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Talaya Flicop [α] & Sarah N. Mitchell [σ]

Abstract- Nonbinary individuals have been shown to be demographically and experientially distinct from binary transgender individuals. Still, there continues to be a pronounced lack of focus on nonbinary identities within transgender research. Additionally, out of the extant research on nonbinary identities, few studies explicitly target the intersectional experiences of nonbinary people of color. To address this gap, this study examined the experiences and perceptions of nonbinary and gender-diverse people of color (people whose gender identity does not exclusively align with "man" or "woman" and whose racial/ethnic identity is not exclusively White) at the intersection of LGBTQ+ and racially/ethnically minoritized identity. The study utilized two main research questions (RQ): (1) What are the expectations and preconceptions surrounding nonbinary identities, and what are their impacts on both conforming and non-conforming individuals, and (2) What kind of influence does culture have on gender development for nonbinary people of color? Interviews with 12 participants highlighted three RQ1 themes: (i) what it means to "look nonbinary", (ii) external perceptions of identity confusion, and (iii) the impact of stereotypes; and two RQ2 themes: (i) lack of overlap in LGBTQ+ and POC spaces, and (ii) identity advantages. These results, as well as broader research and societal implications, are discussed.

Keywords: nonbinary, person of color, intersectionality, stereotypes, lived experiences, gender identity, LGBTQ+, cultural influences, minority identities, social perceptions.

I. Introduction

Even though up to one-third of the transgender community identifies as nonbinary, there continues to be a notable lack of research dedicated to nonbinary gender identities (not exclusively "man" or "woman") as opposed to binary gender identities (exclusively "man" or woman"; Matsuno & Budge, 2017). Previous research has demonstrated that the experiences of nonbinary individuals are idiosyncratic compared to those of binary trans individuals (Harrison et al., 2012). In analyzing data from the 2008 National Transgender Discrimination Survey, Harrison et al. (2012) reported that, at the demographic level, those who chose to write in their own gender label were more likely to be transmasculine, multiracial, experience violence and sexual assault, and avoid seeking healthcare and police assistance when compared to participants who indicated their gender was "male/man", "female/woman", or "part-time as one gender, part-time as another." The nonbinary community is troubled by this invisibility and continues to face unique challenges that increase nonbinary individuals' risk of psychological distress and suicide (e.g., navigating institutional binaries such as public restrooms or paperwork that only includes male/female, frequent misgendering due to unfamiliarity with they/them or neopronouns [those different from she/her/hers, he/him/his, or they/them/theirs], rejection from binary trans individuals; Matsuno & Budge, 2017; Jacobsen et al., 2023).

Although public recognition of the transgender community as a whole has increased in recent years, nonbinary people still report a scarcity of community ties (Fiani & Han, 2019). This is problematic because community ties have been shown to provide valuable benefits, such as feelings of affirmation and authenticity (Coburn et al., 2023). While binary transgender individuals are likely to encounter challenges related to stigmatizing messages, the general lack of resources available to nonbinary individuals provides no frame of reference or support for identity exploration (Fiani & Han, 2019). Some symbols indicate support for minoritized identities (e.g., a rainbow flag, ethnic diversity in the workplace) and impact how minoritized individuals navigate and interact with spaces and communities (Clary et al., 2023). Likewise, Clary and colleagues found that a lack of supportive symbolism (or the inclusion of unsupportive symbolism) may impact minoritized individuals' emotional, cognitive, and behavioral responses to their environment. Given the increased likelihood of mental health distress, the sparse representation of gender diversity beyond the binary and the racial/ethnic diversity there within warrants further exploration into these topics. The potential scholarly and societal impacts of inclusively in social science research can be far-reaching.

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a) Gender Stereotypes and Transnormativity

Gender stereotypes and transnormativity (i.e., the ideological structure that sets the expectations of what it is and what it *should* be like to be transgender; Johnson, 2016) permeate Western society. Ellemers (2018) discussed that gender stereotypes have been researched in many contexts. However, because gender is almost entirely perceived as binary (in Western society), there tends to be an immediate, and sometimes unconscious, categorization of individuals as either a man or a woman and the subsequent comparison of these two groups. Since stereotypes inform not only the expectations of what someone *will* be like, but also what they *should* be like, those who diverge from stereotypical assumptions tend to stick out. Additionally, stereotypes have the power to influence who is viewed as a "good" group member, and therefore, for those who assign high importance to their gender identity, being aware of and properly performing the behaviors prototypical for their group is essential (Ellemers, 2018). As a minoritized group, trans and gender-diverse (TGD) people engage in various forms of stigma management to escape or prevent negative evaluations from others. As a part of this process, TGD people must be acutely aware of behaviors or appearances that may become targets for social rejection (Meyer et al., 2023).

On top of the rigid beliefs held about cisgender men and women, transgender individuals are also exposed to transnormativity (Johnson, 2016). These expectations may affirm the identities of those whose experiences align with the prevailing narrative, but simultaneously alienate and erase the experiences of transgender and nonbinary people who do not conform (Johnson, 2016). For example, medical transition is thought to be a salient aspect of being transgender, especially for transfeminine individuals (Gazzola & Morrison, 2014). However, nonbinary people, on average, are less likely to report the desire to pursue medical transition (Fiani & Han, 2019). Any divergence from the dominant narrative has the potential to create a fear of not being "trans enough", which is a worry that is particularly strong in nonbinary populations (Garrison, 2018). Additionally, although many claim membership in the transgender community, it is possible to identify as nonbinary but not transgender (Matsuno & Budge, 2017).

Contributing to the topic of transnormativity, some research has investigated binary transgender stereotypes (e.g., Gazzola & Morrison, 2014; Howansky et al., 2021), but to the authors' knowledge, there is no established research on what stereotypes exist about nonbinary gender identities. This may, in part, be due to a general lack of awareness of nonbinary identities. Take, for example, the media – one of the primary means by which cultural ideas are communicated. The repertoire of transgender characters is slim, but genderqueer characters, even more so, are excluded by the tendency to depict such characters as exclusively and consistently masculine or feminine identifying (Capuzza & Spencer, 2017). Thus far, nonbinary people have often described navigating the rigid expectations of the traditional gender binary by aiming to make it difficult for others to classify them as either men or women (Barbee & Schrock, 2019). While this may be restrictive for some nonbinary individuals, others describe the "confusion" about their gender as validating to their identity (Beischel et al., 2022). As nonbinary gender identities continue to enter the realm of public awareness, this fight against gender stereotypes may lead to the creation of unique stereotypes suggesting what it means to be *neither* a man *nor* a woman.

Researchers have consistently found that nonbinary and gender-diverse individuals are likely to experience some adverse outcomes related to their specific minoritized identities – connected to how others feel about them and, sometimes, how they feel about themselves (Herman, 2013; James et al., 2016; Neubauer et al., 2023; Pease et al., 2022; Puckett et al., 2022; Rood et al., 2017). Trans and gender-diverse individuals often ruminate on "reflections about misgendering, connection/disconnection from other TGD people, safety as a TGD person, gender affirmation, social narratives about TGD people, body-related thoughts, concerns over others' perceptions of one's gender, and the political restriction of TGD people's rights and protections." (Puckett et al., p. 547). Additionally, Pease and colleagues (2022) found that when trans and gender-diverse individuals experienced minority stressors (i.e., family rejection, threat of harm, and identity invalidation), they were more likely to report higher levels of psychological distress than those who did not experience these stressors. Identity invalidation seemed to be especially meaningful for psychological distress after controlling for several covariates (e.g., education and employment status; Pease et al., 2022). In a series of qualitative interviews, Rood and colleagues (2017) found that trans and gender non-conforming (TGNC) individuals reported emotional distress (primarily anger and sadness) in response to popular denigrating attitudes toward TGNC identities. As a result of the internalization of these messages, some participants experienced shame, heightened discomfort in their bodies, and difficulty in valuing their own lives (Rood et al., 2017).

Again, nonbinary and gender-diverse individuals report an increased likelihood of adverse outcomes related to minority stress (e.g., stress and negativity experienced due to being a member of a minoritized group; Meyer, 2003), stigma, identity invalidation, and global contexts (e.g., the COVID-19 pandemic; Everest et al., 2023; O'Handley & Courtice, 2022). These challenges are often directly related to

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others' perceptions and expectations of them, as opposed to their gender identities per se. Given these experiences and outcomes, an increased understanding of the perceptions and impacts of gender-based stereotypes for this population is warranted.

b) Nonbinary and Gender-Diverse People of Color

It is crucial to investigate the experiences that nonbinary people of color (POC) have with identity-related stereotypes because of the ways in which negative messages contribute to minority stress. Meyer (2003) outlines internalized stigma as a form of proximal stress for lesbian, gay, and bisexual individuals. However, the concept can also be applied to the transgender and gender-diverse community (see Puckett et al., 2023) – especially for those at the intersection of minoritized gender and racial/ethnic identities (Rood et al., 2017).

Although some studies have investigated the personal experiences of nonbinary POC (see Coburn et al., 2022; Coburn et al., 2023; Nicolazzo, 2016; Rood et al., 2017), to the authors' knowledge, few studies on nonbinary identities specifically address race/ethnicity as a prominent factor. Some researchers will point out the experiences of people of color within a mixed sample, either quantitively (see Coburn, 2022; sample 77% POC) or qualitatively (see Rood et al., 2017; sample 60% POC). Nicolazzo's (2016) study explores the experiences of Black nonbinary trans individuals, but it is also important to note that the author used a unique definition of "nonbinary identity," referring specifically to "people who resist options to biomedically transition away from the sex they were assigned at birth" (p. 1175). In interviews with two Black participants, Nicolazzo found that both described an inextricable link between their Blackness and LGBTQ+ identities. However, the lack of overlap in identity-focused campus spaces resulted in a severance of self; the environment left little room for participants to exist as both Black and nonbinary at the same time (Nicolazzo, 2016). Rood et al. (2017) reported similar findings, in which TGNC POC encountered societal messages that prohibited TGNC identities and cultural identities from coexisting.

Conversely, Coburn and colleagues (2022) wanted to understand more about the predictors of well-being for binary trans and nonbinary POC – taking more of a strengths-based approach than many researchers. Binary trans participants reported that family support, religiosity, and connections to the LGBT community were connected to psychological well-being for binary trans individuals. For nonbinary people, only LGBT community connections were associated with increased psychological well-being (Coburn, 2022). Trans and nonbinary people of color are likely to face discrimination and violence but also exhibit resiliency and positive coping methods (e.g., participating in self-care, seeking mentorship and support from others with similar identities; Winiker et al., 2023). These results highlight the need to identify affirming supports for gender-diverse POC. However, given these racially mixed samples, it is hard to tease apart how these experiences are interpreted by racially/ethnically minoritized people in particular.

c) The Present Study

The two theoretical bases of inquiry used to guide this study are Minority Stress Theory and an Intersectionality Framework. Minority Stress Theory posits that one's position in a stigmatized social group, including LGBTQ+ and racial/ethnic identities, creates excess stress not experienced by members of the dominant group(s) (Meyer, 2003). This study examines the experiences of individuals who possess multiple minoritized identities, as other studies have done to explore the lives of LGBTQ+ POC (see Cyrus, 2017; Sarno et al., 2021). To evaluate this overlap, it is necessary to apply an intersectional approach. Intersectionality, as proposed by several African American feminist scholars, conceptualizes the distinct internal and external states produced by the convergence among multiple forms of oppression (Crenshaw, 1989; Stirratt et al., 2008). These concepts and frameworks are necessary for analyzing the experiences of nonbinary POC, who encounter unique obstacles related to their multiple minoritized identities.

To address these gaps, this study investigated the intersectional realities of nonbinary and gender-diverse POC living in the United States. Namely, the authors aimed to gain insight into the expectations and preconceptions surrounding nonbinary identities and their impacts on both conforming and nonconforming individuals. A second aim was to investigate what kind of influence culture and race/ethnicity have on gender development for nonbinary individuals of color.

II. Methods

A survey containing quantitative and open-ended questions was developed in Qualtrics by the second author and several student research assistants in the summer of 2020. This survey was distributed to inquire about the attitudes and experiences of people with multiple intersecting identities (e.g., POC, LGBTQ+, disability, polyamory, and others). Many survey respondents were recruited through a Western university research credit system, though some learned of the study through social media outreach efforts on websites such as Reddit and Amazon Mechanical Turk. Respondents had the option to indicate interest in being interviewed or being entered into a raffle to win one of ten gift codes (distributed twice a year for summer/fall respondents and winter/spring respondents). If so, they could leave contact information before and after completing the survey, which took 40 minutes on average to complete. Any identifying data was kept

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anonymous and stored separately from contact information; only a random participant ID was used to find the contact info of participants who fit this particular study criteria (i.e., identifying as a person of color and nonbinary/gender diverse).

Those participants were contacted via a lab Gmail account to ask if they were still interested in being interviewed. Scheduled interviews were conducted and audio-recorded over Zoom, none lasting more than an hour. All participants were informed that their responses would be reported anonymously and were allowed to choose their own pseudonyms. Verbal informed consent was obtained before beginning the interviews, and participants were informed of their ability to ask clarifying questions or decline to answer at any time. During the interviews, a semi-structured interview protocol with 17 uniform questions was used along with follow-up questions tailored to the individual respondent. Refinement of the interview questions took place over the course of the first few interviews, based on frequently discussed conversation topics. Examples of the items discussed include: "What does being nonbinary mean to you?" and "Are there spaces that integrate both your cultural and LGBTQ+ identities?" All participants were given a $10 Amazon gift code as compensation for each interview.

a) Participants

A total of 24 interviews with 13 participants were conducted, including two member-checking interview sessions. One participant (and their singular interview session) was excluded from the analysis on account of not identifying as a person of color, resulting in a final sample of 12 participants (with one to three interviews each). All participants indicated in the survey that their gender was something other than exclusively man or woman, though some of them used additional labels beside or instead of "nonbinary" to describe their identities, such as "genderfluid", "queer", and more. Three participants were Asian, two participants were Asian and White, four participants were Black, two participants were Black and White, and one participant was Mexican and Jewish. The sample also included two assigned-male-at-birth (AMAB) individuals and ten assigned-female-at-birth (AFAB) individuals (see Table 1).

Table 1: Participant Demographics

Name	Age	Race/Ethnicity	Gender	Pronouns	AGAB*	Sexuality
Sally	18	Korean/White	Nonbinary	They/Them	Female	Queer
Alex	22	Indian	Nonbinary	They/Them	Female	Lesbian
Drew	19	Chinese	Nonbinary/Genderfluid	She/They	Female	Asexual
Paprika	24	Black/White	Nonbinary	They/Them	Female	Bisexual/Demisexual
Donovan	28	Filipino/White	Nonbinary	They/Them	Female	Pansexual
Aaron	20	Black	Nonbinary	She/They	Female	Asexual
Stair	19	Black	Nonbinary/Transmasculine	He/Him	Female	Asexual
August	18	Black	Genderfluid/Woman	She/They	Female	Lesbian
Hannan	21	Pakistani	Genderfluid	All Pronouns	Female	Pansexual
Alyx	18	Black/White	Nonbinary/Transfeminine	She/They	Male	Queer
Axel	28	Black	Fluid	They/Them	Female	Queer/Asexual
Carmen	21	Mexican/Jewish	Nonbinary/Transfeminine	Unspecified	Male	Bisexual

*Note: Participants Drew (Chinese, 19) and August (Black, 18) were the only two in the sample who did not identify as transgender. Additionally, August (Black, 18) did not use the term "nonbinary" to describe herself but identifies with the terms "genderfluid" and "woman," qualifying them for inclusion in this study. *Assigned Gender at Birth (AGAB)*

b) Analysis

After each interview, word-for-word transcriptions were produced with Otter software, and then manually spot-checked by the primary investigator. Descriptive phenomenology, a practice in which commonalities are found among multiple individuals' experiences with the same concept, was employed to describe the lived experience of a nonbinary person of color (Creswell & Poth, 2016). For this particular study, the focus was on participants' understanding of gender

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stereotypes and expectations, in addition to experiences related to their intersecting nonbinary and racially/ethnically minoritized identities. Thematic analysis was facilitated via Dedoose Version 9.0.17 software (Dedoose, Los Angeles, CA 2021). Braun & Clarke (2006) describe thematic analysis as a qualitative research method that identifies and organizes patterns (otherwise known as 'themes') in a data set. The main advantage of a thematic analysis approach is the ability to describe the data in great detail without starting from an existing theoretical framework (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

The authors engaged in the six-step iterative process outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006). The primary investigator conducted all interviews and wrote memos to document potential biases, any feelings, notable occurrences, and participant statement highlights during each interview. The second author also reviewed transcripts and memos to become familiar with the participants' experiences (step 1). The first author then coded all interviews (step 2) and outlined potential themes (step 3). Both authors met and reviewed themes over several sessions to determine distinct and significant commonalities across interviews until a consensus was reached (step 4). The first author then defined and named themes with input from the second author over two sessions (step 5). In the final step, the first author worked to identify exemplary quotes for inclusion in this report.

After the formation of themes and subthemes, two member-checking interviews were conducted with previous participants. During these interviews, the researcher discussed the content of the study findings as well as their organization and presentation. Participants were consulted for their advice on wording and clarification to ensure that the themes listed were accurate to both their own experiences and what they perceived the experiences of others within their communities to be. The member-checkers agreed with all themes and wording as initially presented and elaborated on their own connections to the findings. The first member-checking participant emphasized that any nonbinary person's experience with the themes may vary based on their environment and that certain stereotypes may be more or less salient depending on the individual. The authors considered this sentiment to avoid applying overgeneralizations to all community members.

c) *Positionality*

The research team also wishes to acknowledge their own positionality as researchers. The first investigator identifies as nonbinary and biracial (Asian and White), and the second investigator is a member of the LGBTQ+ community and a Black woman. Although we may draw parallels between our personal experiences and those of our participants, we understand that each person's experiences are uniquely informed by their intersectional identities. The researchers proceeded with such ideas in mind and strived to make no assumptions about how participants might decide to respond to the research questions. To faithfully portray the experiences and perceptions described in the interviews, the investigators constructed the results following the wording of the participants and frequently cited the speakers whenever possible. Again, the primary investigator wrote memos following each interview to reflexively analyze their own thought processes during data collection. In sum, although no researcher is free from bias, the reflective processes utilized in this study aimed to reveal the "truth" of our inquiry as authentically as possible.

III. Results

a) *Research Question 1: Nonbinary Stereotypes*

As previously established, research has explored transgender stereotypes (e.g., Gazzola & Morrison, 2014; Howansky et al., 2021), but to the authors' knowledge, there has not yet been a targeted inquiry into the preconceptions and expectations surrounding nonbinary gender identities. The purpose of the first research question was to explicitly enumerate some of the stereotypes nonbinary people encounter and the ways that said stereotypes impact their experiences. Three subthemes concerning this topic emerged. Firstly, the most frequent stereotypes for the participants mainly involved presumptions about nonbinary individuals' visual characteristics and pronoun usage (i.e., "*Looking Nonbinary*"). Secondly, participants described attitudes surrounding the permanence and validity of nonbinary identities (i.e., "*It's Just a Phase*"). Lastly, participants explained how stereotypes have influenced outside recognition of their identities and their comfort in claiming a nonbinary title (i.e., *"Too Much" and "Not Enough": The Impact of Stereotypes).*

i. *"Looking Nonbinary"*

Participants described physical characteristics that were commonly associated with nonbinary identities. The chief descriptor that all twelve participants mentioned was "androgynous" or some variation thereof (e.g., "neutral"). However, this is not the only expectation that exists. As one interviewee, Paprika (Black/White, 24), put it, "…this one ideal that, especially the internet can try and put forth is like, y'know, thin and White and androgynous, and it's like, that's not the point of nonbinary at all." The mention of this specific overlap of race, style, and body type was mirrored by half the participants (six), bringing dynamics of privilege and power into the picture.

Many participants mentioned that their experiences with their gender assigned at birth were impactful, partly because nonbinary identities were often associated with AFAB individuals. This preconception is

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well-known enough to possess its own terminology, which Alyx (Black/White, 18) labeled as the "Diet-Woman stereotype." In essence, this term is used to refer to the image of nonbinary people as "…women unwilling to admit to being women" (Carmen, Mexican/Jewish, 21). In describing the consequences of this stereotype, Alyx (Black/White, 18) explained that "…a lot of assigned-male-at-birth nonbinary people are either forcibly labeled as loudly gay or just gender non-conforming trans women." Additionally, nonbinary individuals perceived to be AMAB may find themselves excluded from spaces meant for minoritized genders. For instance, Carmen (Mexican/Jewish, 21) recounted:

> There have been a few times in college…I'm not aware of it happening outside. There was a sign that said some group like computer science meetup group or whatever for students with marginalized genders—women and nonbinary—but it's clear they meant just the women.

Besides bodily characteristics, participants agreed that some current depictions of nonbinary people include expectations for alternative style choices (e.g., dyed hair) and unorthodox interests (e.g., "cottage-core", frogs, etc.). Nonbinary people may be conceptualized as "weird" or "alien" in some cases. However, out of the participants who recognized this depiction, most were unbothered by it because of its perceived ingroup origin. Carmen (Mexican/Jewish, 21) weighed in:

> I don't think people actually mean that seriously. It's really more of a fun joke than a "you must abide by, you must cooperate with this" thing. The pronoun pins I have in my desk are frog-themed...There are people with common nouns for names. There are people who like frogs. This is not something I've ever felt was being imposed on me.

Moving away from visual stereotypes, half of the participants mentioned an expectation that nonbinary people only use they/them pronouns and other gender-neutral language. Alyx (Black/White, 18) described their own experience with pronouns:

> Well previously, even though I did prefer she/they, I give they/them just because like, [it] makes me seem like a proper nonbinary person versus a weird, pre-everything, trans-woman…It's good-old self-censorship of queer identities for the comfort of cishets.

This can be especially troublesome for individuals such as Hannan (Pakistani, 21), whose experience with gender is more fluid. Hannan demonstrated how they took issue with this limitation by elaborating:

> I don't want just they/them pronouns. And I don't like the idea of sticking like…It's not a third box. You know, it's outside of the gender binary [and] has limitless identities and explorations within that. Just that one word is not a third gender. It is an infinite amount of genders.

Overall, participants' experiences indicate that although nonbinary identities may not be as widely known as binary transgender identities, stereotypes about nonbinary identities do, in fact, exist. Many of these stereotypes concern visual characteristics, but an expectation for gender neutrality persists concerning pronouns and gendered language as well.

ii. *"It's Just a Phase"*

Contrasting with comments elucidating what a nonbinary person is expected to look like, participants also described experiences with having their gender identities dismissed as confusion or a phase. Multiple participants described the ways in which misunderstandings about nonbinary identities have led to this invalidation. For example, Axel (Black, 28) interpreted some of their experiences like this:

> I feel like it kind of plays into the fragile…skinny White person stereotype. Where it's like…well, you're obviously [nonbinary] because you want to be different. Because you're this skinny White girl that has nothing better to do, or like something like that.

Axel brought up multiple points within this reflection, including the misconception that a person who holds a nonbinary identity is doing so as a form of attention-seeking. In their experience, nonbinary identities are sometimes seen as a choice that people make to feel unique or receive special treatment.

Being exposed to this negative commentary has had detrimental effects on nonbinary individuals' acceptance of their own identities and comfort in disclosing their identities to others. When asked if they would like to come out to their family, one participant answered, "Yeah sorta. But…I'm afraid of what they would say because I don't think they understand it quite well. They'd probably be like, it's just a phase, or like, what are you saying? This doesn't make sense" (Drew, Chinese, 19).

iii. *"Too Much" and "Not Enough": The Impact of Stereotypes*

These preconceptions can have a significant effect on nonbinary POC's experiences of their genders. Demonstratively, one subject, Alex (Indian, 22), reflected, "…I'm like, not thin and like, not White. So, sometimes…I don't feel, like, nonbinary enough." Another participant, Stair (Black, 19), shed light on how expectations of androgyny and static identity led him to self-doubt. He illustrated:

> I kind of struggle with my own gender-queerness because…if I am neutral…I'm supposed to be this way all the time. Like, there's no fluctuation. There's not supposed to be an "Oh, I feel like a man right now." Like, that's wrong, or that's not acceptable. And so I just kind of struggled with my own nonbinary-ness.

Narrow expectations also impact nonbinary individuals' comfort in identifying with the larger transgender community. Transnormativity dictates few options for appropriate or proper transness that many nonbinary people do not find themselves fitting into. Aaron (Black, 20) explained that:

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> There's some debate about being trans and especially…if you have not pursued any medical treatment—medical procedures, or like you haven't been diagnosed with gender dysphoria, you're not trans enough…That has mainly made me feel like, am I really trans enough? Because I haven't…done both of those things.

Not only have these expectations impacted the way some nonbinary individuals relate to their own identities, but they have a palpable effect on the way others treat nonconforming individuals. For example, one participant, Sally (Korean/White, 18), explained:

> When I've met other people and discussed with them…I feel like, just a little bit, they're always like, a little bit reserved to be fully—I don't want to say accepting—but fully realizing my identity…because I think I don't…fit into…a stereotype of what they would expect.

Not being recognized as nonbinary (or trans) and frequently being misgendered were experiences that were common to the participants.

b) *Research Question 2: The Intersectional Existence of Nonbinary People of Color*

One of the main goals of this study was to elaborate on the interaction between gender and racial/ethnic identities among nonbinary POC. Some of the findings from the first research question contribute to this discussion because participants' racial and gender identities often interacted and were difficult, if not impossible, to cleanly separate. Building on some of the previously presented ideas, two subthemes are described within this current theme. For the first subtheme, participants expressed difficulty finding spaces that integrated both their LGBTQ+ and cultural identities (i.e., *Mutually Exclusive Community Spaces)*. Secondly, participants contrasted their challenges by narrating some advantages that came from their unique identity combinations (i.e., *Joy, Connection, and Creation)*.

i. *Mutually Exclusive Community Spaces*

Participants come from various racial backgrounds, so no themes can be assigned to a specific ethnicity. However, all participants affirmed that there is a distinct lack of overlap between LGBTQ+ spaces and spaces geared toward communities of color. To an extreme, Paprika (Black/White, 24) described how while they were attending college, "[Queer Student Union] and [Black Student Union] were at the same time, so I had to choose: Do I want to be Black? Or, do I want to be queer?" Corresponding with previous research (Balsam et al., 2011), even if neither space explicitly bars members of specific groups, LGBTQ+ POC must navigate the potential for racism in queer spaces and homophobia/transphobia in communities of color. Hannan explained their struggle with balancing his LGBTQ+ and cultural identities that resulted from this lack of intersectional space:

> It did hurt for a very, very long time being queer and Pakistani—being queer and Muslim especially…I just, I didn't feel like I could be Muslim because I was queer…It really did feel for a long time that because my community didn't accept me, I couldn't be that. I couldn't be Muslim. I couldn't be Pakistani. But now…I'm at a much, much more stable place with being queer and Muslim together and I proudly exclaim that, and I let people know that…and a big reason for why I advocate for myself so much with those two labels intertwined is because I see it firsthand affecting other people who went through the same thing that I did.

Furthermore, participants recounted situations in which they were subjected to stereotypes of the race and gender combination that others perceived them to be. Aaron (Black, 20) recounted, "Lately, I've been told to not sound too aggressive…because I'm also socialized as a woman and I'm not out to people as nonbinary—so I'll be socialized as the angry Black woman". Drew (Chinese, 19) also elaborated on an experience with racialized gender stereotypes in their dating life:

> Yeah, I was sort of dating this guy for a few months and then, I don't know. He just made me very uncomfortable. I think he also put me on like, a pedestal and he was very idealizing me…I think in his mind, I was like, the Asian girl stereotype. I'm not, and whenever I would do or say things that broke the stereotype, he'd get kind of mad at me. Or, not mad, but like he tried to like, force me back into the stereotype.

Participants were still held to the expectations of the groups that others assigned them to, even if they did not identify as having membership in that group.

ii. *Joy, Connection, and Creation*

Although the challenges faced by nonbinary POC play a role in their experiences, participants demonstrated that membership in these minoritized communities also provided several benefits. Presenting in ways that made them happy, connecting with food, and creating spaces for themselves were examples of identified positives. These benefits can be seen in terms of gender, race, and the intersection between them.

Participants detailed several physical and non-physical components that helped them feel connected to their gender identities. In line with many transmasculine folks, for Stair (Black, 19), binding and packing (i.e., compressing breast tissue to make the chest appear flatter and wearing padding or a prosthesis at the front of the pants to give the appearance of a bulge, respectively) were sources of gender euphoria (i.e., positive feelings toward and connectedness to one's gender; Beischel et al., 2022). In another instance of gender joy, August (Black, 18), delighted in being able to manipulate their appearance with makeup. Alex (Indian, 22) described how their job was affirming for their gender:

> I work in a kitchen and that makes me feel a lot of gender euphoria…I work two positions…I'm a line cook and it's a lot

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> of heavy lifting and using the oven, like the grill and stove, and I usually work with men in the back… I've gotten so much stronger just from working there so like, you know, physically, that gives me gender euphoria.

Participants also have various outlets for connecting to their racial/ethnic identities. Donovan (Filipino, 28) illustrates that food has helped to bridge the gap between them and their heritage:

> Food, food is always the thing. Food is the best. In any case, I love my mom's home cooking…She always makes me Filipino food, like exclusively a whole meal on my birthday now, since we've had those conversations in the past years, because I tell her, seems like you know, you and I are both kind of detached, but let's bring it back. I'm still waiting for the day where she teaches me how to cook her recipes.

Combining gender and race through an intersectional lens, participants also embrace their multifaceted identities to create their own spaces. August (Black, 18) explained:

> It takes one person to create those spaces, you know. Now, don't get me wrong, I'm not gonna invite myself to a place where I'm not welcome, but if I'm invited to that place because of one part of my identity, Imma just also embrace the other side. I'm not just gonna be like oh, you know I'm totally not that other part of my identity, you know. And Imma help create that safe space because there's probably other people in those spaces who relate to me and can definitely give those perspectives as well, and then that's how these wonderful spaces come to life.

IV. Discussion

These results reveal several concepts and implications worthy of further discussion; three will be explored here: *Stereotypes, Identity Conceptualization, and Identity Invalidation*; *Power, Privilege, and Intersectionality*; and *Practical and Societal Implications*.

a) *Stereotypes, Identity Conceptualization, and Identity Invalidation*

Even though "nonbinary" is a purposefully vague term meant to be inclusive of anyone who identifies with it, there appears to be a curious pigeon-holing of nonbinary individuals into an incredibly specific stereotype: thin, White, AFAB people with androgynous, alternative appearances. These results both support and contradict the idea that nonbinary individuals rely on binary gender stereotypes to conceptualize their identities (Garrison, 2018). Respondents have stated that a nonbinary identification is not *supposed* to have "a look", but simultaneously cited a carefully curated juxtaposition of feminine and masculine gender presentations as an indicator of in-group membership. This pattern replicates the findings of Barbee and Schrock (2019), who described the frequent mixing of traditionally feminine and masculine traits in nonbinary individuals' gender presentations.

Participants frequently reported expectations for pronoun usage, as well. Overwhelmingly, participants encountered the attitude that they/them pronouns are not only the standard choice for nonbinary individuals but the "proper" choice, as described by Alyx (Black/White, 18). Although they/them as a singular gender-neutral pronoun is still viewed as grammatically incorrect by some English speakers, the preference for they/them over neopronouns (e.g., "ze", "xe") may have to do with the perceived inclusivity and familiarity with the terms (Hekanaho, 2022). Simply put, they/them is already commonly used in the English language and can be used to refer to anyone regardless of gender.

Additionally, participants shared experiences with external invalidation and beliefs about identity impermanence. This preconception aligns with previous findings in Gazzola and Morrison's (2014) study, which identified a common belief that transgender people harbor confusion about their bodies, which can be remedied through therapy. Further investigation is needed to truly understand the impacts of the growing visibility of nonbinary identities in the greater social sphere. These interviews indicate a large variety of experiences within the community and a need for greater representation of this diversity.

The push and pull among trying to figure out one's identity, wanting to be oneself, not wanting to be held to gender stereotypes, and trying to avoid identity invalidation may cause a particular kind of minority stress. Societal expectations for behavior and labeling will influence an individual whether they want them to or not. The Western gender binary requires gender to be continuously achieved through one's appearance and behavior (aka "doing gender"; West & Zimmerman, 1987). Participants note that a nonbinary identity should not "look" a certain way, but they also express wanting to present in a way that their identities are validated – which requires the recognition of a "type" by other individuals. The androgyny associated with the nonbinary community may not necessarily come from an inherent desire for neutrality by community members, but instead stem from the limitations of the gender structure the individuals function within. These external pressures regarding presentation and pronoun usage from outside *and* within the nonbinary community itself are likely experienced as stressful, which has implications for the overall mental health of nonbinary and gender-diverse individuals. Societal preferences for a particular look or pronoun usage over another can cause further division and identity invalidation.

b) *Power, Privilege, and Intersectionality*

The distinctions between cis/trans and binary/nonbinary are not the only factors important to gender identity. It is also critical to discuss the various levels of power and privilege contributing to conformity and recognition within the nonbinary community. As some

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participants in this study have expressed, one popular conception of nonbinary genders involves a specific visual stereotype: White, thin, and presumably AFAB. While individuals falling into these categories undoubtedly face many of the same challenges common to gender non-conforming people across the board, nonbinary people of color run into additional obstacles on the way to acceptance. For example, because many gender-affirming services are expensive and possibly not covered by insurance, transnormativity has built-in racial and class undertones that are more likely to impact transgender people of color (Johnson, 2016).

Research has also shown that specific differences in gendered attitudes exist between racial groups, but an understanding of these divergencies' discernable scope and impact is still limited (Carter et al., 2009; Cuervo et al., 2022; Kane, 2000). To this point, Cuervo and colleagues state that, "Ultimately, cultural values play a role in how family systems navigate experiences of disclosing sexual or gender identities, providing a framework for examining how values manifest individually within families and under the influence of broader systemic factors" (p.406). Individuals belonging to multiple minoritized identities may find representation more difficult because of the ways in which hierarchies within the margins are defined by one's proximity to the dominant groups (Fellows & Razack, 1998). From feeling like one's racial identity prevented them from being "nonbinary enough" to acknowledging that one's race would impact the way others perceived their gender, participants from Fellows and Razack's study could not separate this experience of intersectionality between race and gender (see also Coburn et al., 2023). An acknowledgment of privilege within the margin may feel like a threat of erasure to some, but the dismantlement of all systems of subordination (e.g., racial hierarchy) is necessary to uplift all gender-diverse people (Fellows & Razack, 1998).

It is important to note that many societies, which are based on binary models of gender, are oblivious to nonbinary and genderqueer identities. However, several cultures have distinct conceptions of gender diversity, such as two-spirit identities within Native American groups, Bakla within the Philippines, and Quariwarmi within Peru (Matsuno & Budge, 2017). Although nonbinary research often refers to these Indigenous genders as proof of the longstanding existence of nonbinary or suprabinary genders (i.e., an alternate term to describe additional genders besides male and female), it is important to recognize that the imposition of Western gender structures onto Indigenous peoples overshadows the unique concepts of gender that are inseparable from an Indigenous identity (Coburn et al., 2023; Mirandé, 2016; Robinson, 2020). These studies examine the interactions of race and gender specifically for a group of American individuals and, therefore, consider the responses within the context of the Western framework of LGBTQ+ identities.

Furthermore, in-depth exploration into the intersectional experiences of nonbinary people of color reveals that, in line with minority stress theory, the possession of a minoritized identity (or identities) leads to exposure to obstacles uncommon for social majority groups. However, these identities also allow for the opportunity for unique forms of connection and fulfillment. Participants' experiences with connecting with their identities—both gender and racial—demonstrate that there is joy and pleasure in being a person of color and a member of the LGBTQ+ community. In addition to investigating the adverse outcomes of stress, by focusing on the positive outcomes of minority affiliation, it becomes possible to identify factors contributing to individual and community resilience, like connection to extrafamilial groups and giving back to supportive communities (Goffnett et al., 2022; Meyer, 2015; Scheadler et al., 2023). Identifying these factors will improve individual coping strategies and inform how public policy addresses the social issues that perpetuate the stressors in the first place (Meyer, 2015).

c) Practical and Societal Implications

Scholars and practitioners have already begun to identify actionable steps that can be taken to support transgender and nonbinary people in general (especially youth). Some interventions would require more significant systemic shifts and institutional support, such as the proliferation of gender-neutral restrooms, greater accessibility to medical care, and gender-diverse education in schools (Shah et al., 2022; Tebbe & Budge, 2022). However, Shah and colleagues note that other action plans may be implemented freely by individuals, such as social acceptance (in the form of pronoun and chosen name usage) and active listening. Mental health professionals working with transgender and gender-diverse individuals may support their clients by encouraging gender exploration, decentralizing linear, transnormative gender identity narratives, and considering external factors like geographical region and local attitudes (Scott & Cornelius-White, 2022; Coburn et al., 2023). Beischel and colleagues (2022) capture the sentiment well, reminding us that, "…the fight for transgender rights can be framed not only as reductions in gender-related harm, but also more equitable access to gender-related joy and pleasure" (p. 290).

V. Limitations and Conclusion

Nonbinary people of color possess a unique intersection of identities that provides opportunities for important insights into both gender and race research. As the literature on transgender topics continues to

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expand, it is vital that researchers acknowledge and actively investigate gender identities outside of the traditional binary. This study aimed to understand the lived experiences of the participants as they pertained to two main research questions: 1) What expectations and preconceptions surround nonbinary identities and what are their impacts on both conforming and nonconforming individuals, and 2) What kind of influence does culture have on gender development for nonbinary individuals of color?

Due to the nature of this study, certain limitations and constraints must be considered when interpreting the results. First and foremost, the experiences of this qualitative sample may not generalize to all gender-diverse people of color. The participants in this study were volunteers who were contacted through a collegiate research system and internet outreach efforts. As a result, the sample is young and highly educated. Additionally, the sample does not represent the full spectrum of gender identities, racial/ethnic backgrounds, and existing combinations of these positions. In particular, this study was not able to include Native American/Indigenous, Middle Eastern, nor Native Hawaiian and Pacific Islander participants, among other ethnic groups. A majority of participants were AFAB, and no participants indicated that they were intersex. While this study focused on aspects of gender identity and racial/ethnic background, it has been made clear through conversations with participants that factors such as socioeconomic status, religious beliefs, educational level, family structure, body size, etc., all contribute to identity exploration and development in these domains. Furthermore, this study only investigated the experiences that nonbinary POC themselves have had with nonbinary stereotypes, but stereotypes may be known and perpetuated by people whose identities fall outside of the categories to which the stereotypes refer. Future research is needed to investigate the perceptions of binary transgender and cisgender individuals to paint a more complete picture of the cultural attitudes surrounding nonbinary identities. Lastly, the research team acknowledges the inevitable influence of researcher bias. However, the team has been purposeful in establishing reflexive practices and building conscious positionalities to mitigate the distortion of the findings as much as possible.

Despite these limitations and constraints, the study results demonstrate that the social and legal separation of people into binary gender categories is outdated, but the diversity of reported experiences affirms that "nonbinary" is not simply a new homogenous third gender. Additionally, the recognition of transgender identities as a purely medical phenomenon is reductive and harmful to those not pursuing transition in a fashion considered to be typical. Further exploration is warranted to determine how to better integrate LGBTQ+ and racial/ethnic spaces; however, the intersectional experiences of nonbinary POC span much further beyond race, gender, and sexuality. Within this sample alone, participants elaborated on additional avenues of influence, such as body size and shape, religious affiliation, and neurodiversity. The voices of these participants contribute to the growing body of research concerning all these topics.

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