

Running Head: The Space In-Between

**The Space In-Between: Gender Non-Conformity and the Experience and Navigations of
the Gender Binary in Online Dating**

Juliana Schön

Student number: 500395

Master Thesis: Engaging Public Issues

Erasmus University Rotterdam

School of Social and Behavioural Sciences

Supervisor: Dr. Samira van Bohemen

Second reader: Prof. dr. Renske Keizer

Due Date: 04/08/2024

Abstract

The current study explored how people identifying as gender non-conforming navigate the societal construct of the gender binary in the context of online dating. Additionally, it looks into the role self-representation plays within these processes. A combination of participatory methods was used, including a modified photo voice approach, a creative making exercise and focus groups (3x3 and 1x2 participants). The theoretical framework draws from Judith Butler's concept of gender performativity alongside theoretical perspectives on representation by Stuart Hall. By exploring the experiences, thoughts and ways of moving along the lines of normativity and agency through the eyes of people who identify as gender non-conforming, the study shows the conflicting, contradicting and fluent nature of non-normativity. The study highlights the individuality involved in processes of navigation. Additionally, it shows the influential social and political forces that influence collective and individual meaning-making through means of representation.

Keywords: gender non-conformity, gender binary, non-normativity, dating, self-representation

The Space In-Between: Gender Non-Conformity and the Experience and Navigations of the Gender Binary in Online Dating

Society operates within specific socially constructed sets and beliefs about what is considered 'normal' behaviour, love and sexuality, based on your presumed gender identity (Garritano, 2021; Butler, 1990). These ideas of what-gender supposedly looks like play into the assumption that we need to be able to categorize one another within a binary set of 'appropriate' gender expressions, that are clearly distinguishable as either classically female or male (Garritano, 2021). This static representation of gender is not only assumed to correspond to sex but also to heterosexual orientation and normative execution of romance, reinforcing the binary framework of appropriate gendered behaviours (Garritano, 2021; Comunello, Parisi, & Ieracitano, 2021; Butler, 1990).

There is no space where the concept of gender plays a role as large as within the context of dating (Ellison, Hancock & Toma, 2011). Simultaneously we rarely find the deeply rooted binary structure Western culture implemented regarding the way we perceive and negotiate our gender expressions and experiences to be as salient (Garritano, 2021). The idea of dating and getting to know someone romantically and/ or sexually is structurally bound to the binary 'rules' of sexuality and romance, fundamentally rooted in gendered norms and expressions. These norms include the way one presents the self and the roles and behaviours one portrays and assumes in others (Comunello et al., 2021; Gagnon, 1990). This is reflected within more traditional ways of getting to know someone, as well as within online dating, where binary and heteronormative interfaces mirror our cultural perceptions and ideologies (Garritano, 2021).

The functioning of dating apps fundamentally relies on users' gender identities, adhering primarily to a binary framework (Garritano, 2021). Consequently, they not only serve as a platform for users to portray gendered behaviours but also facilitate binary structures from within (Vijlbrief, Saharso, & Ghorashi, 2020). As dating apps are becoming a

more normative part of dating culture (Ellison et al., 2011), their build-up, has the power to direct social shifts and ideals within dating. This can lead to the reinforcement or maintenance of gendered and binary structures, as well as categorizations, also within the queer community (Garritano, 2021). Moreover, it fosters structural exclusion and stigmatization of people who fall outside the binary understanding of gender as reflected through harassment, victimization and sexualization of gender non-conforming (GNC; entailing various identities that do not conform with gendered norms associated with one's gender assigned at birth) people in online environments as a continuation of offline violence (Campaioli, 2023).

While visual cues and the gendered ways we represent ourselves, play a role within any form of dating, Ellison et al. (2011) mention how dating apps serve as a distinct genre of self-representation as people deliberately choose to display or portray their identity in a certain way, to connect with like-minded individuals with very limited options to do so. An important aspect when looking at gender binary structures, specifically within the context of dating, is the concept of self-representation (the act of how one portrays their identity, including various forms of expression), as self-representative acts can visualize the gender binary norms and expectations it is ruled by (Hall & Nixon 2013). For one who is moving outside a binary understanding of gender, self-representation is not just about how they present themselves visually or verbally, but also how they manage and negotiate their identities within and against dominant binary gender norms and structures.

While research has been conducted on gender and gendered experiences in the context of dating, dating apps and self-representation practices, these mostly move within the scope of heterosexual, cisgender or binary transgender experience, whereof the latter, is often highly clinicalized. Exploring binary structures through the eyes of those who identify as GNC is crucial, as it can reveal aspects of our gendered system that are invisible to one who moves within the binary idea of gender (Bowker & Star 2000). In order to contribute to the understanding of GNC identity experiences specifically within digital space, and to add to the

understanding of the gender binary on dating apps, going beyond the structural binary but looking at it from a broader social perspective, the current study aims to answer the question: *How do gender non-conforming people experience and navigate binary gender dynamics in the context of online dating?* Navigation thereby refers to one's approach to conceptually and practically move within and beyond current normative gendered structures. Additionally, the role of self-representation will be explored through the question: *What role does self-representation play in this process?*

Given the socially constructed and ingrained nature of gender, scientific and social relevance are closely intertwined. Scientific relevance is not solely acquired through knowledge production. Gendered and binary structures are pervasive, also within academia. Therefore, research that explores and moves outside the gender binary and is conducted with and through the experiences of those who navigate these spaces is inherently relevant. It offers new perspectives and contributes to making research itself less normative.

Theoretical Framework

In order to explore the research question, the theoretical foundations of the gender binary, its link to self-representative norms, and its manifestation in the context of dating apps will be conceptualized. To do so, theoretical approaches by Judith Butler and Stuart Hall will be explored and used as a tool to analyze the data.

Gender Non-Conformity

Within the current research, GNC serves as an umbrella term for a spectrum of identities not aligning with the binary concept of gender and/or the gender one was assigned at birth (Vijlbrief et al., 2020). This includes non-binary, a-gender, bi-gender, gender-queer, gender-fluid, and demi-gender (Vijlbrief et al., 2020) and reflects a broader rejection or questioning of socially constructed norms and expectations associated with gender. While some trans people may align with binary gender norms, others, including many who identify

as GNC, navigate their gender identity outside of these binary structures. Yet, identity experiences are subjective and cannot always be categorized.

Deconstructing Gender: The Cis- Heterosexual Matrix and Gender Performativity

In order to explore the experiences and ways of navigating binary structures in dating, it is crucial to understand the construction of the gender binary and its implications on a person as a gendered being. A concept that has been highly influential in conceptualizing the predominance and upholding of heteronormativity and the conflation of sex and gender is Judith Butler's heterosexual matrix (Atikson & DePalma, 2009; Butler 1990). For this research, the heterosexual matrix will be referred to as the "cis-heterosexual matrix" as used by Garritano (2021), as it provides a more inclusive terminology and closer resemblance to the current investigation. In her work, Butler critiques the ruling regimes of alignment that the matrix enforces between biological sex, gender identity and sexual orientation that are socially expected to be congruent and are upheld through constant reinforcement. This reinforcement is reflected through our adherence to binary gendered norms and ideas within all aspects of life, setting a tone for what gender and consequently sexuality, love and interpersonal relations look like (Butler 1990). The matrix constitutes itself through its appearance as natural. Gender is seen as a baseline, a natural given that is established at birth, and maintained through cultural norms, social institutions, and everyday practices that look inevitable due to its presumed naturalness.

But how are gendered Identities formed and maintained? As articulated by Butler (1993) there is no agency within what gendered categories and norms one adheres to, as gender is not a fixed, nor chosen identity, but constructed through repetitive performances within the realms of the matrix. Consequently, gender is never inherent, but as Butler describes it the process of becoming (Butler 1990, Butler 1993). Similarly, gendered actions are not an individual choice, but rather constrained and shaped by pre-existing norms and structures of power. Thereby, gender can be seen as a political and cultural interpretation of

the body in binary terms. Categories of men and women function as political constructs, reflecting both social and institutional performances while shaping societal norms and realities. Gendered action should be understood as the results of dominant power structures that enforce binary conceptions of the body (Butler 1993).

The naturalization of the human body is an essential part of the human as a political and gendered being (Butler 1993), and the establishment and visualization of societal binaries. One becomes 'humanified' once the body is gendered in a binary manner (Butler 1993). Simultaneously, binary gender is "performed as the body is stylized", meaning looks and characteristics become attributed to a gender and therefore acts of representing the self serve as a political act (Butler 1993; Pitt 2000, p. 446). These normative ideas are upheld through the notion of being 'intelligible,' meaning being comprehensible and categorizable within a given cultural or social context (Butler, 1993).

Between Performativity and Performance

This raises the question of how GNC people can navigate these constraints, and in what ways one can conform, resist or redefine normative understandings and articulations of the body. Butler (1993) points out that while actions are performative, they are never perfectly replicated. This space of variability within actions creates a space for agency. A space where one might reinterpret or deviate from the norm, serving as a space for resistance and change (Butler, 1993). This makes the performative nature of gender open to subversion. Non-conforming performances can challenge and destabilize traditional gendered norms. Thereby Butler (1993) notes the distinction, between performativity and performance. Other than performativity, performance suggests a degree of agency within how one presents the self, an instance that can be singular. Opposingly, performativity is never a singular event, nor an agent. Performances might be seen as a way of dismantling norms, yet they often occur within a broader context of performativity, consequently, even singular acts are situated within a broader social and performative realm. Hence, performativity constraints performance.

Subversion and Resistance

Pitts (2000) contextualizes performances specifically within the realm of bodily practices and their potential for subversion and political empowerment. She notes, that while acts can never be wholly liberating, as they are carried out in the realm of a social system of oppression (Pitt, 2000; Butler 1993), self-representative acts have the potential to act as a form of resistance, solely through standing in opposition to the homogenized 'ideal' (Pitt 2000). She explains that marginalized groups often utilize this otherness as a form of resistance which can potentially lead to subversion of the norm. Yet, the performative context of resistance raises questions about the extent to which individuals are agents over their bodies and how they choose to represent themselves outside the binary idea of gender, through and beyond the means of the body (Pitt, 2000; Bordo, 1995). Bordo (1995) highlights that asserting difference is a "political struggle" (Pitts 2000 p. 447), making the navigation of identity practices challenging and conflicting, specifically for those whose identity does not conform to societal norms, describing this space as a "minefield" (p.265). While expressiveness is involved in this navigation process, it simultaneously moves within a space that inscribes bodies with political ideas of power. The space in which identity formation outside the binary understanding of gender is navigated must therefore be understood as complex and liminal, influenced by individuality and performativity (Butler 1995, Bordo 1995; Pitts 2000).

Butler (1995) visualized this through the example of drag, as having the potential to be subversive in the long run, through challenging normative gendered ideas of 'appropriate gendered behaviour', by parodying the seeming naturalness of gender. However, she also argues that the subversion remains constrained within the boundaries of binary gender and binary gendered ideals. This can also reinforce or harden certain norms as a binary re-articulation (Butler, 1993). Epstein (1994) aligns with this idea, prescribing a risk of a mere shift within categorizations, or the construction of new categories, rather than abolishing these

structures altogether, potentially facilitating the recreation or upholding of hierarchical structures and distinctions also within the queer community. Yet, while drag doesn't oppose gendered norms, the execution can be seen as a failure of the heteronormative system to control one's agency (Butler 1995). The potential to subvert, therefore also lies within the exposure of performativity. Nonetheless, both Butler and Epstein highlight the complexities and challenges involved in the subversion of the binary categories of gender.

Self-Representation

Butler's work highlights how the social idea of gender as inherent and natural, along with the stylization of the gendered body and gendered scripts, links socially constructed norms to means of representation. In order to have a body that is deemed socially relevant, it needs to be recognizable within the 'norm' (Butler 1993). To investigate the role that self-representation plays within the experience and navigation of GNC within this constructed norm of a categorizable binary body, it is essential to understand how meaning is constructed through self-representation. In this paper, self-representation refers to the ways individuals present themselves to others through various means such as behaviour, appearance, language, and online presence.

According to Stuart Hall and Nixon in *Representations and Signifying Practices* (2011), meaning is constructed through the interpretation of representations through a cultural lens. Representations thereby act as signifiers that carry meaning, like language, performances or the way one presents the self. It is important to note, that representations are not to be equated with self-representation, yet self-representations can act as cultural cues that carry meaning (Hall & Nixon, 2011). When engaging in representative acts, one therefore inherently engages in the construction of their identity within a cultural framework. The cultural contexts, and the meanings they produce change the way representations are carried out. Representations and meaning-making therefore constitute each other (Hall & Nixon, 2011). Hall argues that there is no true meaning to what is represented and what is perceived,

instead, interpretation needs to be understood as constructed through cultural narratives and power structures. This way of interpreting the meaning of self-representation frames them as political beings (Hall & Nixon, 2011).

Hall discusses that the way representations are negotiated depends on how they are perceived and what meaning is derived from them. The ambiguity and individuality of meaning-making can thereby reflect power dynamics and underlying structures of control over the definitions of representations. Self-representation must therefore be seen as a complex process, shaped by agency as well as broader socio-cultural contexts in which they occur (Hall & Nixon, 2011).

Dating Apps

Dating apps are constructed within the framework of binary gender norms and social categorizations and therefore reinforce and perpetuate existing social norms and expectations in the context of dating (Garritano, 2021). By structuring user interactions and profiles according to these categories, dating apps contribute to the maintenance and reinforcement of traditional gender roles and social classifications (McLeod & McArthur, 2019). McLeod and McArthur (2019) attribute the central role, gender plays within the construction and functioning of dating apps, to Butler's concept of imposed heteronormativity and the link it draws between gender and the social idea of desirability (Butler 1993). Gender is therefore not a necessity of a dating app interface, but rather a reflection of what dating supposedly looks like under hegemonic political forces (McLeod & McArthur, 2019).

The integrated categorizations within the layout of dating apps have implications on how the environment regulates the way one presents the self and navigates one's identity (Garritano, 2021). McLeod and McArthur (2019) relate the process of making oneself "intelligible" as inherently bound to the constraints of the platform that therefore shape how users represent or are encouraged to present the self. Thereby they differentiate between implicit and explicit tools, whereby implicit tools refer to means of representation that

someone can individualize, like images, bios or prompts (short, guided questions or statements designed to encourage users to share personal information) while explicit tools do not allow for agency or adjustments, like gender options that are part of the interface. One's level of agency influences how well someone is able to present themselves in an individual way. Moreover, the process of representation varies between people whose identity is more or less easily captured by the design of the interface (McLeod & McArthur, 2019). This reflects an idea, articulated by Bowker and Star (2000), who describe infrastructures as invisible for whom is not affected or excluded by them. Failures of a binary design would therefore be primarily visible for the ones who move outside the binary. In line with Hall's (2011) understanding of the cultural construction of meaning-making, McLeod & McArthur (2019) define intelligibility as being created collaboratively. This also acknowledges the socio-political forces and norms that are part of the construction of identity and self-representation on dating apps.

In his exploration of the facilitation of gendered and sexual politics on dating apps in China, Chan (2021) describes dating apps as sites of power dynamics. While they have the potential to act as tools of liberation through the attribution of agency by offering users the opportunity to explore and express identity in more inclusive ways that may not be as easily accessible in offline interactions, they are built on hegemonic socio-political dynamics and power relations. Similarly, Vijlbrief et al., (2020) outline that while dating apps often serve as a space for queer community and connection, as well as a space to experiment with the fluidity of identity and gender experience, they often provide a hostile or fetishizing environment towards people that exist outside the cis-normative paradigm (Griffiths & Armstrong, 2023; Vijlbrief et al., 2020).

Methodological Framework

Productive Methods

Like Hall (2013), McDonnell (2014) views meanings as being socially constructed and shaped. Observations, behaviours and other markers that “externalize a person’s internal state” are solely representations of meaning and “inherently incomplete” as personal and social influences can never be fully captured (p.248). Similarly, Hall (2011) describes how images or other artefacts can act as a source of meaning-making about their social, cultural or individual context. The process of data collection and interpretation shapes the meaning it reflects. The way one sees the world shapes the meaning one makes of it and of its representations (Hall, 2013). In order to reflect this ambiguity within knowledge production, McDonnell (2014) argues for methods that are constructed, based on the participants’ understanding of the world, rather than a researcher’s interpretation of it.

Productive methods as described by McDonnell (2014) aim to capture and attribute meaning through creation and collaboration. As other participatory and art-based methods like photo voice, which McDonnell encompasses within his understanding, productive methods, focus on the participant not as an informant but as the executing part (Wang & Burris, 1994). The aim is to enforce change within who is primarily to carry out research, give agency to those who are not in a power position and learn through their meaning-making and representation.

The current study

The current study methodologically situated itself within the realm of productive methods, focusing on the documentation and visualization of the participant’s experiences and their interpretation of the word and themselves. This, along with the personal and social complexities involved in the experience and navigation of the gender binary on dating apps, should not be simplified nor explored within rigid categorization (McDonnell, 2014). Instead, these aspects should be treated with the fluidity that the topic and the participants’ experiences naturally entail, giving participants the space to engage in the process of data inquiry.

A combination of methods was used, including semi-structured focus groups, an adapted form of photo voice, where participants shared their dating app profiles and used them within the focus group conversation (Wang & Burris, 1994; Hall, 2013), as well as a “creative making” part, where participants were asked to create something in relation to a prompt they were given. The setting of focus groups gave space, for participants to share, and reflect on their experiences and ways of navigating in between or outside standardized binary ways. A group setting served as a collective approach to data inquiry (McDonnel, 2014) and to fostering different kinds of sharing, shared meaning-making and critical dialogue between the participants. The participants’ images within the discussion served as a representation that gave rise to and extended the discussion on how the participants experienced and navigated the gender binary, with consideration of the social, cultural and individual factors involved. The discussion was extended with collaborative making, letting the participants visually contribute to the prompt “How do you see yourself and/or how do you want to be seen on dating apps”, serving as a creation or artefact (Hall, 2013) that carries meaning. The prompt was chosen, in order to serve as an open entry point into thinking about their identity, ways of navigation and potential constraints or agency.

The current research does not focus on one specific dating app, as it is aimed to be inclusive of different dating apps, experiences and attitudes, opening up discussions on differences, problems and feelings towards various ways in which the binary is experienced and navigated on different apps. Real dating app profiles are used as they allow for a look into the participant’s real world.

Data-Collection

Participants were recruited through voluntary response sampling (Grill, 2020). The recruitment process took place online and participants were reached via the social media platforms Instagram and Facebook, where posts, including the basic information of the study, were shared through personal accounts and within public groups. Due to the small nature of

the population, sampling was preceded by a snowball sampling technique after initial participants had been recruited (Shaheen, & Pradhan 2019). Considering the group of interest and the research question, participants needed to fulfil specific requirements, namely, (1) self-identify as GNC; (2) be willing to contribute to the study through the sharing of images; (3) use/ have used dating apps within the past year; and (4) need to be over the age of 18.

Data collection took place in Rotterdam, the Netherlands. While the group in question was rather specific, Rotterdam served as a culturally diverse environment (Belabas & Eshuis 2019) and has a fluid population (Crul, 2019). This means that while the group in question is rather small, people from diverse backgrounds were able to be reached. In total, 11 participants were recruited and distributed among four focus groups of 3x3 and 1x2 participants. The focus groups took between 90- 120 minutes, whereby the last 30 minutes were used for the creative making. Conversations were started with a rather open conversation about GNC and then moved into more specific topics related to the participant's experiences. The Dating app images were mainly used during the second half of the focus groups when the conversations moved into more explicit discussions about the interface and their ways of navigation.

Data Analysis

Two sources of data need to be considered when analyzing the current methodology: (1) the data obtained during focus groups, and (2) the participant's art works from the creative-making part. Thematic Analysis as described by Braun and Clarke (2006), was used to analyze the data. This analysis, and its aim to identify patterns within data, is suited for visual as well as narrative data, is flexible and works in different contexts (Mooney & Bhui, 2023). To ensure reliability within this research process, the data analysis will be approached by following the guided process suggested for thematic analysis in photo voice, as described by Braun and Clarke (2006), including a six-step approach to analyze the data through:

“transcription, familiarization, coding, searching for themes, reviewing themes and defining themes (Braun & Clarke 2006).

Due to the fluent nature of GNC and the individuality and variety within this identification, the goal was not to identify distinct patterns within visual self-representation as this would contribute to the upholding of forced generalizability and categorization of gender. Instead, the analysis was informed by the meanings that participants made of the images, themselves and the ways they move on their dating apps. As highlighted by the nature of productive methods and situated knowledge, the current project was not aimed to generalize the experiences and ways of navigating binary ideas within dating, nor to find objective truths. Instead, it aimed to illustrate the individuality and ambiguity of identity within a broader social realm. Contradictions are not meant to be reduced, but embraced, as inherent to the topic. Consequently, account must be taken for what this study is not able to portray. The limited variation in age, as well as the limited educational diversity, must be taken into account.

Ethics and Privacy Implications

Due to the methodological approach and usage of imagery of the participants, full anonymity cannot be kept. Consent was given by all the participants. Names were replaced with pseudonyms if explicit consent for usage of the real name was not given. A full account of ethical and privacy considerations can be found in Appendix 2.

Stance as a Researcher

The binary notion of gender fails to fully represent the diversity within human experience and one’s understanding of the self. My personal and political perspective on gender emphasizes the fluidity and plurality of gender experiences and expressions, and rejects the idea that one has to fit within the binary of ‘female’ or ‘male’. By embracing a theoretical alignment with the notion of social and gender constructionism, I believe, that the complexity of gender identity, and formation as well as individual experiences and feelings

towards the gender binary are illustrated best by people who move outside the binary notion of gender.

Results

The Participants

The sample consisted of a group with an age range between 19-27, living in Rotterdam and with various nationalities (see Appendix A.) While all participants identified as GNC, there was a wide range of gender identifications among participants, including non-binary, gender-fluid and trans-non-binary. While some experiences and ways of navigation were shared between participants, others were as individual and fluent as the people who shared them.

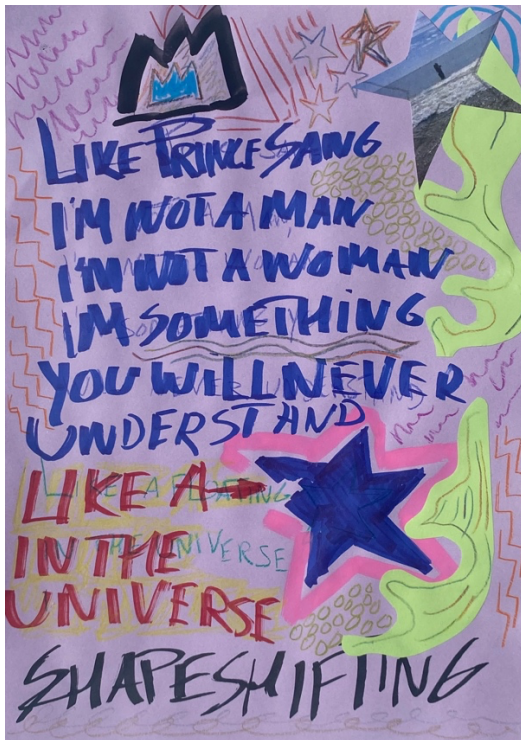
Overall, participants shared two different sources of experiencing and navigating the gender binary in online dating. The first was the interface itself, while the second involved interactions with people on and around the app. This included both, using the app to engage with others and interacting with people met through the app in offline settings. As a lot of experiences stemmed from dates, situated in real life and not only within singular encounters online, both will be discussed in the following analysis. The goal was to highlight what participants pointed out as important and necessary to share.

Due to the close relation between experience, navigation and self-representation, the following analysis follows a thematic approach, yet the first part focuses more on binary experiences, while the latter dives deeper into the participant's ways of navigation. Additionally, the last part of the analysis evolves more specifically around the navigation of dating apps, as a platform while the first part is more reflective of experiences on- and offline.

Gender Non-Conformity

To start this analysis, it is important to contextualize the participants' experiences and ways of navigating the gender binary within dating by taking the space to explore and elaborate on their identities, perceptions of gender and meaning-making of the gender binary.

Most participants gave similar meaning to what gender non-conformity means to them personally, describing it as a state of embraced non-definition; *"I think that's the whole thing. It's non-defined. Because gender is a defined thing, right? So anything that's not that it's a non-category and so like whatever, whatever I feel like"* (Charlie). They emphasized the fluidity, openness and individuality that gender non-conformity leaves with the exploration of the self, rather than the exploration of one's place within the categories of women and men, leaving room for something undefined and unprecise. For Jazz, the meaning is reflected within the lyrics from "I Would Die 4 U" by Prince, which they write down as a poem (Figure 1). Some participants were explicit about the liberation they experience through opposing the duality of gender and the established gendered norms and expectations *"Like it's free and you can do whatever and don't really stick to the set rules"* (Aleks). Thereby multiple participants mentioned the beauty and liberating effect of learning that they don't have to adhere to binary norms. Leander, who identifies as non-binary, mentioned feeling specifically comfortable with the terminology, as it articulates the active non-conforming and disruptive nature of their identity *"This negatory term like non-binary as well as non-harmless"*.

Figure 1*Creative making Jazz***A state of “Flux”**

Most participants described how they are still actively discovering themselves and their identity “*A state of flux*” as Malin described their current state of mind. This state was expressed to be particularly present when trying to navigate and understand the broadness and ambiguity of socially constructed gender norms, within and in opposition to their identity outside the binary

“I’m still so actively in the process of like, how far can I push it within all these little categories and outside of these little categories that I’ve learned and where’s the line for me, like in terms of expression and how I carry myself” (Tamar).

Simultaneously, participants described how difficult it is to separate the self from norms and rules about gender, “*I don’t know if I would be comfortable with having facial hair if it wasn’t so gendered. Personally, I feel that having facial hair is a signal of manliness. So it’s hard to separate the two. Cognitively at least*” (Charlie). Participants described being aware of the

gendered attributes within appearance, yet still feeling certain levels of comfort or discomfort with portraying certain gendered attributes as part of their body. This highlights the idea, as expressed by Bordo (1995), that the space in which identity formation and exploration outside binary norms take place, must be seen as complex and conflicting, mutually influenced by its subversive potential and social inscription (Butler, 1993).

For all participants, GNC formed a process, highlighted by continuous education and exploration of the self, within and outside of gendered norms. Malin, a non-binary person who was raised as a man, explicitly expressed, how identity formation for them is not solely about self-representation but exploring their identity through challenging and educating themselves about their own “toxic” behaviours and thoughts:

“The more I spend time in queer communities, the more I learn about consent, the more I learn about different ways of building relationships and different ways you can present yourself. The better my life gets and the more I'm able to separate myself from those behaviours and build healthier, longer-lasting relationships” (Malin).

Similarly, Leander describes the process of educating themselves, as *“A lot of unlearning and a lot of trying to find the bravery to experiment with that as well as someone who carries quite a masculine body”*.

The participants’ characterization of the continuous nature of self-exploration sets a framework for their realm of navigating the gender binary. While self-representational factors will be discussed more in-depth later on, it is important to note, that from the beginning of the conversations, it became clear, that the gendered meanings attributed to the body, bodily representation and the way one is able to re-articulate meaning to the such, is an inherent struggle of identity navigation outside the binary, re-posing the question of how much agency one has within their bodily and representative performances (Pitts 2000; Bordo 1995).

Binary Interfaces

One of the first things Leander said when being asked to introduce the dating apps they had used before was *“The general experience is horrible [...] not to go too much into the topic but it is very binary”*. This was not a singular encounter, but the general perception of dating apps through all the focus groups. Yet, groups and participants felt differently about the structural binary imposed by the apps. Leander, Charlie and Tamar perceived it as rather explicit, and close to what Vijlbrief et al., (2020) suggest about the structural limitations of dating apps. This was mentioned within the context of Bumble, and its “feminist” idea of women needing to send the first message; *“Then they put non-binary people into the in the male category you're not allowed to text first you know”* (Tamar). Similarly, Leander, who recently re-downloaded Tinder, pointed out, that while the app allows them to select different gender options when they sign up, you can only be shown as a man or woman on the app. These explicit tools (McLeod & McArthur 2019) were not seen as limiting by Rikki and Aleks who were both primarily using Bumble and explained: *“The app allows you to put whatever pronouns and identity. I think that's great, other than that, I didn't feel like I don't belong to this space. I didn't feel like that space is a hetero-cis space”* (Aleks). Other groups perceived the binary on dating apps rather as *“a binary in practice, not a binary in the settings”* (Malin) or felt like the structural binary that some apps impose did not affect them, and rather the people on the apps fostered the binary experience *“They are like a reflection of society”* (Lukas). This, however, also depended on the apps that were used (view Table 1). From the two most “popular” dating apps (Tinder and Bumble), most participants used Bumble while Tinder was being avoided *“I don't want to navigate there at all anymore because it has become so binary”* (Charlie). Bumble, Her and Hinge were generally seen as a better environment *“I think I got less like weird invasive questions on Bumble than I did on Tinder. I think Bumble is maybe more queer-friendly”* (Lukas), while Grindr was generally counted as a very male-dominated and “sex-driven” place.

Binary Boxes

One ruling theme within the conversations was the experience of binary gendered categorization and resulting expectations or invalidations from other people, mutually present within online and offline encounters. Categorizations became apparent through gendered scripts carried out towards the participants, depending on the other person's assumption of their gender in a binary way (Butler 1993); *"I always notice people treating me differently, like, depending on [...] whatever assumptions they made about my gender or like how far along I was in medical transition or whatever [...] You can just feel it"* (Lukas). Means of categorization are thereby highly dependent on the participants' visual attributes, interpreted through a binary lens, reflecting the socially inscribed idea of gendered and stylized bodies as a source of social categorization (Butler, 1993; Hall, 2011).

"For example, when I dress very masculine and I feel a bit more masculine energy that day, I will be treated as a guy, kind of. Just so weird, I'm not a guy. I'll never be one, I don't wanna be treated as one" (Tamar).

Tamar describes this as a dysphoric experience and how these dynamics are often not detected or consciously experienced by people who do not move outside the binary, aligning with Bowker and Stars' (2000) idea of structures being visible, only for whom they are not designed.

"It's a hard thing to understand, I think, for people that are not queer or genderqueer. It's almost like you're on the other side of the glass trying to tell them, like, what the fuck, I'm seeing something that you don't. I can't even put into words that I feel that you're treating me in a certain way because of scripts [...] which is super nuanced, but now that I started to notice I always can't unsee it which is really sad, it makes me really sad sometimes" (Tamar).

Categorization and gender roles in queer dating

Another way in which binary gendered categorizations were experienced, was through behavioural expectations visualized as gender roles. These were also described as apparent

within queer dating. Both Charlie, who was raised as a man, and Tamar, who describes themselves as rather masculine presenting feel the expectancy of having to “take initiative” within their dates. Charlie actively opposes this due to its constructed nature (Butler 1995) “*I won't because that's patterned behaviour*” (Charlie). These patterns were explained as being apparent when dating men and women, yet there was consensus among all participants, of women just being “*more open to anything*” (Isabel). For this reason, many participants explained that they avoid men on dating apps, “*Across none of the apps there's a button to like click 'Queer guys who I feel safe around' [...] I want that checkbox please*” (Malin). This was not dependent on the participant's sexual orientation but rather a general measure of safety.

The Heterosexual and Gender Non-Conformity

The participants' experiences highlighted a contradiction: While people were dating them, they were still identifying as heterosexual. This suggests a disregard for GNC experience in order to fit one's attraction within a heterosexual and binary framework (Butler, 1993). This becomes visible in one of Charlie's dating stories: “*He said something within the lines of- 'it doesn't really matter, does it? Because if I see somebody as something, like, if I see you as a man, then, it really doesn't change anything' - I was just like, oh, you know, it does actually*” (Charlie). For Tamar, this raises questions, specifically in regards to how they carry themselves;

“You wonder why people are attracted to you and whether or not they really see you for being a non-binary person or if they are just putting you in their own little categories [...] I'm at this point to masculine presenting, but when men do approach me, or when they used to approach me on dating apps when I was still a bit more feminine presenting, you could tell that they would really read over the fact that I was non-binary. They approach you in a way that [...] can feel very dysphoric, I think, for my gender identity” (Tamar).

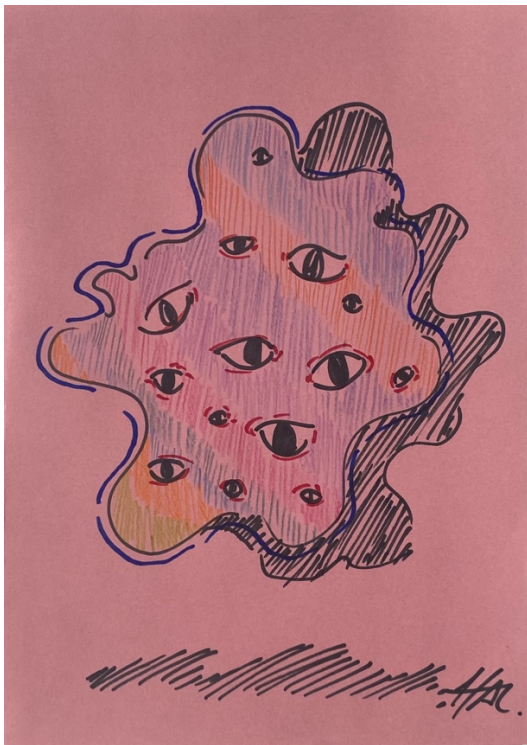
As Isabel explains, this only happens within dating as it involves sexual relationships. Talking about their best friend, they note “*She does not have to think of me like oh I'm attracted to women so I'm gonna think about you as a woman. Because I'm not attracted to you I'm just gonna treat you as you are. So it's really frustrating that most people can't feel that way when sexual relationships come along*” (Isabel). While this contradiction visualizes the construction of gendered and heteronormative attraction and compulsive heterosexuality in itself, it also visualizes the constraints that performativity puts on its subversive potential, by deeming GNC unintelligible (Butler, 1993).

The Body and its Meanings

In order to not get overly repetitive within the following parts, I must note that the role of self-representation moved through the conversations like a red thread. The experiences participants had with other people were dictated by the creation of meaning directed towards their bodies and means of representation. Consequently, the process of navigation was, for many, ruled by “trying to make sense” of their identity and simultaneously their body. Ideas about the gendered body as a constraint within one’s identity formation were expressed within the drawing that Isabel made within the creative making process. Figure 2 shows how Isabel expressed, wanting to be seen on dating apps: “*It would be so much easier to just everyone being little souls without shapes and to multicolour without criticizing how everyone looks. So this is like a bit of an ideal kind to be perceived*”.

Figure 2

Creative making Isabel



During the focus group with Isabel, it became apparent that their experience of people's invalidation of their non-binary identity in dating is often related to Isabel's choice to present themselves; *"Just because I'm really femme"*. Isabel expressed, how people would often label their experience as "a phase", *"Just because the day you met them, you don't look like what you said you feel"* (Isabel). Visual attributes, seen through a gendered lens are thereby equated with how one supposedly feels or identifies (Butler, 1993). Based on this experience of disregard, primarily from straight men who often still regard Isabel as a woman, as well as a fear of romantic rejection, they mention how they often feel uncomfortable or scared to tell people about their gender identity *"Maybe they will just not be comfortable with*

it. They will leave and when you actually really like the person you're like should I just hide this little part of me?". Contemplating the downplay of their own identity is one way in which Isabel navigates the space between being desired within the cis-heteronormative paradigm of desirability and being true to their identity. Thereby, the consideration of other people's level of comfort raises a new question: how much value does one attribute to their own experience versus other people's heterosexual experience when navigating binary norms? Utilizing Butler's (1990) framework, of the Cis-Heterosexual Matrix, it becomes clear, that diminishing value from identities that lie outside the cis-heterosexual "norm", is an essential part of the matrix, and current structures of power are maintained, potentially influencing how people navigate their identities and underlying socially learned ideas of intelligibility that can be seen. The experience of a power struggle (Bordo, 1995).

Desirability

For Malin, GNC was closely tied to how she wants to be "perceived and desired" by others. During the creative making, she drew herself in purple "*It's been increasingly become a motif of my femininity. You can see from these earrings that I have in, my fingernails. And also because my mom always liked purple, so it reminds me of her and I guess her feminine energies*" (Figure 3).

Figure 3

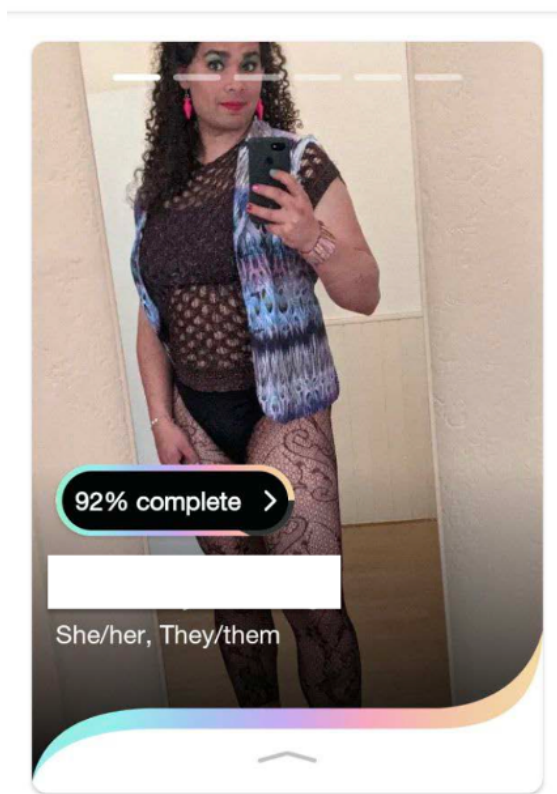
Creative making Malin



Malin navigates binary norms by intentionally utilizing her self-representation in order to provoke specific reactions and desirability within others “*You have to very much know who you want to be attracted to, who you want to attract and who you want to match with and have that in mind and design your profile*”. Thereby she actively tries to navigate the way she is perceived and desired, by experimenting with “*I think one of the most openly feminine and also kind of sexualized pictures that I've ever put on my profile*” (Figure 4), to see whether presenting in a way that is more in line with a gendered idea of femininity will provoke the responses that she is hoping for. A process of experimenting with people’s reactions, and the boundaries of binary gendered norms of femininity and masculinity and how she can fit in there or re-articulate these ideas for herself and others. While at first glance, her approach might seem like a form of accommodation to a rather binary ideal of femininity (Bordo, 1999), it can be seen as a way of gaining or re-claiming agency over the body. While it moves within the duality of masculinity and femininity (Butler, 1993), we can see it as a disruptive act, challenging the idea of what is seen as acceptable for a body and the way it is represented.

Figure 4

Malin



The Authentic Self

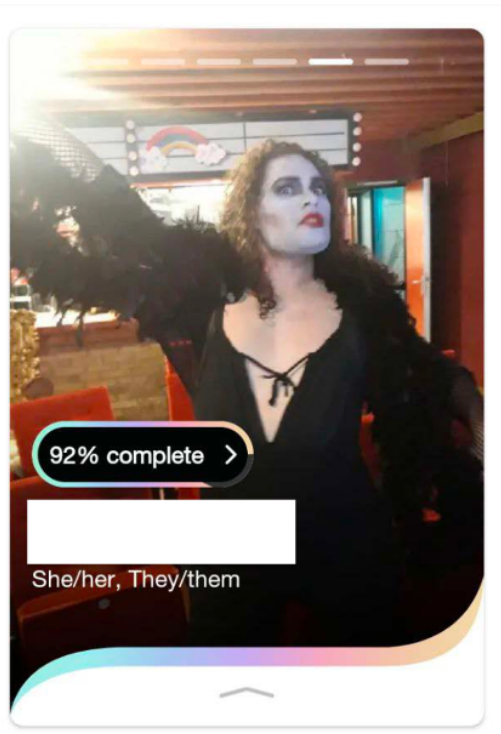
Reoccurring was also the topic of consistency within the way participants portrayed themselves, often equated with being “authentic”. For Malin, this was apparent when she is not in, as she calls it “*girls mode*”, the state she feels particularly comfortable in, making her conscious and scared of not matching a specific version of herself or not matching someone’s idea of sexual desirability when meeting up with them, specifically with cis-men due to her more “masculine” appearing attributes. Referring to one of her dating app pictures she notes “*I look very male in that one it's a cute picture but I really struggle with putting that on there because I think people will assume that this is my default*” (Figure 5). For Rikki, consistency was less related to their desirability and more related to not feeling like themselves when looking at their profile and not wanting “*to be like a catfish*”. Therefore they always made sure to use pictures that show them in different outfits;

“I really like baggy fits like very masculine presenting but I also want to show that side of me that's not. So people know that I'm also like [...]I also like to dress up more feminine [...] But still when I look at my Bumble, I'm thinking is this really Rikki” (Rikki).

We should therefore evaluate the social meaning of authenticity, as the meaning that is attached to it is based on the idea that, for a body to make sense it must be categorizable. Only the body that is understood would then be perceived as "authentic" (Butler 1993).

Figure 5

Malin



This idea of authenticity inherently complicated the experience for participants. In line with McLeod and McArthur's (2019) understanding of the interface as structurally constraining the possibilities of making the self "intelligible", participants shared the experience of dating apps being very limited towards how they are able to present themselves and not allowing for a broad display of identity "*When you have to put yourself out there, you're like, which part do I choose? I have so many versions of myself. What do I choose to put out there in a way that it represents my whole?*" (Aleks). As participants mentioned, the limited ways to represent yourself on dating apps, stand in contrast to the fluidity of a lot of GNC experiences "*It immediately takes it away from this fluidity of gender expression*" (Leander). Lukas acknowledges this as being difficult for everyone, no matter their gender identity, yet posing specific difficulties when being GNC and having a more fluent gender expression. This suggests, that constraints imposed by dating apps extend beyond the explicit tools being designed for heteronormative needs (McLeod and McArthur, 2019). They also include implicit constraints, where the idea of self-represented tools is based on a static and consistent idea of binary self-representation.

McLeod and McArthur described the ability to portray oneself on an app as a level of agency provided by the app. But what does being agent of your identity on an app truly mean? As Hall (2011) posits, meaning is constructed and dependent on one's positionality. What constitutes agency for one person may not reflect agency for another. While tools like apps are described as enabling agency, the agency we possess is only the meaning we attribute to it, more specifically, the level of identity portrayal we consider variable and fluid. While the participants' experiences align with McLeod's and McArthurs (2019) idea that the interface and its level of agency influence how well one can present themselves, their experiences also highlight how agency is framed and its limitations and cultural context.

The Cuntly Queer: Categorizing The Non-Category

Looks were seen as conflicting in another way, namely within their attribution to or recognition as queer or gender-queer as highlighted by comments like *“Ohh, but how are you non-binary? You don't look non-binary”* (Rikki) that participants received on dating apps. This is closely tied to the idea of ‘having’ to present differently than your gender assigned at birth, in order for people to supposedly legitimize your experience. Isabel reflected on having felt pressured before, to present more masculine, out of fear of not appearing “gender-fluid” enough *“I felt pressure showing people, like to basically make other people's life easier to know how to call me that day and in the end I was like, I don't like this, I feel very uncomfortable wearing men's clothes”*. Isabel describes how they were not “feeling pretty” on the pictures they took at that time. Looking at their images now, they noticed that they moved away from the urge to present a certain way, describing their pictures now as “super feminine” (Figure 1 and 2). A process of re-articulating the meaning behind what “pretty” can mean when not aligning with the binary idea of gender. Isabel's process of navigating other people's perceptions next to their own identity formation can be seen as resisting normative expectations (Butler 1995). For Isabel, feeling attractive and confident is closely tied to

presenting in a way that aligns with their sense of beauty and comfort rather than a gendered idea of looks.

Figure 6

Isabel



Figure 7

Isabel



The specific queer or “gender-fluid” look as Isabel described before, was not only a topic for them. When talking about this, Leander brought up the concept of “cuntiness” as a new trend within queerness, or as they described it “queer extravagance”. A queer that is recognizable as queer and sets standards for ways of self-representation. Tamar and Charlie extend this by emphasizing how this specific kind of queer is being normalized not only within the queer community but “popularized and capitalized of” by straight people *“There's a certain type of cool queer and if you don't fit that you're not relevant anyway but now they allow this small portion of Quote-unquote cuntly queer people to be cool”* (Tamar).

These thoughts closely tie to Butler’s concept of performativity and performance, losing its disruptive potential through its “palatability” as Charlie calls it, leading to a reinforcement of the binary in a modified way (Epstein, 1994). In line with this, Jazz

mentioned how they do not like the term non-binary, as it is often being viewed as a “third gender”. This can pose additional challenges of navigating identity. Leander explained how the specific queer look makes them feel dysphoric at times influencing their self-perception and self-representation on dating apps *“I don't like the pictures of myself because when I see pictures of myself they are too masculine or they don't feel [...] like I just don't find myself pretty”* (Leander).

Gender as a Game

While everyone had different experiences and ways of dealing with binary norms and navigating their self-representation in relation to that, Lukas, who identifies as trans-non-binary, mentioned that self-representation for him is a way of explicitly playing with social norms and expectations.

“I think that for me, gender is like a game almost, like it's a performance. [...] And it's just so absurd almost that it's like this whole act that you have to carry out all the time and it's expected of you and it's like imposed on you even if you are pretty clearly not expressing that in any way you're not performing anything like it. For me it's kind of fun to play with that” (Lukas).

Playing with expectations, to him also includes often not being or wanting to be “approachable” to cis-people, or those who show discomfort by not being able to recognize him *“I want cis people to be scared of me. It's my goal in life [...]. It's just fun to kind of play around with people's expectations and treat it as absurd as it is”*. Oppositely, identifying as trans to Charlie meant moving within a more limited space of presentation and experimentation, being more closely tied to the idea of having to be intelligible (Butler, 1993) *“I need to be very sure of what my identity is and what that means and how I want to present myself in order to justify that that is my identity”* (Charlie).

Self-Protection and Boundaries

While choosing different platforms, like the avoidance of Grindr or Tinder as well as making sure someone “is queer”, is a way to avoid and navigate potential binary behaviours, Leander mentions *“I have to be very explicit in the language mostly because I feel like the images are not queer enough or something. So it's like, it feels very stupid. It's something I don't want to do, but having to be super explicit to add something about being queer as a sort of precaution”* (Leander) (Figure 8). Lukas explains a similar experience *“If I put this in my bio then people already know that they're not to interact with me, part of it for me is kind of like a reactionary tool to deal with. It's like taking up space”*. As a safety measure, they always put T for T (trans for trans) in their bio *“I don't really want to meet like a weird cis freak that's gonna be weird”* (Lukas). Preferences thereby often become explicit boundaries; *“Making this box around yourself”*, as Jazz describes this process (Figure 9). This poses an interesting observation of how the process of navigation and the creation of “concrete” boundaries is inherently tied to acting and behaving within means of categorization. Utilizing a tool that it is opposing. This shows not only our deeply engrained categorical thinking (Butler, 1993; Hall, 2011), but contradictory, categorization as a means of protection.

Figure 8*Jazz***Figure 9***Leander*

Grindr

The app that was mostly associated with sexualisation and harassment was GRINDR. Most participants stayed away from this app, due to their general avoidance of men or discomfort with the app due to the overt sexualization towards GNC people “*On Grindr, if you have a different pronoun than the cis majority, you're sexualized because they think, oh that's kinky, that's cool, that's hot, someone who's not cis*” (Aleks).

Aleks shared their specific experiences of navigating their identity on Grindr by using the app mainly to, as they call it “provoke men” through being on the app as a non-binary person:

“I mainly do it from a political stance, as in I really like to humiliate men. So I go and Grindr because the target there is mainly gay men who are not very deconstructed. So it's kind of like I go there as a non-binary person and they start sexualizing me because they're like oh what are you what is this are you trans do you have a pussy do you have a

dick, these kind of things, and I either make them rethink it or we get into some sexual talk where I am very dominant over them” (Aleks).

We can interpret this as disruptive in many ways: moving on the app and reclaiming space, asserting presence as a non-binary person; trying to educate others, and re-position and navigate your identity within a space (Butler, 1993). Interesting, however, is the reclaim of agency and bodily autonomy that stands in opposition or can be seen as a reactive tool to the sexualization experienced on the app. Gaining control and agency over the non-normative body and finding ways to control the meaning others attribute it (Hall, 2011).

Another explanation might be found in Emily’s experience. Being approached or treated in binary ways to them has the effect of heightening their sense of self *“It makes me more sure of who I am and kind of shows how I don’t want to be approached”*. A way for them to find out where they want to position themselves and their gender identity is by learning how they do not want to be positioned by and in their surroundings.

Discussion and Conclusion

Through the lens of queer studies and the utilization of productive methods, the current study aimed to explore how people identifying as GNC, experience and navigate binary ideas of gender on dating apps. Additionally, the role of self-representation was explored within its involvement in these processes.

While the participants' experiences can be described as conflicting, challenging, and full of contradictions, they were commonly on a journey of self-exploration, navigating binary social structures, and finding their place in between and outside of normative ideas of what gender means and looks like. Dating apps thereby posed as a very specific environment for the experience of a gender binary, adding more layers to the already complex and intertwined process of navigation, by serving as a space heavily based on a divided idea of whom should be loved and desired.

The connecting theme around all conversations and topics that were touched upon, was self-representation in different forms and shapes, yet primarily revolving around one's visual attributes like clothes or the body. Self-representation connected the binary experiences that participants made with ones resulting navigation strategies. Thereby the ways participants experienced the effects and norms attached to the socially constructed idea of gender, visualized the political structures of power, that lie in the meaning attributed to ideas of gender and the cycle of performativity (Butler, 1993). Their experiences allowed for a look beyond these structural implications and visualized them within the context of dating apps.

While the results revealed the lines and boundaries of performativity, they also highlighted the challenges of moving in between and beyond the norm (Bordo, 1995), as well as how moving in the space in-between performativity and performance can be disruptive. Participants navigated social binary ideas and their identity in many different ways, showing the individuality that can be involved in meaning-making, as well as its constraints. A struggle between agency and performativity. A process that is defined and simultaneously reflects the progressions that inherently define life outside the binary in its social-political context (Hall, 2011).

We are far from a world where gender does not matter. The meaning of gender is best explored and made sense of by those who move beyond current structures of normality (Bowker & Star, 2000). The current study extends the understanding of GNC experiences from a perspective outside the normative, thereby it not only enhances meaning about the participants and their meaning-making as individuals but also gives rise to an understanding of the environment they move in. A perspective on an environment that often goes unquestioned or is not consciously perceived. Consequently, the current study does not solely illustrate the specific gendered experiences and ways of navigating gendered norms, dynamics and behaviours experienced on different dating apps, it also gives rise to the broader social

and political standing of the people who move outside the conventional and normative idea of gendered looks, attributes and behaviours and how they are being maintained.

Limitations

First and foremost, the current study needs to be considered within the context of its limitations, particularly the sample, which included only young participants. Further research should investigate differences in experience and means of navigation across different age groups, as GNC experiences and perceptions of social norms might vary significantly. Moreover, the current study does not allow for generalizability. While some recurring themes were present in the experiences participants had with binary categorizations on dating apps, the participants' interpretations, feelings, and means of navigation are individual and fluid, and therefore cannot and should not be categorized. While the current study does not look at differences between gender binary norms in the context of dating apps versus outside the realm of dating, results suggest a difference between dating spaces and non-dating spaces. Meanings are dependent on their context (Hall, 2011), consequently, it would be of relevance to investigate potential differences within various environments, as well as to take a closer look at specific dating apps, their structural design, and the people who use them.

Lastly, the current study was able to provide a space for the communal sharing of experiences. Many participants expressed that they enjoyed the conversations and gained insights about themselves or in a broader context. For some, it was the first time discussing these topics with people they were not explicitly close to. I am very grateful to have been part of this process of sharing and exploring experiences, and for the trust the participants placed in me with their often very personal experiences and thoughts. I found the conversations very inspiring and learned a lot about myself and my ways of seeing the world. Hearing different takes on a topic that can often be very saddening, yet a topic that is able to reveal so much joy, fluidity and individuality was truly beautiful.

References

- Atkinson, E., & DePalma, R. (2020). Un-believing the matrix: Queering consensual heteronormativity. In *Judith Butler and Education* (pp. 91-103). Routledge.
- Belabas, W., & Eshuis, J. (2019). Superdiversity and city branding: Rotterdam in perspective. *Coming to Terms with Superdiversity: The Case of Rotterdam*, 209-223.
- Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2006). Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative research in psychology*, 3(2), 77-101.
- Butler, J. (1990). *Gender trouble : feminism and the subversion of identity*. Routledge.
<https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203902752>
- Butler, J. (1993). *Bodies that matter : on the discursive limits of "sex"*. Routledge.
<https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203828274>
- Bordo, S. 1995. *Unbearable Weight:Feminism, Western Culture and the Body*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Bowker, G., & Star, S. L. (1999). Sorting things out. *Classification and its consequences*, 4.
- Campaioli, G. (2023). Hiding the gender binary behind the ‘other’.: A cross-platform analysis of gender and sexuality self-categorization affordances on mobile dating apps. *AG About Gender-International Journal of Gender Studies*, 12(23).
- Cao, R. J. D. (2022). Book review: The politics of dating apps: gender, sexuality, and emergent publics in Urban China: by Lik Sam Chan, Cambridge, The MIT Press, 2021, ISBN 978-0-262-54234-0. *Asian Journal of Communication*
<https://doi.org/10.1080/01292986.2022.2127811>
- Chan, L. S. (2021). *The politics of dating apps: Gender, sexuality, and emergent publics in urban China*. MIT Press.
- Comunello, F., Parisi, L., & Ieracitano, F. (2021). Negotiating gender scripts in mobile dating apps: Between affordances, usage norms and practices. *Information, Communication & Society*, 24(8), 1140-1156.

<https://doi.org/10.1080/1369118X.2020.1787485>

Crul, M., Lelie, F., & Keskiner, E. (2019). The second and third generation in Rotterdam:

Increasing diversity within diversity. *Coming to Terms with Superdiversity: The Case of Rotterdam*, 57-71.

Ellison N. B., Hancock J. T. & Toma C. L. (2011). Profile as promise: A

framework for conceptualizing veracity in online dating self-representations. *New Media*

<https://doi.org/10.1177/1461444811410395>

Epstein, S. 1994. "A Queer Encounter: Sociology and the Study of Sexuality."

Sociological Theory 12(2):188-202.

Gagnon, J. H. (1990). The explicit and implicit use of the scripting perspective in sex

research. *Annual review of sex research*, 1(1), 1-43.

Garritano, A. (2021). Inside a binary interface: the construction of gender and identity in mainstream dating apps. *Occam's Razor*. Retrieved through:

<http://occamsrazorwvu.org/volume-11-1/2021/6/6/inside-a-binary-interface-the-construction-of-gender-and-identity-in-mainstream-dating-apps>

Griffiths, D. A., & Armstrong, H. L. (2024). "They were talking to an idea they had about

me": a qualitative analysis of transgender individuals' experiences using dating apps. *The Journal of Sex Research*, 61(1), 119-132.

Hall, S., & Nixon, S. (2013). *Representation : culture representation and signifying*

practice (Second edition). Open University ; Sage.

MacLeod, C., & McArthur, V. (2019). The construction of gender in dating apps: An interface

analysis of Tinder and Bumble. *Feminist Media Studies*, 19(6), 822-840.

McDonnell, T. E. (2014). Drawing out culture: Productive methods to measure cognition and

resonance. *Theory and Society*, 43, 247-274.

Mooney, R., & Bhui, K. (2023). Analysing multimodal data that have been collected using

photovoice as a research method. *BMJ open*, 13(4), e068289.

Pitts, V. (2000). Visibly queer: Body technologies and sexual politics. *Sociological Quarterly*, 41(3), 443-463.

Vijlbrief, A., Saharso, S., & Ghorashi, H. (2020). Transcending the gender binary: Gender non-binary young adults in Amsterdam. *Journal of LGBT Youth*, 17:1, 89-106,
<https://doi.org/10.1080/19361653.2019.1660295>

Appendix A

Overview Participants

Table 1

Overview Participants

| Name | Pronouns | Age | Nationality | Gender Identity | DA Experiences |
|---------|---------------|-----|-----------------|------------------|--|
| Alex | They/Them | 23 | Romanian | NonBinary | Bumble, Grindr, Her |
| Charlie | They/Them | 24 | British/ Dutch | Non-Binary | Bumble, Tinder |
| Emily | She/ Her | 23 | Dutch | Trans Non-Binary | Bumble, Her, Tinder |
| Rikki | They/ Them | 23 | Dutch | Non-Binary | Bumble, Tinder |
| Jan | They/ Them | 24 | Dutch | Non-Binary | Bumble, Tinder |
| Leander | They/ Them | 25 | Dutch | Non-Binary | Tinder, Feeld |
| Lukas | He /They | 25 | British | Trans Non-Binary | Bumble, Tinder |
| Tamar | They/ Them | 21 | Dutch | Non-Binary | Bumble, Tinder |
| Jazz | She/ They/ He | 23 | French/ Ivorian | Gender-Fluid | Bumble, Her, Tinder |
| Malin | She/ They | 27 | American | Trans Non-Binary | Bumble, Breeze, Her, Hinge, Tinder, Grindr |
| Isabel | She/ They/ He | 19 | Spanish | Non-Binary | Bumble, Hinge, Tinder |

Appendic B

Ethics and Privacy Checklist



CHECKLIST ETHICAL AND PRIVACY ASPECTS OF RESEARCH

INSTRUCTION

This checklist should be completed for every research study that is conducted at the Department of Public Administration and Sociology (DPAS). This checklist should be completed *before* commencing with data collection or approaching participants. Students can complete this checklist with help of their supervisor.

This checklist is a mandatory part of the empirical master's thesis and has to be uploaded along with the research proposal.

The guideline for ethical aspects of research of the Dutch Sociological Association (NSV) can be found on their website (http://www.nsv-sociologie.nl/?page_id=17). If you have doubts about ethical or privacy aspects of your research study, discuss and resolve the matter with your EUR supervisor. If needed and if advised to do so by your supervisor, you can also consult Dr. Bonnie French, coordinator of the Sociology Master's Thesis program.

PART I: GENERAL INFORMATION

Project title: Master Thesis

Name, email of student: Juliana Schön; 500395js@student.eur.nl

Name, email of supervisor: Samira van Bohemen; vanbohemen@essb.eur.nl

Start date and duration: 24/03/24-

Is the research study conducted within DPAS **YES** - NO

If 'NO': at or for what institute or organization will the study be conducted?

(e.g. internship organization)

PART II: HUMAN SUBJECTS

1. Does your research involve human participants. YES - NO

If 'NO': skip to part V.

If 'YES': does the study involve medical or physical research? YES - NO

Research that falls under the Medical Research Involving Human Subjects Act ([WMO](#)) must first be submitted to [an accredited medical research ethics committee](#) or the Central Committee on Research Involving Human Subjects ([CCMO](#)).

2. Does your research involve field observations without manipulations that will not involve identification of participants. YES - NO

If 'YES': skip to part IV.

3. Research involving completely anonymous data files (secondary data that has been anonymized by someone else). YES - NO

If 'YES': skip to part IV.

PART III: PARTICIPANTS

1. Will information about the nature of the study and about what participants can expect during the study be withheld from them? YES - NO
2. Will any of the participants not be asked for verbal or written 'informed consent,' whereby they agree to participate in the study? YES - NO
3. Will information about the possibility to discontinue the participation at any time be withheld from participants? YES - NO
4. Will the study involve actively deceiving the participants? YES - NO
Note: almost all research studies involve some kind of deception of participants. Try to think about what types of deception are ethical or non-ethical (e.g. purpose of the study is not told, coercion is exerted on participants, giving participants the feeling that they harm other people by making certain decisions, etc.).
5. Does the study involve the risk of causing psychological stress or negative emotions beyond those normally encountered by participants? YES - NO
6. Will information be collected about special categories of data, as defined by the GDPR (e.g. racial or ethnic origin, political opinions, religious or philosophical beliefs, trade union membership, genetic data, biometric data for the purpose of uniquely identifying a person, data concerning mental or physical health, data concerning a person's sex life or sexual orientation)? YES - NO
7. Will the study involve the participation of minors (<18 years old) or other groups that cannot give consent? YES - NO
8. Is the health and/or safety of participants at risk during the study? YES - NO
9. Can participants be identified by the study results or can the confidentiality of the participants' identity not be ensured? YES - NO
10. Are there any other possible ethical issues with regard to this study? YES - NO

If you have answered 'YES' to any of the previous questions, please indicate below why this issue is unavoidable in this study.

- The current study aims to answer the research question: 'How do gender-non-conforming individuals navigate traditional gender norms and hetero- and cis-normative visual standards through their self-representation on dating apps?'. Due to the nature of this question, and to answer it appropriately, data needs to be gathered in regard to the participant's sexuality and sexual identity since it is the focus of the research question and lays the foundation of the data that is going to be gathered regarding the participants self-representation. Moreover, due to the methodological approach that was chosen for the current project, and due to its visual baseline, participants cannot be held anonymous. The current methodology was chosen, as an approach that allows for individuality and for the group in question to actively participate in the study, instead of the study being conducted on them, reflecting their needs and their experience, which is an appropriate way of approaching this topic. Moreover, giving the possibility to learn from a different perspective. Taking the imagery allows for the self-expression of the participants and their reflections thereof. Yet, consent of the participants will be granted for the study to use their imagery and for them to not be anonymous within the process.

What safeguards are taken to relieve possible adverse consequences of these issues (e.g., informing participants about the study afterwards, extra safety regulations, etc.).

- Informed consent will be gathered and participants will be informed about the process, their anonymity or lack thereof, as well as their rights within the research process in order for them to make an informed choice about their participation. Participants will be informed about the content of the study and the topics that will be discussed or could potentially come up within the informed consent. Their participation is voluntary.

Are there any unintended circumstances in the study that can cause harm or have negative (emotional) consequences to the participants? Indicate what possible circumstances this could be.

-
- Due to the unstructured approach and the freedom given to participants within focus groups, topics can come up that were not initially anticipated for and could lead to potential distress or negative emotions of participants. Yet, bringing back triggers is not necessarily a negative experience, but can also have healing qualities, specifically within the context of a focus group, and the possibility of similar experiences being shared and a room that promotes a positive development of self-exploration and reflection. Yet, to prevent any harm, the informed consent form will be made as explicit as possible, and potential occurrences of topics will be taken into consideration for the participants to make an informed choice. Moreover, participation is voluntary and can be withdrawn at any point of the process.
-

Please attach your informed consent form in Appendix I, if applicable.

Continue to part IV.

PART IV: SAMPLE

Where will you collect or obtain your data?

- The data will be obtained through pictures provided by the participants as well as through focus groups that will follow. The Focus groups will be recorded and transcribed for the following data analysis.

Note: indicate for separate data sources.

What is the (anticipated) size of your sample?

- 10-15
-
-

Note: indicate for separate data sources.

What is the size of the population from which you will sample?

- The educated guess about the population size is about 0.5% of the population, as estimated by Goodman et al. (2019), which would result in around **3.110** gender non-conforming people in Rotterdam considering its current population of around 623.600.
-
-

Note: indicate for separate data sources.

Continue to part V.

Part V: Data storage and backup

Where and when will you store your data in the short term, after acquisition?

- Photos and interviews will be saved to Microsoft OneDrive, and will be password-protected, to ensure privacy and security.

Note: indicate for separate data sources, for instance for paper-and pencil test data, and for digital data files.

Who is responsible for the immediate day-to-day management, storage and backup of the data arising from your research?

- Juliana Schön, as a researcher, will be responsible.

How (frequently) will you back-up your research data for short-term data security?

- The drive will be backed up weekly.

In case of collecting personal data how will you anonymize the data?

- Due to the current design of Photo-Voice and the inclusion of images taken of the participants, anonymity cannot be provided. However, participants will participate voluntarily and will be informed about the method and the usage of images beforehand, to make an informed choice. Consent will be provided by the participants. Moreover, names will be replaced by pseudonyms if consent for the referral to the real name is not given.

Note: It is advisable to keep directly identifying personal details separated from the rest of the data. Personal details are then replaced by a key/ code. Only the code is part of the database with data and the list of respondents/research subjects is kept separate.

PART VI: SIGNATURE

Please note that it is your responsibility to follow the ethical guidelines in the conduct of your study. This includes providing information to participants about the study and ensuring confidentiality in storage and use of personal data. Treat participants respectfully, be on time at appointments, call participants when they have signed up for your study and fulfil promises made to participants.

Furthermore, it is your responsibility that data are authentic, of high quality and properly stored. The principle is always that the supervisor (or strictly speaking the Erasmus University Rotterdam) remains owner of the data, and that the student should therefore hand over all data to the supervisor.

Hereby I declare that the study will be conducted in accordance with the ethical guidelines of the Department of Public Administration and Sociology at Erasmus University Rotterdam. I have answered the questions truthfully.

Name student:

Name (EUR) supervisor:

Date:

Date:

PART VI: SIGNATURE

Please note that it is your responsibility to follow the ethical guidelines in the conduct of your study. This includes providing information to participants about the study and ensuring confidentiality in storage and use of personal data. Treat participants respectfully, be on time at appointments, call participants when they have signed up for your study and fulfil promises made to participants.

Furthermore, it is your responsibility that data are authentic, of high quality and properly stored. The principle is always that the supervisor (or strictly speaking the Erasmus University Rotterdam) remains owner of the data, and that the student should therefore hand over all data to the supervisor.

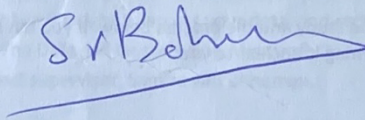
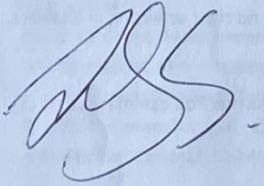
Hereby I declare that the study will be conducted in accordance with the ethical guidelines of the Department of Public Administration and Sociology at Erasmus University Rotterdam. I have answered the questions truthfully.

Name student:

Name (EUR) supervisor: *dr. Samira v. Bohemen*

Date: *08.04.24*

Date: *08-04-2024*



Appendix C

Information and Consent Form

The Experience of the Gender Binary on Dating Apps and Self-Representation

Contact Details:

Reseracher: Juliana Schön

e-mail: 500395js@student.eur.nl

+4915117512377

If you have any questions about the study or your privacy rights, such as accessing, changing, deleting, or updating your data, please contact me.

Dear all,

This current study investigates the social construct of the gender binary through your experiences and self-representation on online Dating Apps. Apart from that, the study investigates the idea of research and activism in relation to the topic. We will work with different art-based and participatory methods, which means that they are focused on your experiences, individuality and the idea of promoting critical dialogue.

The current project is only possible because of your help! I appreciate you taking the time and I'm very curious about your experiences, ideas and stories.

I will explain the study and the process below. If you have any questions, please don't hesitate to ask me!

In this study, you will:

- Share your dating app profile (the app you prefer or use most).
- Participate in a focus group where you will talk about your general thoughts and experiences of the gender binary on dating apps. This will take place on one selected day and take between 90-120 minutes.
- Participate in collaborative making.

Usage of your Imagery

The images that you provide within the research process as part of the Photo Voice will only be used as part of this Master Thesis and as a contribution and exploration of individuality and self-expression as well as a starting point for discussion. By participating in this study, you will therefore consent to your images being used within the realm of this thesis and that your photos might appear in the final thesis.

You can withdraw your consent at any point.

Confidentiality

Due to the nature of the design and the usage of imagery within the process, complete anonymity is not possible, and your imagery can be used within the current Thesis process. Your name will not be published, and pseudonyms will be used within the transcribed focus groups and to refer to your imagery unless consent for the usage of your first name is explicitly given below.

Voluntary Participation

Participation in this study is Voluntary and you can withdraw at any point of the process. If, during the research, you decide to terminate your participation, the information that you have already provided will be used until the moment that consent is withdrawn.

You are free to not answer questions that you wish not to answer. If there is information that you do not wish to share within the group, but want to share individually, you can do so after the Focus Groups or by contacting Juliana Schön via e-mail or phone. The focus groups are supposed to be a safe space, so please consider each other's well-being and act respectfully towards each other. If you feel uncomfortable at any point of the process or have concerns, please also reach out!

Do you want to stop participating in this study?

Then please contact me via 500395js@eur.nl or +4915117512377.

Data storage

The data of the audio recordings and the dating profiles will be stored for a period of five years. The original audio will be deleted after it has been transcribed. Your name will be replaced with a pseudonym in the transcription if consent for the usage of your real name is not explicitly given. You have the right to access your data and rectify, erase or restrict the processing of your personal information. The Data will be stored on Microsoft OneDrive. Your data will only be accessible to the researcher and the project supervisor, Samira van Bohemen.

During or after the study, you may regret your participation. Please indicate this by contacting me. I will then delete your data. Sometimes we need to keep some of your data so that, for example, the integrity of the study can be checked.

Submitting a question or complaint

If you have specific questions about how your personal data is handled, you can direct your question to Juliana Schön via 500395js@eur.nl or +4915117512377. You can also submit a complaint to the Dutch Data Protection Authority if you suspect that your data has been processed incorrectly. You may also contact the EUR data protection officer (privacy@eur.nl).

Declaration of Consent

I have read the information letter. I understand what the study is about and what data will be collected from me. I was able to ask questions as well. My questions were adequately answered.

By signing this form, I:

1. Consent to participate in this research;
2. Consent to the use of my personal data;
3. Confirm that I am at least 18 years old;

4. Confirm that I understand that participating in this research is completely voluntary and that I can stop at any time;
5. Confirm that I understand that my data will be anonymised for publication, educational purposes and further research;

Check the boxes below if you consent to this.

My Data

I consent to the collection, use and retention of the following data: health, race, ethnic origin, political views, religious or philosophical views, sexual behaviour, sexual orientation, online appearance, dating behaviour and dating app memberships.

I give permission for the researcher to use my answers as quotes within the thesis.

I give permission to use my real first name.

**This is voluntary and not required to take part in the study.*

Your last name will never be published!

Audio recording

I give permission for audio recordings to be made during discussions and a transcript of my answers to be produced.

Images

I give permission for my images to be used for the purpose of the Master Thesis Project.

New research

I give permission to be contacted again for new research.

**This is voluntary and not required to take part in the study.*

Name of participant:

Participant's signature:

Date:

Please upload you Dating profile /images here.

*You can take screenshots of your profile. Make sure that you images are in the center so that they are not cut off. You do not have to use all the upload boxes, but use as many as you need

**You will receive a () copy of the complete information and consent form*