Bisexual
Simon	25	They/Them	Genderqueer	Bisexual	N/A	Pansexual
Vick	19	He/Him	Transgender Man	Demisexual Panromantic	Genderqueer (briefly)	Lesbian

Table 2: Participant Definitions

Term	Definition
Aceflux/Aroflux	“Not experiencing sexual attraction to some degree with the flux component meaning that the degree can change over time, be it year, month, week, whatever. And same for aroflux.” – Jay
Agender	“Completely neutral.” - Diamuid “Not experiencing gender or not having an inner gender.” - Jay “I've never felt any kind of connection to gender identity, I've never felt any kind of connection to my assigned gender at birth. I just recently found out that I could classify myself as intersex, so that further distances myself from anything assigned at birth, but yeah. When I describe it to people, I just say ‘neither/nothing’” – Sapph
Agender Femme	“I'm feminine expressive, feminine aligned [. . .] but I don't want any kind of labels near me that are, like some people say ‘nonbinary woman’. I don't want that part.” – Sapph
Agenderfluidflux	“Being agender while also being genderfluid and genderflux.” – Jay
Agenderfluid	“I mostly identify without a gender, but I fluctuate between masculinity, femininity, and androgyny.” – R2D2
Androgynous	“Looking both masculine/like a man and feminine/like a woman or being difficult to distinguish between the two.”-Chandler “Between feminine and masculine.” –R2D2
Autochorissexual/ Angeosexual (-romantic)	“Wanting or fantasizing about things, but not necessarily doing them. So, that's an ace-spec identity [. . .] and romantic also fits that.” – Sapph
Aromantic	“I don't experience romantic attraction, like, at all. I think even if I ended up in a relationship with somebody I wouldn't ever feel romantic love.” – Elliot “Not experiencing romantic attraction.” – Jay
Asexual	“I didn't really feel sexual attraction towards people.” –Hedge “Not experiencing sexual attraction.” – Jay
Bisexual	“I like men and I like women and I like nonbinary people. I just like . . . people as long as they're nice and pretty but [. . .] my attraction fluctuates, which is why I say bisexual. Because I have

	<p>been almost 100% into women an almost 100% into men at different points in my life, but the other attraction is always there.” – Diamuid</p> <p>“I used bisexual because I thought that the world was man and woman.” –R2D2</p> <p>“I’m attracted to two or more genders.” – Simon</p> <p>“I’m attracted to multiple genders. In this case, men, women, and masculine presenting people pretty much.” – Elliot</p>
Bicurious	<p>"I had never been attracted to a guy before. But if the opportunity had arisen, I would have tried something. [. . .] I know there were crushes that I had in high school that I suppressed because I was too afraid to admit my own feelings for people that may have had the same gender expression I had."-Maria</p>
Demigirl	<p>“The official definition would be partially girl and then partially something else. For me, it means, like, mainly girl with a strong attachment to femininity with some other things kind of creeping in the background that have yet to be identified.” - Chandler</p>
Demiromantic/ Demisexual	<p>“I have to build a relationship – which for me, has taken between a month and seven years – to actually be sexually and romantically attracted to them.” –R2D2</p>
Demisexual	<p>“I just didn’t see how people can look at other people and gauge how much they would want to sleep with a person (or even fall in love with them) at first sight. That was crazy to me then and still is today.”-Maria</p> <p>“I am only sexually attracted to those I have a very strong emotional bond with.” – Vick</p>
Fluid	<p>“There are some days that I feel like I’m more masculine-presenting than feminine-presenting, but usually I don’t feel like either.”-Hedge</p>
Gay	<p>“I meant that to mean that I desired a relationship with another guy.” – Andy</p> <p>“I identify mostly as a girl and the girl that I'm with is a girl. [. . .] that was the way I started since I was born female, so that's just kinda the label I kept. I suppose I could change it, but, eh, I'm a girl who's interested in girls, so it fits.” -Chandler</p>
Genderfluid	<p>“Having an inner gender or gender identity that changes over time, be it year, month, week, day, hour, whatever.” – Jay</p>
Genderflux	<p>“Fluxuating between two specific points.” – Diamuid</p> <p>“Having a gender in which the degree changes over time. It's akin to genderfluid, but specific to, like, degree as opposed to type.” – Jay</p>
Genderqueer	<p>"I felt like I had a mixture of traits and desired an expression that was sort of in the middle... knowing what the word 'queer' meant and knowing [. . .] what gender is, I felt that genderqueer</p>

	<p>was a really nice fit for someone of my identity, especially considering [. . .] the queerness of my own gender." – Maria</p> <p>"It's really a way of not adhering to a specific gender, but not minding being associated with one necessarily - for me that's my definition. [. . .] I don't conform, so I guess gender-nonconforming but the term genderqueer, I feel like, encompasses a lot of other things. It's like an umbrella term." – Simon</p> <p>"The umbrella label I use for genders that don't fit perfectly under the binary. I wouldn't perfectly equate it to nonbinary because sometimes it covers binary genders . . . that just work differently. You know, like being fluid between binary genders or something like that." – Elliot</p>
Greyasexual/ Greyaromantic	"Not experience sexual attraction to some degree. Same for greyaromantic." –Jay
Lesbian	"As a woman who is exclusively or near exclusively attracted to women, but of course, there is always someone who will find a, some different version of that description, so that's my subjective description." -Kefira
Nonbinary	"Identifying as a gender that is neither male nor female." - Simon
	"Means that you're outside of the male/female binary." –R2D2
Nonbinary Trans Boy	"I mean nonbinary I'm thinking there's a spectrum and I'm not fully anything in a way, sort of fluctuating between gender neutral and almost 100% boy." -Diamuid
Nonbinary Trans Feminine	"While I don't necessarily feel like I have a gender that floats [. . .] in the middle, but I don't 100% feel like a trans woman [. . .] how I relate with myself and my body, even though I have a desire to be more feminine than I was, I don't feel like my gender is that of a woman." –Maria
Pansexual (-romantic)	"The reason I used that term specifically was because it doesn't denote that I am a gender, it doesn't denote that the other person that I fall in love with is a gender and, for me, that frees it up so much that I can be with whoever I want to be with"-Andy

	<p>"I recognize that my ability to fall in love with somebody and to be attracted to them, happens regardless of their gender or of their physical appearance. I feel at least for now, um, as my identity is not entirely set in stone, that 'pan' was a good identifier for me because it embodies how I feel best about myself and what my values are." -Maria</p> <p>"Pan removed itself from the dichotomy that bi creates naturally – both naturally and socially[. . .] focuses less on a person's gender and how it compares with yours and more about how that person is and how [. . .] who they are as a person and how it compares to you. That's something I value." –Maria</p> <p>"I can fall in love with anyone."-R2D2</p> <p>"Any gender attraction." – Sapph</p> <p>"I have the potential to be romantically attracted to anyone regardless of gender." - Vick</p>
Polysexual	<p>"I used polysexual because at the time I thought my attraction still changed from gender to gender. Like with women, I wanted someone shorter than me, but with men I wanted someone that was taller than me."-R2D2</p>
Queer	<p>"You can define me however you want to define me and so, to define the word queer is whatever you want it to be. It's just not normal. It's not 'the norm'" -Andy</p> <p>"Whatever I am, it's not straight, but I'm not willing to nail down anything more specific than that." –Kafira</p> <p>"Queer has a couple of meanings to me. The first one is an umbrella term for the LGBT+ community, a more inclusive word than maybe, gay. I usually take it to mean anyone different from the norm, whether they're not cisgender and/or heterosexual. I also recognize it as an identity of someone whose identity or orientation may not be cis/heteronormative, but can't be easily defined by a label." "The sense of my identity being something between what's defines, occupying a space that otherwise would have been called 'other'." -Maria</p>
Saris Adam	<p>"which dates back a while, but it's, [. . .] you could say it translates to transgender woman, I guess, but it literally translates to a eunuch made by man rather than a eunuch made by God [. . .] but basically, it's a person with one set of external genitalia who doesn't want them, who really doesn't want them and who would like to participate in the gender roles and cultural practices of being a woman, which, in Judaism carries its own weight."-Kefira</p>
Transgender/ Trans	<p>"Identifying as a gender different from that which I was assigned at birth." – Jay</p> <p>"Means that my identity does not match the sex that I was assigned at birth." -Vick</p>

Transgender Man	“A person that was assigned female at birth, but identifies as a man. Their gender is male.” “A person that was assigned female at birth, but identifies as a man. Their gender is male.” –Vick
Transgender Woman	“The simplest way I can define it is, as, um someone who is male assigned at birth, often who presents with stereotypically male puberty or other external, uh, primary and secondary sexual features who does not identify with male-ness or necessarily with those features and who . . . wants to change them.” -Kefira

Table 3: Website Usage

	Activity	Websites Mentioned
Chandler	Learning terminology; Reading other people's experiences of identity; Pride flags; Selling pride paraphernalia	Tumblr; Google; Etsy
Diamiud	Fandom (fanfiction, headcanons); Learning terminology; Discussing identity; Viewing blogs on the discourse	Tumblr; Facebook groups; SuperModel
Elliot	Fandoms (mentioned fan-creations generally); Learning terminology; Discussing identity; Reading other people's experiences of identity	Tumblr; AVEN
Hedge	Learning terminology; Discussing identity; Researching cultural identities to prove legitimacy of identities to family	Facebook groups; Tumblr; Google
Jay	Learning terminology; Reading other people's experiences of identity	Tumblr; AVEN
Kefira	Learning terminology; Engaging with fandom communities; Learning about religion	Tumblr; Gaming group; Google; Wiki; TransTorah.org; Other websites focused on Jewish identity
Maria	Discussing identity; Engaging with various fandoms; Reading about others' experiences of identity and transition	Tumblr
R2D2	Learning terminology; Reading about others' experiences; Reading fiction by LGBT+ writers	Wattpad; Google
Sapph	Engaging with various fandoms; Learning terminology; Reading others' experiences of identity; Body Positivity movement; Disabled community	Fandom forums; Social Media; Youtube
Simon	Learning terminology; Fandom	Tumblr
Vick	Viewing others' experiences; Learning about transition; Learning terminology	Youtube; Instagram