“Am I Trans Enough?”: A Hermeneutical Phenomenological Investigation into Transgender Gender Identity

Chloe Seongeun Kim

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Faculty of Social Sciences

University of Ottawa

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There was no journey towards womanhood for me

Simply

a quest for healing.

Dane Figueroa Edidi

Abstract

Previous medical and sociological studies have attempted to explain how transgender people develop their identity, while at the same time, feminist and sociology scholars discussed socially constructed nature of gender. Yet, in arguing that there is no essential characteristic of one's gender, these studies offer unsatisfying answers as to how trans people come to know their gender. To explore this phenomenon, a series of interviews were conducted with six transgender and non-binary adults in Ottawa, guided by hermeneutical phenomenology. The results show that knowing one's gender identity is exploring one's desires guided by feeling of joy. These findings, and a subsequent analysis on a praxis of joy, suggest a way to validate transgender identities as something "real," while also avoiding reification of gender categories, by centring desires as core structure of gender identity.

Abstrait

Des études médicales et sociologiques antérieures ont tenté d'expliquer comment les personnes transgenres développent leur identité, tandis que dans le même temps, des chercheurs féministes et sociologiques discutaient de la nature socialement construite du genre. Pourtant, en affirmant qu'il n'existe aucune caractéristique essentielle du genre d'une personne, ces études offrent des réponses insatisfaisantes quant à la manière dont les personnes trans apprennent à connaître leur genre. Pour explorer ce phénomène, une série d'entretiens ont été menés auprès de six adultes transgenres et non binaires à Ottawa, guidés par la phénoménologie herméneutique. Les résultats montrent que connaître son identité de genre, c'est explorer ses désirs guidés par un sentiment de joie. Ces résultats, ainsi qu'une analyse ultérieure sur une praxis de la joie, suggèrent une manière de valider les identités transgenres comme quelque chose de « réel », tout en évitant la réification des catégories de genre, en centrant les désirs comme structure centrale de l'identité de genre.

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1. Introduction

> *…When was it? I can't remember when I first started noticing it. There was a girl in my class in my elementary school. She was cool, athletic, and very much a tomboyish type of person. I had a huge crush on her. Or was I? I'm still not sure if I liked her or wanted to be like her. For so long I wished I was born a girl. Whenever I saw girls in my school, I got jealous. I cried and prayed nights after nights to let me be a girl in my next life. But I didn't have a word describe this feeling. Every boy feels the same way, right? I mean, who even enjoys being a boy. One time, I asked my friend how he would feel if he turned into a girl suddenly. He said he'll be horrified, disgusted, and will try to turn back into a man as soon as possible. He enjoyed living as a man! My world had turned upside down. I was so, so wrong…*[1]

Although most of the human population experiences a sense of having a gender, compared to cisgender people, transgender people are compelled to question the nature of gender, as it is culturally understood. Being cisgender means that one's gender identity aligns with one's assigned gender in a way that requires little to no explanation to oneself or to others (Benson, 2013; Cooper et al., 2022).[2] In contrast, for trans people, the disconnect between one's gender identity and one's assigned gender requires extensive evaluations of one's physiological self, one's gendered self, and oneself in general, that cannot rely on cultural assumptions or social norms as a guide. As a result, understanding the lived experience of transgender people holds revolutionary potential for better understanding and redefining the nature of gender itself, illuminating a path to understanding how to separate gender from essentialist notions of biological sex.

[1] Throughout this paper, I share snippets of my own experience as a trans woman at the start of each chapter as a practice of epoché, except for in the results section where I shifted my focus onto participants' stories. I have inserted a small butterfly symbol at the start of each memory to differentiate these from the participants' quotes.
[2] In this paper, I have used the term gender and gender identity as separate definitions. I followed social constructivist perspective on gender (Butler, 2006; Goffman, 1979; Kessler & McKenna, 2006; West & Zimmerman, 1987), and used it to refer to socially expressed and perceived categories of identity. Meanwhile, I used gender identity as one's internal sense of self that one wants to be identified as.

Studying this phenomenon could push feminist theorizing forward by building on dominant theories of the social construction of gender by doing (West & Zimmerman, 1987) or performing gender (Butler, 2006). Though such theories rightly challenge gender essentialist theories that define gender as a biologically, or even socially, derived binary, they nonetheless fail to explain why trans people experience gender euphoria and dysphoria. Though they point to patriarchal power structures as the cause of the existence of gender dichotomies, it is unclear what drives trans people to reject the normative social order, often at great cost to themselves physically, financially, and socially. By hearing the voices of trans people, this research seeks to validate and affirm trans identities as "real" while avoiding dangers of essentializing gender as purely biologically determined. Furthermore, the implications of this research have the potential to challenge the trans/cis dichotomy by more fully explaining the meaning of gender for trans and cis people alike.

As such, I aim to uncover the core structure constituting the knowledge of one's gender identity by exploring what it means for transgender people to know their gender identities using Heideggerian hermeneutical phenomenology. I interviewed a total of six people using semi-structured, open-ended interviews, recruited through criterion sampling, augmented by snowball sampling, starting from the Ottawa Trans Library. Guided by van Manen's methodology, after transcribing interviews verbatim, I uncovered themes in the participants' testimonies to describe and understand the lived experience of knowing one's gender identity for transgender people. Furthermore, these findings were reflected upon hermeneutically to uncover potential implications of the participants' lived experiences to our broader understanding of gender.

2. Literature Review

> *...Late 2014, my best friend came out to me as lesbian. She was the first queer person I met in my life. I wasn't sure what to feel at that time. Just having a queer person next to me shook how I saw the world. I've asked a lot of questions, some probably ignorant now that I think about it. But she kindly and patiently explained everything for me. All about sexuality and gender stuff. Through her, I realized transgender people actually existed in the real world. Before then, transgender people only existed in televisions and movies. I never thought I could be trans. I started looking up reddit posts written by trans people. Even looking that up felt scary, like it was breaking a big taboo. But all their stories, experiences, thoughts, and feelings, they all felt so familiar. There were people out there who were like me. I finally found a word to describe myself...*

How the term transgender (trans) is defined differs across previous studies. The most common definition of transgender is having a gender identity that is different from the one assigned at birth (Burdge, 2013; Cooper et al., 2020; Nulty et al., 2019; Wilson et al., 2021). However, there are transgender people whose gender identity is flexible, multiple, or close to what they were assigned at birth. Therefore, for this research, transgender people are defined as people who identify as transgender, which includes binary transgender people (e.g., trans-feminine, trans-masculine) as well as non-binary and other gender non-conforming people. Nonetheless, popular notions of gender as an unchangeable and biologically determined dichotomy of either male or female persist, among both the traditionally conservative and among some feminists, such as those who call themselves Gender-critical Feminists, or also dubbed Trans Exclusionary Radical Feminists (TERFs). Such popular essentialist and binary understandings of gender are not merely theoretical debates but reinforce and perpetuate high levels of transphobia in transgender peoples' lives (Grant et al., 2012; Navarro et al., 2021) by delegitimizing pathologizing trans identities. For example, a 2012 study on transgender people in the United States showed that out of 6,436 trans people, 61% of them experienced harassment in school, 47% of them experienced employment discrimination, and 57% of them have experienced rejection by their family members based on their identity (Grant et al., 2012). Also,

a 2021 study on trans people in Canada showed that out of 2,873 respondents, 72% of them experienced harassment and 25% of them were ostracized by their family members for being trans (Navarro et al., 2021). Given the physiological complexity of transition and the overwhelming pressure to conform to gender norms, how do transgender people know that their gender identity is different from what they were assigned at birth?

2.1. Transgender Identity Development

At least since Freud, psychologists have offered several explanations for how transgender identity is formed, traditionally through a pathological lens (Burdge, 2013). In his inherently misogynistic theory, Freud (1905) argued that gender identity develops through either penis envy for girls, and incestuous desire for opposite-sex parents for boys (Oedipal complex), seeing men as possessing the normative body while placing women as people who lack penises. Building on Freud's ideas, Erikson (1950) argued that gender identity is developed by imitating gender roles that children deem worthy, while rejecting certain roles to be accepted as a competent member of that gender by their parents. Likewise, Kohlberg (1966) claimed gender identity is realized once children develops a cognitive ability to categorize objects around them; male identifying children will then naturally desire things categorized as masculine, while female identifying children will desire feminine-categorized things (Kohlberg, 1966). To Freud, Erikson and Kohlberg, normative gender identity development follows binary biological sex designations, making transgender identity fundamentally pathological by deviating from "normal" identity development (Burdge, 2013). Such explanations of transgender identity formation have been shown to be dangerous by devaluing and denying transgender experience (Burdge, 2013).

Whereas these heterosexual, cis-male-presenting psychologists pathologized transgender people, the early 20th century German sexologist Magnus Hirschfeld, who was a pioneer

advocating for transgender people, coined the terms “transvestite,” and “transsexual” (Hill, 2005; Stryker, 2009). A gay man himself, Hirschfeld established the Institute for Sexual Science in Berlin, and researched diverse sexualities and gender identities of people (Stryker, 2009). His most notable contribution to transgender studies was *The Transvestites,* aiming to differentiate transgender identities from homosexual identities based on interviews with 17 people who did not conform to the gender binary (Hill, 2005; Stryker, 2009). In his “theory of intermediaries,” Hirschfeld (1910), argued that every person has unique combinations of different sexual characteristics, and that gender is more of a spectrum rather than a binary. Hirschfeld (1910) recognized that the term *transvestite* “describes only the external side, while the internal is limitless” (p. 502), suggesting that gender identities beyond the gender binary can be possible. However, while his contributions are important for depathologizing transgender identities, he still dismissed many of the participants' accounts and tried to fit them into his own understanding of identities (Hill, 2005). For example, he called a trans-feminine participant dating a woman a heterosexual man, while being confused as to how to describe a bisexual trans-masculine person, claiming that the participant’s desire must have been just a phase (Hill, 2005). As such, Hirschfeld’s work also makes clear a need for research on transgender people that privileges the actual lived experience of transgender people.

In response to such critiques, there were several attempts from medical and sexological fields to develop a theory of gender identity that affirms transgender lived experience (Devor, 2004; Goldberg & Kuvalanka, 2018; Kuper et al., 2018; Levitt & Ippolito, 2014; Pollock & Eyre, 2012; Pullen Sansfaçon et al., 2020). These qualitative studies describe different stages transgender people go through while figuring out their gender identity, and how they negotiate their identities within society.

Nearly 100 years after the publication of *The Transvestites,* Devor (2004) showed that transgender individuals could successfully navigate through their own identity development and achieve positive life experience. After studying multiple transgender individuals, he proposed a 14 stage model of transgender identity development including: (1) abiding anxiety, (2) identity confusion about one's originally assigned gender and sex, (3) identity comparisons about one's originally assigned gender and sex, (4) discovery of transsexualism, (5) identity confusion about transsexualism, (6) identity comparisons about transsexualism, (7) tolerance of transsexual identity, (8) delay before acceptance of transsexual identity, (9) acceptance of transsexual identity, (10) delay before transition, (11) transition, (12) acceptance of post-transition gender and sex identities, (13) integration, and (14) pride (Devor, 2004).

Similarly, conducting in-depth interviews with thirteen trans-masculine youths, Pollock and Eyre (2012) explored how trans-masculine people develop their identity, a population often left invisible by previous research. They developed a three-stage model suggesting that transgender people's identities are developed through a process of: (1) growing sense of gender, (2) recognition of transgender identity, and (3) social adjustment (Pollock & Eyre, 2012). As this study focused only on the 18 to 23-year-old population, it failed to account for prolonged experience of transgender people and may have limited generalizability as subjects came from the relatively 2SLGBTQ+ friendly San Francisco, California.

Further, these stage-based identity development models have been criticized for framing the development of gender identity as a linear process rather than a dynamic, perhaps cyclical, experience without a clear end point (Kuper et al., 2018; Pullen Sansfaçon et al., 2020). Instead, Kuper et al. (2018) constructed a model based on narrative framework, where one's own meaning to their experience becomes the core of their identity development. In this model,

transgender people's identities are developed through an interplay between their sense of self, and an intrapersonal development process (Kuper et al., 2018). The sense of self describes a dimensions of gender identity, physical self, gender expression, and gender presentation one has, while in an intrapersonal process describes people's experiences with self-awareness, exploration, meaning making, and integration of these meaning back into one's sense of self (Kuper et al., 2018). Similarly, Pullen Sansfaçon et al. (2020) developed a model where both personal and social processes influence each other during transgender people's identity development. A personal exploration process is driven by gender dysphoria, while the social process is performed through experimentation with external feedback (Pullen Sansfaçon et al., 2020). These two studies show that how transgender people actively make meaning out of their pre-coming-out childhood experience and interpersonal relationship in order to make sense of their identities (Kuper et al., 2018; Pullen Sansfaçon et al., 2020).

Moreover, Levitt and Ippolito (2014) found out how transgender individuals take their own socio-economic constraints into consideration when developing their identities. Interviewing 17 transgender participants, they studied transgender identity development using grounded theory integrated with phenomenology. At the core of their results was the difficulty for transgender people to articulate their complex identities in a society where binary gender expressions are enforced, which they described in metaphor as "the struggle to develop color vision in a monochromatic world" (Levitt & Ippolito, 2014, p. 1746). In this formulation, gender identity formation is more experience than process, constituted in three main ways: (1) developing constructs to represent one's gender authentically, (2) finding ways to communicate one's gender to others and be seen, and (3) balancing these needs with [a] need to survive under discriminatory political, social, and economic conditions (Levitt & Ippolito, 2014). The last

category of their findings illuminated how transgender people carefully balance their own transition and comfort with constraints such as medical fees and discrimination.

As these models expanded understanding of transgender experiences, they, albeit unintentionally, contributed to growing trans-normative narratives, where binary transgender experiences are privileged while non-binary experiences are ignored (Matsuno & Budge, 2017; Tatum et al., 2020). Even though non-binary people's experience are unique from binary transgender people's, (Tatum et al., 2020), their experiences are often made invisible from the larger society. Goldberg and Kuvalanka (2018) therefore studied seven non-binary college students using focus group interviews to develop non-binary identity development model. Four common themes emerged from participants' experiences: (1) exploring gender identity through online and offline resources, (2) complexities coming from being a non-binary person, (3) tensions within and across LGBTQ+ spaces, and (4) recommendations for action, where participants advocated for better support for non-binary people from institutions (Goldberg & Kuvalanka, 2018). The research revealed how non-binary people experience complex discrimination coming from both the binary gender system, and exclusion from normative queer spaces (Goldberg & Kuvalanka, 2018).

These previous models hold significance as they break free from the pathological view of transgender identity and show transgender experience could be life-affirming. However, they are concerned about lived experience of transitioning for transgender people, and skirt around on asking how they identify as such in the first place.

2.2. Lived Experience of Transgender People

Understanding the lived experiences of transgender people, and not just the aspect of transitioning, is mostly found in the phenomenological literature—a type of research that seeks

to capture the lived experience of participants (Benson, 2013; Burdge, 2013; Cavalcante, 2016; Cooper et al., 2020, 2022; Eisenberg & Zervoulis, 2020; Harrison et al., 2020; Nulty et al., 2019; Wilson et al., 2021). These prior phenomenological studies focused on lived experience of general sense of being a transgender person (Burdge, 2013; Eisenberg & Zervoulis, 2020), dealing with gender dysphoria (Cooper et al., 2020, 2022; Harrison et al., 2020), experience with health services (Benson, 2013; Harrison et al., 2020), living in prison (Nulty et al., 2019), and how they express their identity around people (Cavalcante, 2016; Wilson et al., 2021). Two major themes found in these studies were the distress coming from gender dysphoria, and in contrast, the life-affirming experiences as a transgender person.

Gender dysphoria refers to the psychological distress caused by incongruence between their gender identity and their assigned gender (Cooper et al., 2020, 2022; Harrison et al., 2020). Transgender individuals find it hard to describe their initial feelings about having dysphoria exactly, but commonly it is described as feeling "different," "strange," or "confusing" (Cooper et al., 2020; Eisenberg & Zervoulis, 2020; Harrison et al., 2020; Nulty et al., 2019). According to Cooper et al. (2020, 2022), transgender people experience distress coming from these themes: mismatched body, uncertain identity, gender expectations, social unacceptance, and transphobia.

First, transgender people often feel negative emotions due to their body being mismatched from their gender identity (Cooper et al., 2020, 2022; Nulty et al., 2019). This distress mainly comes from their secondary sex characteristics, and because of this, trans people report they feel estranged from their bodies (Cooper et al., 2020, 2022). Next, transgender people feel distress from an uncertain sense of identity (Cooper et al., 2020, 2022). Dominant cisgender normative societal expectations leave transgender people with a constant feeling of uncertainty about their identity (Cooper et al., 2020, 2022). Difference coming from gender norms with their

desired gender identity was another factor of distress (Cooper et al., 2020). Transgender individuals often try to express themselves in line with social gender norms to not get misgendered (Cooper et al., 2020; Wilson et al., 2021). Fourth, transgender people feel distress coming from social unacceptance (Cooper et al., 2020, 2022; Eisenberg & Zervoulis, 2020; Harrison et al., 2020; Nulty et al., 2019; Wilson et al., 2021). This unacceptance results in transgender people repressing their identity or severing social ties to avoid negative interactions (Cooper et al., 2020, 2022; Eisenberg & Zervoulis, 2020; Harrison et al., 2020; Nulty et al., 2019; Wilson et al., 2021). Finally, external, and internal transphobia was another factor of distress experienced by transgender people (Benson, 2013; Cooper et al., 2020; Nulty et al., 2019). As the risk of threat coming from societal transphobia transgender people feel hypervigilance when being outside (Benson, 2013; Cooper et al., 2020; Nulty et al., 2019). Furthermore, this transphobia is sometimes internalized, resulting in transgender people feeling shameful about their identity (Cooper et al., 2020). Often this gender dysphoria makes transgender people feel hopeless about their future, making them believe death is preferable (Cooper et al., 2020; Eisenberg & Zervoulis, 2020; Harrison et al., 2020).

However, the lived experience of transgender people is not solely constituted of negative experiences but is often full of life affirming experiences as well. Transgender people have described coming out as trans as feeling authentic to oneself, having a stronger connection with others, and developing a sense of greater purpose (Burdge, 2013; Cavalcante, 2016; Eisenberg & Zervoulis, 2020; Nulty et al., 2019). Through a deeper exploration of one's desires, often with internal reflection or trying on different gender expressions (Burdge, 2013; Eisenberg & Zervoulis, 2020), transgender people can have feeling of self-discovery, uniqueness, and authenticity about themselves (Burdge, 2013; Eisenberg & Zervoulis, 2020). Research has shown

that entering the world as what they felt was their genuine self-resulted in transgender people rediscovering their sexuality and becoming more resilient and enthusiastic in life (Burdge, 2013; Eisenberg & Zervoulis, 2020).

Being trans enables people to be more deeply connected with each other (Burdge, 2013; Cavalcante, 2016; Eisenberg & Zervoulis, 2020). As trans people face rejection from their family and the larger society, they often rely on offline or online transgender communities for support (Cavalcante, 2016; Eisenberg & Zervoulis, 2020). These communities act as a care structure for transgender people and have positive mental effects on them (Cavalcante, 2016; Eisenberg & Zervoulis, 2020). Furthermore, being deeply connected to oneself enables them to be more generous, honest, and open, thus creating stronger bonds with others (Burdge, 2013). Finally, living as trans gives people a profound sense of connection with greater purpose (Burdge, 2013; Nulty et al., 2019). Some trans people described their spirituality becoming fuller and more meaningful after experiencing a better sense of self, and love from others (Burdge, 2013). Some trans people have expressed feelings of being part of greater social change, making a better world for everyone by breaking down oppressive structures such as transphobia, gender boundaries, prison systems, and inequality (Burdge, 2013; Nulty et al., 2019).

These phenomenological studies are significant as they illuminated transgender experiences that are often silenced and pathologized in society. They also highlighted the uniqueness and joy of transgender experiences thus affirming their identity and lives. However, many of these phenomenological studies are conducted through the lens of medical fields, placing transgender people as objects of treatment. And importantly, none of the studies successfully answers what it means to know one's gender identity for transgender people.

3. Theories

…About a half a year, I was a non-binary person, specifically identifying as agender. I was disgusted with masculinity or anything to do with being a man, so I rejected all gender categories. But there was still something that felt left out. Like I don't have enough Lego bricks to build a complete set. So, then I thought I might be more of an androgenous person. But something still bothered me. Next label was a demigirl, a non-binary person who is closer to a woman. But the feeling was still there. And on one faithful night that I drank too much beer, I finally had enough courage to embrace the fact that I am a woman. My first thought as a woman was "I'm so happy that I'm a woman." A few weeks later from that night, I learned that I could change how my body looked with hormones. As soon I realized that my desire to medically transition exploded. All the feelings and desires I've been suppressing suddenly burst through the barrier; it became unbearable. Every day waiting for a referral felt like I was drowning inside my body. And when I finally got the referral after several months, I couldn't stop my tears. I finally look forward the future. My first estrogen shot filled me with joy. I was floating on a cloud. The world seemed so round and soft…

3.1. Theories of Gender

How transgender people understand themselves, and how they navigate through this world is bound to our knowledge of gender. Thus, to understand the lived experience of transgender people, understanding how the concept of gender has evolved over time is needed. Contemporary understanding of gender has been heavily relied upon essentialist and binary notion of biological sex. This has been often applied to oppress women's capability in society. To break out from this notion of biological sex, de Beauvoir (1956) introduced the idea of gender in feminist conversations. She argued that society sets male as a default human form of being, and positions women as the "Other" to serve men's needs (de Beauvoir, 1956; Dini, 2017). Phenomenologically examining women's life from childhood to adulthood, de Beauvoir (1956) argued this "Othering" process begins from birth of a child. Like a doll, women are trained to suit men's needs by passively listening to men's troubles and soothing them, dressing up in pretty clothes, and providing physical pleasure to men (de Beauvoir, 1956). She also explored history and saw how women were stripped of power. Through an example of ancient Greece, she

showed how only men can hold both powers simultaneously and assign some of the power to women to benefit the patriarchy (de Beauvoir, 1956; Dini, 2017). She ultimately argued that women are not inherently inferior to men, rather, they are socially trained to view themselves as such, famously saying, "one is not born, but rather becomes, a woman" (de Beauvoir, 1956, p. 273). Her work was significant in feminist studies as she first introduced gender as a socially constructed, rather than biologically determined, concept. By presenting femininity as something assigned, rather than something intrinsic, it offered many feminist scholars to critically examine and challenge patriarchal social norms that oppressed many women.

Later, Goffman (1979) built on this notion of gender as something learned socially through ritualized performances. He argued that masculinity and femininity are "prototypes of essential expression" (p.75) that reveal clues about the fundamental nature of male and female (Goffman, 1979). Although such description expresses something about individuals' essential selves, such essences are not intrinsic at birth, but rather are socially learned (Goffman, 1979). And by displaying gender, people establish social contract on how the interaction might occur (Goffman, 1979). However, to Goffman (1979), these performances are optional; one could choose to initiate gender or not, and it could be also declined by the second party (Goffman, 1979).

Perhaps illustrating Goffman's argument, Garfinkel's (1967) ethnographical analysis of Agnes showed this performative nature of gender. Agnes was a transgender woman who claimed that she wanted to be a "120 percent female" (Garfinkel, 1967, p. 129). She described herself as a female born with a penis, which she perceived as a mistake of nature. During the interview, she shared how she utilized various strategies in different situation to be seen as a "normal natural female" (Garfinkel, 1967, p. 176). These included managing her mannerisms, expressing herself

through her clothing, and avoiding situations where she must disclose her transness. Analysing Agnes's experience, Garfinkel (1967) characterized gender as a game between parties where one must manage one's sexed impression to stay within the conventional notion of binary sex. If one fails to follow the binary order, then one is in risk of getting socially punished, as the binary sex is regarded as an unequivocal truth for the public (Garfinkel, 1967). Given this fact, Agnes had to be a "120% female" all the time to avoid marginalization. Garfinkel (1967) coined the term "passing" to describe Agnes's continuous effort to be seen as a natural female without her transness being disclosed (p. 137). While performative in nature, Agnes's attempts at passing cannot be explained through Goffman's (1979) Gender Display Theory. If gender is something that could be initiated willingly, how come Agnes had to constantly manage her impression to avoid social repercussions?

Following Goffman's symbolic interactionist approach, West & Zimmerman (1987) agreed with Goffman that gender is "done" through interactions with others. However, analyzing Agnes's example, they challenged the notion that there are essential characteristics of being a male and female, while at the same time, refuted the idea that doing gender is optional. Instead, they claimed that gender is an unavoidable and reoccurring accomplishment, constructed to allocate and maintain sex-based social hierarchies (West & Zimmerman, 1987). In this system, if one does gender appropriately, one is rewarded for reproducing social arrangements; and if one fails to do one's gender successfully, one is punished (West & Zimmerman, 1987). Through this point of view, we could explain why transgender people suffer from high levels of transphobia and discrimination. As transgender people fail to follow their assigned gender and challenge systematic allocation of gender hierarchy, they are thus punished to maintain the system.

Later, Lorber (1994), and Lucal (1999) criticized Goffman (1979), and West and Zimmerman (1987) for individualizing gender. They argued that gender does not just come from interpersonal interactions, but it's a separate social institution that oppresses women (Lorber, 1994; Lucal, 1999). Gender is a "process of creating distinguishable social statuses for assignment of rights and responsibilities," and through that process women are stratified as a subordinate class (Lorber, 1994, p.32). Building onto Lorber's argument, Lucal (1999) pointed out that men experience gender differently from how women experience it. Similar to what de Beauvoir (1956) suggested, she showed how society assumes people's gender as male as a default unless femininity is explicitly expressed (Lucal, 1999). Thus, the binary gender system serves to oppress women; women have to constantly prove that they are proper women in order to avoid being held accountable for not following the gender role (Lucal, 1999). Lorber (1994) extended this argument, however, to make the transphobic claim that transgender people reinforce binary gender institutions by perpetuating traditional gender roles. She described transgender people as "biological males and females who have sex-change operations to alter their genitalia," (Lorber 1994, p. 17) and claimed they "do not challenge the social construction of gender. Their goal is to be feminine women and masculine men" (p. 20). On the other hand, using her own personal experience with gender bending, Lucal (1999) asserted that we can challenge the binary gender system by doing gender differently.

Meanwhile, Kessler and McKenna (2006) explored how gender is attributed to someone through socially shared meaning. Gender attribution is described as a process in which one attribute genital to someone based on their interaction, or physical cues (Kessler & McKenna, 2006). These meaning could include someone's voice, height, and clothing. During this process, an assigned genital becomes the core of the interpretation where other cues are flexibly

reinterpreted to fit with the imagined genital (Kessler & McKenna, 2006). The assigned genitalia here isn't the physiological genital, rather it is cultural genital that someone is assumed to have one (Kessler & McKenna, 2006). For example, if a person is assumed to have a vagina, traits that were unnoticed previously, such as their width of their hips or length of their hair, are reinterpreted as "female cues." Then, the assigned binary gender system becomes a paradox where their gender is assigned through their assumed genital, while concurrently that genital itself is also attributed through socially shared meanings (Kessler & McKenna, 2006). Furthering their argument, Kessler and McKenna (2006) conducted an ethnomethodological study with 10 adults to showed how the male cues are heavily preferred over female cues during the attribution process. They concluded that socially shared meaning of femaleness is a lack of maleness (Kessler & McKenna, 2006). This argument reaffirms de Beauvoir's (1956) claim that men are seen as default form of human existence. This phenomenon could explain why trans woman are made hyper visible comparatively to trans men and non-binary people in the media.

3.2. Gender Performativity Theory

Social constructivist theories of gender exposes how gender is socially constructed and performed (Goffman, 1979; West & Zimmerman, 1987), while how it as a social institution systemically oppresses women (de Beauvoir, 1956; Lorber, 1994; Lucal, 1999). However, these theories either assume that there are essential characteristics of biological sex or fail to question how sex itself might be also constructed. Butler (2006) critiqued de Beauvoir that she assumed that there are still feminine bodies before gender inscription. They pointed out that in *The Second Sex* de Beauvoir never pointed out that the body "becoming a woman" is never implied as a feminine body, if sex is not where this gender comes from, non "feminine" bodies could hold

potential to become a woman (Butler, 2006).[3] Paradoxically, de Beauvoir still holds onto the physical form of feminine body and urges "women" to use this body as an emancipatory tool, while saying the concept of women is constructed (Butler, 2006; de Beauvoir, 1956). Butler (2006) critiqued de Beauvoir that she was holding onto Cartesian mind-body duality. Rather, they suggested, our understanding of biological sex is also constructed (Butler, 2006). There is no prediscursive sex before gender, rather, gender assigns sex onto our bodies (Butler, 2006). Kessler and McKenna (2006) made similar argument, by saying "hormones, behavior, physical characteristics, developmental processes, chromosomes, psychological qualities have all been fitted into gender dichotomous categories… our seeing of two genders leads to the "discovery" of biological, psychological, and social differences" (Kessler & McKenna, 2006, p. 178-179).

If gender doesn't come from biological sex, then how is gender constructed? Like Goffman (1979) and West and Zimmerman (1987) have discussed, Butler (1988, 2006) argued that gender is performative. We see people wearing dresses, behave in certain mannerisms, and call themselves certain names. Through these "stylized repetition of acts," (Butler, 2006, p. 191) we assume and assign gender to these people even though we cannot determine their "biological sex." Indeed, if this "biological sex" is also constructed through gender, it is then apparent that these performances are in fact, gender themselves (Butler, 2006). To Butler (2006), there are no prediscursive gendered beings behind these performances. Gender, in this sense, has no original form, no boundaries, and to achieve "true" gender would be a continuous failure to be one. Like Lucal's (1999) argument, Butler (2006) contended that through redeploying these performances in certain ways (e.g., drag) we could potentially make trouble in the social boundaries of gender.

[3] Judith Butler uses they/them pronouns.

Butler's theory on gender performativity holds importance regarding transgender rights issues. Transphobic discourse has been relying upon the essentialist notion of biological sex, that one could not change one's own sex. But by challenging the assumption of biological sex distinction, and suggesting that gender is constructed through continuous performances, it holds potential to emancipate transgender people from shackles of "true biological sex" and affirm their gender identities. However, Butler's (2006) gender performativity theory failed to explain where these performances come from. Indeed, if gender is purely performative, and there are no gendered agents behind performing these acts, then how do transgender people claim their own gender identity? If there are no prediscursive gendered beings, how can transgender people maintain their own identity in the face of ruthless transphobia? How can trans people know their own gender identity and argue that they are in fact, women, men, non-binary, or other? To claim that there is an "authentic" feeling of one's gender, and gender is indeed "stylized repetition of acts," there must be a place where these authentic acts come from. If we are gender neutral beings just ritually repeating these acts, why do trans people feel distress having to perform a certain gender while feeling euphoric with another one? Butler (2004) tried to answer this question by arguing that recognition of oneself within a norm is integral to one's survival. Yet, the immense joy and comfort experienced by trans people experiencing their gender identities cannot be explained by their mere survival.

To explore how trans people know their own gender identity in relation to their life-world, we must orient ourselves to trans people who are experiencing the phenomenon and ask what it means to them. Indeed, there were several phenomenological attempts to describe the meaning of the lived experience of transgender people (Benson, 2013; Burdge, 2013; Cavalcante, 2016; Cooper et al., 2020, 2022; Eisenberg & Zervoulis, 2020; Harrison et al., 2020;

Nulty et al., 2019; Wilson et al., 2021). However, no study in our current knowledge has yet to ask what it means to know one's gender identity. Burge (2013) and Eisenberg & Zervoulis (2020) suggested that through exploration of one's desires transgender people find authenticity to oneself thus feeling euphoria, it only answered how they find and feel authenticity, but not why they feel euphoria through those gender performance in the first place, ultimately failing to fill in the empirical gap between the lived experience of transgender people and gender performativity theory. Then, we must ask, these questions to explore the phenomenon:

- What does it mean to know one's gender identity for transgender people?
    - How do transgender people first come to realize their gender identity?
    - What are the implications of our understanding of gender in general?
    - How can we acknowledge and embrace a gendered self without pathologizing and essentializing what it is to be gendered in a particular way?

Through these questions, this research aims to describe and understand the meaning of the lived experience of knowing one's gender identity for transgender people.

4. Methodology

> *…I was full of hope, I was more sociable, I loved myself. But I wished I could be loved as a daughter too. I came out to her. Terrible mistake. Pure denial and hostility. You're disgusting. I'm alone in this world. I am inherently unlovable. Violence ensued. I feared for my life. One day, all my hormones got confiscated. My future now gone. The person who I loved and trusted the most betrayed me and was trying to kill me. There was no reason to live. That night, I… I don't want to remember. Everything after that is a blur. Only the emotions are graspable. Anxiety, hopelessness, pure white anger, terror, terror, terror, and more crushing terror. My lungs helplessly drowning in dark, grey sludge. I wasn't living anymore…*

4.1. Hermeneutical Phenomenology

Phenomenology is a philosophical discipline that tries to capture the essence of a lived experience of a phenomenon (Creswell & Poth, 2018; van Manen, 2014, 2016, 2017).

Phenomenology was first developed by Husserl in an attempt to break away from 19th century positivist philosophical assumptions that presumed that objective truth is out there for us to grasp (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Houston, 2022). Husserl (1931) instead argued that our knowledge is constructed in relation with others. This is called intentionality; it describes how our consciousness is always oriented towards an object, and it only becomes meaningful through the perceiver's own consciousness (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Houston, 2022; Husserl, 1931). Because of this assumption, phenomenology rejects the Cartesian object-subject dichotomy (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Consequently, instead of trying to find unchanging objective truth, Husserl is more concerned with trying to capture the primordial essence of a phenomenon as it presents itself to our consciousness (van Manen, 2017). However, doing this is difficult due to what Husserl (1931) called "natural attitude," which describes our taken-for-granted attitude that makes us believe we already understand the objective truth, and discourages us from challenging our assumptions (Giorgi, 1997; Husserl, 1931; van Manen, 2014). To break out of this natural attitude, phenomenologists must practice *epoché*, a process of bracketing out one's own experience, prejudgements, and knowledge to precisely understand the essence of a phenomenon without any interpretations (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Giorgi, 1997; van Manen, 2017). After setting aside one's own experience, phenomenologists should describe the phenomenon as if they are experiencing it for the first time in their lives, and then seek out the most invariant meaning in the description (Giorgi, 1997).

One of the scholars who had been influenced by Husserl was Max Weber. Like Husserl, Weber criticized positivist assumptions of sociology, arguing that the positivist approach only shows how phenomena happen in the society, not why they happen (Allen, 2004). Unlike Marxist viewpoint that focused on a social structure, Weber's focus of research was on

individuals (Allen, 2004; Weber, 1946). He argued that an individual is able to interpret and construct their own reality, rather than being bounded by an objective social structure (Allen, 2004; Weber, 1946). Indeed, his idea that people can create their own meaning towards a certain object has a striking resemblance with Husserl's (1931) concept of intentionality. Hence, Weber's methodological approach called *Verstehen*, also encourages sociologists to put oneself into another's mind to understand and interpret a subjective perspective of them (Allen, 2004; Weber, 1946). And again, like Husserl's concept of epoché, Weber urges researchers to put one's values and judgement in order to fully immerse oneself into the subjective perspective (Allen, 2004). However, what Weber's Verstehen method differs from Husserl's phenomenological approach, where it's aim was to describe the pure essence of a lived experience of a phenomenon, is that it focuses more on explaining reasons of an individual's actions. He claimed that we could create models that could logically explain an individual's actions through analysing one's religious, cultural, emotional, or economical context, which he called *Ideal Types* (Allen, 2004; Hall, 1979; Weber, 1946). And through verstehen, sociologists can explain why one deviated from their ideal type (Allen, 2004). Yet, his concept of ideal type assumes that there is a correct way of an individual's action (Allen, 2004). Without answering who decides what is correct and what is wrong, Weber is inserting his own assumptions into the concept, directly contradicting his own encouragement earlier about the importance of value-free method (Allen, 2004). If Weber himself cannot remove his own judgements from the methodology, is it even possible to achieve transcendental ego, free from prior experiences and judgements in the first place?

Criticisms against Husserl and Weber's assumption that objective observer could study a subjective perspective emerged, specifically regarding the idea of epoché. Critics argued that

achieving pure transcendental ego free from all prejudgments is impossible, an oxymoron at best (LeVasseur, 2003). Indeed, if our consciousness is always directed towards an object like Husserl said, how can a pure observer of phenomena exist? Husserlian phenomenology defended epoché saying that Husserl's intention was not an elimination of a researcher, but rather a brief suspension of judgement to preserve constant curiosity towards a phenomenon (Creswell & Poth, 2018; LeVasseur, 2003). One of the most prominent critics of Husserl was his own student, Heidegger (LeVasseur, 2003; van Manen, 2014).[4]

Heidegger (1962) argued that we are always situated and involved in the world, something he called "dasein." Thus, it is impossible for us to completely bracket out our own consciousness from the world (Heidegger, 1962; LeVasseur, 2003). Instead, our prejudgements could be used to reflect on the meaning of a phenomenon, ultimately interpreting what makes it so unique (LeVasseur, 2003; van Manen, 2016). Hence the birth of hermeneutical phenomenology.

Hermeneutical phenomenology aims to interpret the subjective lived experiences of phenomena (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Kafle, 2013; van Manen, 2016) using our past experience with phenomena, or what is called our "fore-structure." This fore-structure should be utilized to co-construct meaning between phenomenologists and participants because this fore-structure explains how our perceptions of our own life-worlds differ from one another (Tuohy et al., 2013; van Manen, 2016). There are four major themes within this life-world: lived time, lived space, lived, body, and lived human relationship (Tuohy et al., 2013; van Manen, 2016). These

[4] Martin Heidegger was a Nazi. He joined the National Socialist German Workers Party when he became the head of the University of Freiburg in 1933. He had removed all the Jewish people from the institute, while never renouncing his involvement with the Nazis after WWII (Randall & Richardson, 2021). Although I believe hermeneutical phenomenology is the best approach to study the lived experience of marginalized people, we must critically recognize that the philosopher that inspired the methodology, Heidegger, was involved with genocide, including the systemic extermination of transgender people.

subjective perceptions of our world intertwine and cannot be separated from each other (van Manen, 2016). To interpret these lived experiences, phenomenologists must engage in the "hermeneutical cycle", or a method of interpretation in which one re-examines isolated themes from the descriptions, and then analyzes the meaning through reciprocal conversations with the participants (Kafle, 2013; van Manen, 2016).

Expanding on Heidegger's idea of dasein, Merleau-Ponty introduced a concept of corporeality into phenomenology. He argued that as we perceive the world through our bodies, our consciousness cannot be separated from our corporeal bodies (Marshall, 2008; Merleau-Ponty, 1945; van Manen, 2014). To Merleau-Ponty (1945), the world only becomes meaningful as we perceive it through our bodily senses. Our minds are not free-floating consciousness out in the space; they are constructed through a complex network of our nervous system, eyes, and a brain (van Manen, 2014). And as our minds are inexplicably intertwined with our bodies and with the world, our bodies become central to our being-in-the-world (van Manen, 2014). Merleau-Ponty (1945) also contended that our bodies are not just a subject of a study, but it both perceives and is perceived. As one touch one's skin with their fingers, the body becomes both a subject and an object of perception (Merleau-Ponty, 1945). And as we possess different corporeal existence, how we perceive reality becomes different from one another. Because of this diverse and ever-changing aspect of our perspectives, Merleau-Ponty (1945) said "…ambiguity is of the essence of human existence, and everything we live or think has always several meanings" (p.196). As our lived worlds are influenced by our corporeality, our lived bodies diverge from objective bodies (Daves, 2021; Merleau-Ponty, 1945). Merleau-Ponty (1945) called this lived body a phenomenal body, and defined it as a subjective body that we experience through our perceptions (Daves, 2021). In contrast to the phenomenal body, is an

objective body, which is a material body that is observed by a third person, most commonly from a medical perspective (Daves, 2021). Using examples of phantom limb and agnosia patients, he demonstrated how people's perceptions of their own bodies can differ from what we can observe from outside (Daves, 2021; Merleau-Ponty, 1945). Thus, through this viewpoint, to understand a phenomenon we must understand this corporeal lived perception of people.

Merleau-Ponty's corporeal phenomenology brings a unique analytical perspective into the lived experiences of transgender people. Transgender people's lived experiences are inseparably tied with their bodies but as illustrated by Agnes in Garfinkel's (1967) study, the gender that they live does not agree with medical binary sex definitions. In other words, to use Merleau-Ponty's terms, there is a significant incongruence between the objective and phenomenal bodies of transgender people. Since his philosophy legitimizes these subjective and ambiguous bodily experiences, studying transgender experiences through his perspective could legitimize trans people's lived bodily experiences. Furthermore, as trans people's physical bodies change throughout their transition, their perception of the world might change as well.

Overall, phenomenological epistemology holds potential to be utilized as an emancipatory tool. As it emphasizes recognizing our fore-structures, it could be critically utilized to challenge the systems of oppression (Weiss et al., 2020). The hermeneutical cycle process aligns well with feminist methodologies in that it emphasizes the importance of going back to the participants and inviting them as equal collaborators of knowledge production, consequently challenging researcher-participant hierarchy. Indeed, it was deemed useful for many feminist scholars as it helped form a deeper understanding of a gendered oppression (Freeman, 2018). De Beauvoir (1956) famously employed phenomenology in her book *The Second Sex* to investigate the construction of women as did Butler (1988) in their critique of a sex-gender dichotomy.

Furthermore, for queer people, examining physical and social surroundings is necessary for our everyday survival, making us natural phenomenologists (Salamon, 2009). Phenomenology holds potential for transgender research as it recognizes agency and lived experience of transgender people as legitimate source of knowledge production (Burdge, 2013). For these reasons, hermeneutical phenomenology is the best epistemological approach to understand what it means to know one's gender identity for transgender people under an oppressive cis-normative social structure.

4.2. Research Design

Guided by Heideggerian hermeneutical phenomenology, I used van Manen's (2016) methodology as a means of scaffolding this research. While van Manen (2016) did not specify exact steps for hermeneutical phenomenology, he suggests six activities that researchers must follow. These are: (1) turning to a phenomenon which seriously interests us and commits us to the world, (2) investigating experience as we live it rather than as we conceptualize it, (3) reflecting on the essential themes which characterize the phenomenon, (4) describing the phenomenon through the art of writing and rewriting, (5) maintaining a strong and oriented pedagogical relation to the phenomenon, and (6) balancing the research context by considering parts and whole (van Manen, 2016). These activities are not sequential but should be performed throughout the research process.

To respect van Manen's (2016) phenomenological activities, this research was conducted in six major steps. First, I collected data from the participants who have experienced the phenomenon. Starting from August 2023, 6 participants in total were recruited through criterion sampling, augmented with snowball sampling, starting from the Ottawa Trans Library. Then, using semi-structured, open-ended interviews, participant's responses were recorded and

transcribed verbatim.[5] Filler words such as "uh," or "um" are edited out from the transcripts to aid readability. Second, after the data collection I have read through the gathered data as a whole. Through this process, I submerged myself in the lived experiences of the participants and try to locate the essential meaning(s) of their experiences. Third, using NVivo, themes were identified by coding the transcripts, informed by van Manen's (2016) four major life-world themes: lived time, lived space, lived body, and lived human relationship. Fourth, to practice a hermeneutical cycle, I have returned to the participant to verify the themes after they were isolated. Participants were reached out individually through in-person meetings, and video chats (e.g., Zoom) to check the results are accurate to their lived experience. All participants except for two responded and validated the findings. This second interview lasted maximum 30 minutes. Fifth, I have hermeneutically reflected on these themes by analyzing their implications with our understanding of gender. Personal interactions with people visiting the Ottawa Trans Library informed this process as well. And finally, using thick descriptions, I have reported the meaning of the lived experience of the phenomenon.

I have also incorporated autobiographical elements by inserting my personal experience into the start of each section of this paper. Laying out my experience as a transgender woman acted as a phenomenological epoché by helping me understand how I am situated in this world,

[5] Although several articles show benefits of implementing a focus group method in phenomenology (Bradbury-Jones et al., 2009; Palmer et al., 2010; Phillips et al., 2016), limitations of the method outweighed its benefits, especially in this research's context. Studies showed that implementing a focus group method is beneficial because it: (1) brings out more experiential reflection, (2) challenges researcher's prejudices, (3) stimulates discussion, and (4) opens up new discussions (Bradbury-Jones et al., 2009; Palmer et al., 2010). Furthermore, sharing experience with others may serve as a therapeutic moment for the participants. However, the method also has limitations. First, securing privacy becomes challenging in group settings (Phillips et al., 2016). Considering the participants of this study is socially marginalized, minimizing a privacy risk should be a priority. Second, given that the research questions are related to highly private subjects, such as one's own experience with gender identity, freely sharing their thoughts may become harder for the participants in a group setting. And finally, there could be unpredictable factors in a group setting, including pre-existing relationships between the participants (Palmer et al., 2010), and situations where few people dominate the conversation. Because of these challenges of a focus group method, I have decided that individual interviews are better suited for this study.

and how my prejudgements influenced the analytical process. Additionally, feminist theorist Ann Cvetkovich (2012) argues that autobiographical methods offer up space for researchers to reflect on the personal meaning of a phenomenon and let new ideas and concept emerge, while also enable them to challenge already established theories (Cvetkovich, 2012). Finally, by re-examining myself, I was able to understand my gender identity more deeply throughout the research. This research wasn't just me extracting knowledge out of participants, but it was a shared opportunity for me to grow through the participants and vice versa. By reflecting on my personal meanings and emotions related to my sense of gender identity, this research acted as a therapeutic moment for me, and by giving voice to the participants, hopefully this was healing for the participants as well.

4.3. Sampling Method

Because this research aimed to study a marginalized group of people with specific experience with the phenomenon, I used criterion sampling augmented with snowball sampling. Criterion sampling is a purposeful sampling method where participants are recruited through pre-established criteria (Creswell & Poth, 2018). There are two criteria used for sampling for this research. First, all participants must identify as a transgender person. This included trans women, trans men, non-binary, and other gender nonconforming people. Second, all participants must be legal adults who are capable of giving informed consent.

However, due to the small population of transgender adults in society and the social stigma surrounding the population, there are difficulties with finding and recruiting them as participants (Herman et al., 2022). Because of this, the sampling method was augmented with snowball sampling. Research using snowball sampling recruit participants through pre-existing participants' acquaintances (Creswell & Poth, 2018). With the augmentation of snowball

sampling with criterion sampling, I recruited other transgender participants through already recruited participants. Initial recruitment of the participants started at the Ottawa Trans Library, a community library for transgender people located in Ottawa. I obtained written consent from the Head Librarian of the organization to recruit participants from the library after providing her with the purpose & methods of the research.

A poster containing information about the research with a QR code leading to a Google Forms page was posted at the Ottawa Trans Library, while an Instagram post was shared on the library account as well. Comment and tagging features were disabled for the Instagram post to ensure confidentiality of applicants. Upon the posting of the recruitment, 49 people in total signed up, just in a day, including a wide range of people with diverse experience from the Ottawa region, including immigrants, disabled persons, BIPOC, and more.

As the applicants exceeded the maximum threshold of 6 people, participants were then purposefully selected to capture as diverse experiences as possible, leading to a final sample of six participants. Selection was carried out on a first come, first served basis, with participant diversity in mind. Actors for inclusion included but were not limited to: gender identity, age, ethnicity, and religion. Selected and non-selected participants were individually contacted using the contact information they provided.

All participants were recruited in Ottawa, Ontario. This location is particularly interesting due to its historical context and several socio-political aspects. First, Ottawa has been a key location for transgender rights movement in Canada. The first large-scale 2SLGBTQ+ demonstration in Canada, We Demand Rally, was held in Ottawa in 1971 (Graydon, 2018). Also, several Ottawa-based transgender rights activists lobbied the Canadian government to include equal protection for transgender people, culminating in Bill C-16 (Sypniewski, 2018). More

recently, Canada's first dedicated transgender library, the Ottawa Trans Library, opened in 2022 (Laucius, 2022). Moreover, as the capital of Canada, which is often considered as one of the safest countries for 2SLGBTQ+ people in the world, Ottawa is an environment where transgender communities could potentially flourish. However, even with all the historical context and legal protections, the city is not free from discrimination and transphobia. As recently as 2023, protesters with transphobic signs gathered in front of the National Art Centre to protest a drag story time event and anti-trans protests are an increasingly common occurrence around local schools and on Parliament Hill (CBC News, 2023; Miller, 2023; Pringle & van Rooy, 2023). This complex situation where transgender people could navigate their identity through visible and supportive communities while also being challenged by the public creates a unique perspective on the relationship between the lived experience of transgender people and their gender identities.

4.3.1. Participant Profile

Eight people were selected and individually contacted. During the selection process, I tried to capture as diverse voices as possible, including people from age groups, ethnicity, immigration status, and gender identity. Among those, six people replied and then were interviewed. Pseudonyms are used to protect the identity of participants.

Table 1

Participant Demographics

Name	Age	Gender Identity	Race or Ethnicity
Sawyer	20	Non-binary	Asian (Filipino)
Jasper	30	Trans man	Asian (Chinese Canadian)
Phillip	35	Trans man	White (Unknown ancestry)
Darcy	45	Trans woman	White

Riley	19	Genderfluid/Genderqueer	(Irish ancestry) White
Stephanie	68	Trans woman	(Unknown ancestry) White (Polish ancestry)

The first participant interviewed was Sawyer, a 20-year-old queer, non-binary person. They identified as a second-generation Filipino-Canadian, born and raised in Canada, who moved to Ottawa for their university studies. During their time in the university, Sawyer had carried out research on the local queer community. They were in a long-term relationship with their partner at the time of the interview and shared how they explored their identity together with their partner since the beginning of their queer identification. We first met each other at the Ottawa Trans Library, during a session of a Dungeons and Dragons (D&D) group. The interview was conducted right after one of our D&D sessions. Sawyer was in a cheerful mood and was enthusiastic about the interview.

The second interview was with Stephanie, a tall, 68-year-old trans woman, who knew her trans identity from a young age. She was a second-generation Polish-Canadian daughter of refugees of the Second World War, born and raised in Ottawa. Stephanie had been involved in the trans community since the 1970s, most notably through the *Gender Mosaic,* a group involved in passing Bill C-16, which made gender identity and gender expression protected under the law. Our interview took place at the trans library before the opening time of the library (as I was a volunteer there at that time).

Darcy, a 45-year-old second generation Irish-Canadian trans woman was the third participant I interviewed. She was born and lived in Ottawa for most of her life, except for when she briefly moved to another city to pursue a university degree. She was married for a while and had three kids, until recently divorcing. She was a big fan of the Vermont-based jam band called

Phish, and she described how a community she formed around the band was crucial for forming her awareness of her identity. She was volunteering at a local transgender community centre at the time I was recruiting for this research, and we first got to know each other there. The interview was conducted after Darcy's shift at the centre.

The fourth interview was with Jasper, a 30-year-old second-generation Chinese-Canadian trans man. He shared how he first came to realize his gender identity after meeting with a trans person and trying out a chest binder for himself for the first time. He has a background in kinesiology and had experience working in university residences. Jasper signed up for the research through the recruitment post on Instagram. As this was the first time meeting each other in person there was some awkwardness present throughout the interview. The interview took place in a graduate study room at the University of Ottawa.

Riley, a White 19-year-old genderfluid/genderqueer person, was the fifth participant of the research.[6] They described their identity as something fluid, that changed frequently throughout the day. However, they said they preferred to be referred to by they/them pronouns for this research. They described how they first learned their identity through their experience with their queer friends in high school, and also through personal experimentation during a COVID-19 lockdown period. They are currently pursuing an undergraduate degree at a university in Ontario. They regularly visited the Ottawa Trans Library for a knitting group, and we had previously met during one of these group meetings. The interview took place at the library before the library opening hour.

The final participant was Philip, a 35-year-old trans man. He identified as a White American, who was born and lived most of his life in New Hampshire before moving to Ottawa

[6] I have used a term "White" as the participant presented as White but did not share their ethnic identity. I recognize these racial categories are arbitrary, and likely do not represent the full spectrum of experience of this individual.

to study. After graduating, he began working in the government, where he continues to work as of the interview. He described that he always identified with male characters in the media when he was young, but that he did not realize his trans identity until he started meeting other queer people in university. He applied for the interview through the Instagram post. Our interview at the Ottawa Trans Library was our first-time meeting in person.

4.4. Trustworthiness Criteria

According to the traditional scientific research paradigm, researchers should be concerned with four aspects of the research to ensure trustworthiness of research (Guba, 1981; Lincoln & Guba, 1986). First, researchers should ensure confirmability of a research by asking whether their prior dispositions introduced biases on the research (Guba, 1981). Second, researchers should provide credibility of a research by making sure their findings are actually "true" (Guba, 1981). Next, researchers should guarantee transferability of a research by determining whether the research can be applied to similar but different contexts (Guba, 1981). And lastly, researchers should verify dependability of a research by making sure the research can stay stable with minimal errors (Guba, 1981).

While my feminist and phenomenological perspectives might not coincide with the positivist attitude above, I still aimed to ensure rigor of this research through four methods, informed by these four trustworthiness criteria. First, to ensure confirmability of the study, I have practiced reflexivity (Guba, 1981). I am a transgender woman and I have laid out my personal experience and prejudgements in this paper to reveal my presumptions, prior knowledge, and experiences in detail. Second, I have used triangulation and member check to establish credibility of this research (Guba, 1981). By using multiple data sources from diverse backgrounds, I have explored various perspectives. In addition, by going back to the participants

to check whether the findings are accurate, I tried to make sure the results are plausible (Guba, 1981). Next, to warrant transferability of the research, a thick description to describe the phenomenon was used (Guba, 1981). By doing so, I have ensured the results will be context relevant (Guba, 1981). And finally, I have collaborated with my research supervisor to guarantee dependability of the results. This made sure the results stay stable even after changes coming from "developing insights on the part of the investigator-as-instrument" (Guba, 1981, p.86).

4.5. Ethical Considerations

This study followed the University of Ottawa's ethics guidelines that is based on Tri-Council Policy Statement 2 (TCPS2) by the Government of Canada (2018) and received ethics approval from the University of Ottawa Research Ethics Board in July, 2023. As suggested in the TCPS2, this research aimed to satisfy the three core principles of research ethics: respect for persons, concern for welfare, and justice. As I was a Board Director and the Administrative Officer of the Ottawa Trans Library, where some of the recruitment and interviews were conducted, I acknowledge that my role as a gatekeeper to a community resource could reflect a possible power difference that might influence the consent process (Ryen, 2021). As a gatekeeper, I had the power to allow or block entry of certain people to the library and to organize or cancel community events. As such, participants could feel pressured to participate in the research, fearing that refusing to do so will deny their entry into the community or events. To minimize this risk of coercion, I made clear to the participants that the research was a separate project from the library and that their participation in the research had no bearing on their access to the library. Participants were also explicitly informed about the potential risks of this research, including mental distress, and that participating in the research was voluntary; they were always free to withdraw from the research.

The most crucial ethical consideration for this research was protecting participants' privacy. Because many transgender people are not out to society and are often in a socially vulnerable state, it was important to protect their identities during the research process. To safeguard their privacy, pseudonyms were used in the transcripts and the final report. Different names participants have used in the past, and names of their friends were also anonymized. Interviews were conducted in private and quiet spaces such as the Ottawa Trans Library during its non-library hours and at the University of Ottawa Graduate Study Rooms so that no one could overhear the conversations.

As the transgender community in Ottawa is small, and even smaller in the Ottawa Trans Library, there was a risk that individual identity could be inferred even with a pseudonym, based on one's age, occupation, or particular experiences. At the same time, overly masking certain individual's experiences could be experienced as silencing and strip away at one's sense of agency. To address this issue, I explained to the participants the specific risks associated with their involvement and asked them if they wanted all potentially identifiable information to be masked out from this thesis and any future publications (e.g., age, gender identity, specific experience of the individual). All participants consented to sharing their indirect-identifiable information and masking only their names.

To further secure the data, all files containing any of the contact information of the participants and the interview transcripts were all password-encrypted and saved on my password/biometric-protected laptop. All physical documents (e.g., consent forms) were stored in a locked cabinet in my home apartment which is protected by a locked door at the common front lobby and at my individual unit. The data and research documents will be stored for five years from the collection period (2023) and will be destroyed after the period. All digital data

were stored in a password protected file, within my OneDrive. After the retention period, all digital data within OneDrive will be securely deleted, and all physical documents will be shredded.

Next, I informed every participant about the purpose, recruitment process, potential risks and benefits, and privacy measures of this research and obtained both verbal and written consents from the participants. I have given a three-day period to the participant so that they could consider the risks and benefits of the study before signing the consent form. The verbal consent was audio recorded during the start of each interview. I recognize that the consent process should be a continuous process during the duration of the research, and if a participant withdraws from the research from any point in time, the data gathered from the participant would be destroyed. The only compensation for participating was a small transgender pride pin, priced around $10, as a thank you gift for their time.

In consideration of the benefits and risks of this research for the participants, I was also attentive to the mental toll interviews such as this can take on transgender research participants in particular. Given a recent, rapid increase in research on transgender people's experiences, some projects have engaged in a kind of extractivism that mines trans people for memory and experience that can leave research participants fatigued and distrustful towards the research community. To minimize potential fears around this, I provided an information sheet containing my own experience as a transgender woman prior to the interview. My goal was to overcome researcher-participant hierarchy and establish trust with the participants. To minimize possible psychological distress caused by the interview, I also informed participants before the process that it may bring traumatic memories and worked to help them find a time for their interviews that would be least disruptive to their lives (e.g., not during working hours) if the interview

brought on mental distress. Furthermore, information about mental health support centres were provided to participants in case they showed any signs of distress during the research process. The list included but was not limited to: Family Services Ottawa – 2sLGBTQ+ Counselling (613-725-3601), Centretown Community Health Centre (info@centretownchc.org), LGBT Youth Line (info@youthline.ca), and Trans Health Ottawa (https://transhealthottawa.org/contact/).

5. Results

> To me, gender is not the words. It's, it's a little, it's like if someone smashed like a plate, it's like putting the plate back. It's the, […] the pieces, right? I unlock little pieces as I go. There's this, oh, what is it? It was this, this thing where like if you break something, you paste it with something gold, so everything fits. […] I, I think my gender, what is it like to know my gender is like how I piece it back and it's golden. It's different. It's more beautiful now. So, I think every single thing I do that challenges those norms, it just gets me a little closer to under…, being more my gender, becoming more fully realized within myself. (Sawyer)

To the participants, knowing one's own gender identity meant exploring and learning one's desires to break free from expectations surrounding them. During their lives, the social contexts surrounding participants imposed certain expectations on them, whether they liked it or not. These expectations constricted their view on what could be possible and to question them meant facing prompt social retaliation. Despite such pressure to conform, gradually, participants were able to learn possibilities outside of social expectations through their environments and the human relationships around them. Simultaneously, participants started internally exploring their own desires, embracing those that brought them joy. These explorations of desire set in motion cascades of more discovery and joy which ultimately expanded their overall sense of self. However, neither for the participants' nor for me, were these explorations arrive at some kind of ultimate endpoint in a process, as suggested in the psychological literature. Rather, such moments of discovery, exploration, and joy, can be better seen as lapping waves at a shoreline—

always there, always real, but always shifting in their force and their consequences. What was clear throughout was the crucial importance of having access to low stakes environments to play and experiment with burgeoning desires without fear of repercussion.

In keeping with a hermeneutical phenomenological approach, the three main themes that emerged from the lived experiences of the participants leading to these conclusions were as follows: experimentation with self, seeing possibilities, and a low stakes environment. And just like ever changing tidal flows, each theme was experienced by participants as cyclic, repeated, usually intertwining with each other, thus making it impossible to truly separate from one another, and with no clear beginning or end.

5.1. Experimentation with Self

> […] Whenever the next thing I need to do presents itself to me, then I will do that and see how it feels. And if in six months that doesn't feel good, I know that I can tell you and tell our other friends, my other friends, hey, yeah, I don't know, that doesn't feel good anymore. (Darcy)

The first theme describes different explorative measures participants undertook in order to figure out their gender identity. As gender identity cannot be seen or touched physically, we can begin to understand how participants have sensed this part of themselves through how they shared about their internal exploration. In the interviews, participants recounted using activities like meditation, trying on different clothing and hairstyles, and experimenting with different pronouns, as ways to explore and identify the desires that brought them joy, and which did the opposite. Overall, there were three main ways participants experimented with their sense of self in order to sense out their desires: introspection, presentation, and social interaction.

Participants' internal experimentation often took a form of meditative questioning of whether they felt closer to one gender or another, or if they needed gender affirming medical procedures.

When participants started questioning their identity, they often described it as a self-examination. To illustrate, when they asked themselves if being trans, transitioning, or undergoing surgery were something they really wanted, they were able to conclude that either they want to pursue them, or they don't feel a need to pursue those paths at all. Darcy described how she first came to realize her sexuality when she went through a "religious" experience while on acid during a trip to a Phish concert with friends:

> When the show started, they started singing this, this acapella song, and I was singing along, and I had this just profound, like almost religious experience. When the acid kicked in, it was just, it felt like aliens were, pulling open my… opening up my head and rewiring some stuff and it just felt like, just like a religious ecstasy almost. And then later on that night […] we got back to my friend's apartment where we were staying and everybody else went to sleep. This was, we got back at like 3 in the morning. And everybody else was sleeping and I was like, that was amazing, I want to have more of that feeling in my life. And I feel, I just felt, I don't know, like loved and accepted. And... it was like, how do I get more of that in my life? And I was still tripping at the time. I couldn't sleep. And I asked myself, what? What can I do? And at first, the first answer was, oh, you should exercise and get, get in shape. And I was like, well, no, that's not, we're not talking about that. We're not talking about that level. It's something deeper. And they're like, well, just accept that you're gay or queer or bisexual or whatever. You know that, right? So, why don't you just go live that? And I was like, oh shit. Yeah, that's true. I just accepted it all of a sudden. (Darcy)

Later, in a similar way, Darcy was able to finally come to terms with the fact that she is trans:

> I went inside by myself, and I laid down on the couch for a while. And then, just, I don't remember the circumstance at all, but just a voice in my head was like, You're trans. You, you know that, right? You're, you're trans. And then I was like, okay, drugs. You've told us, we've had a lot of things happen recently. You've told me a lot of stuff. And I'm just gonna like explore this for a while, I said. And then yeah […] I bought a skirt, and I went to a concert by myself in a skirt for the first time. (Darcy)

Participants also commonly engaged in introspection when they were about to go through a gender affirming medical procedure, namely gender affirming surgery. Because of the highly invasive nature of these surgeries, participants had to go through series of self-reflection to see if they are what they truly wanted. For example, Darcy recalled the time when she was waiting for

her surgery and asking herself if she really wanted the surgery. She realized that she needed the procedure when her question was met with bodily euphoria:

> […] I was waiting in a room, in a little room down the hall from the surgery room. And I was in there for, I don't know, like a half an hour to an hour as they got things ready. And I was just, I was nervous, and I decided to meditate, and I did a body scan meditation where you're, you concentrate on your toes and then your feet and your legs and you just go all the way up your body. And I did; I went through that. And then I asked myself, are you sure, you know, this is, I had always told myself, I'm going to go through the process, and if I decide it's wrong for me, I don't care if I'm on the doorstep of the, of the surgery room, I'll just not do it. That, I think that maybe made it easier for me to pursue. And then I asked myself for the last time, are you sure you want this, and I just felt like, my whole body just felt, emphatic, yes, yes, this is what you need, this is what you want. (Darcy)

On the other hand, through introspection, Jasper concluded that he did *not* need to go through a surgical procedure. Even though he was already familiar with the process, as a family member had gone through the same surgery previously, he realized that it was not necessary for him to feel comfortable with himself:

> […] I originally went through the process of getting funding to complete a hysterectomy and was like, do I want to do this? Is this something that I want? My mom had a hysterectomy. She had a fine experience. But I'm like, is this something that's necessary for me? And I was like, no, no, it's not. Because it doesn't impact my feelings as a guy. Similar with phalloplasty. I don't feel the need for that. The surgeries are incredibly invasive. And I don't need that to feel euphoric. (Jasper)

This type of internal exploration was also acted as an environment for participants to safely experiment with how they see their own gender without social repercussions. When Jasper first started questioning his identity, his initial exploration mainly took place mentally, which allowed him to experiment with his presentation physically eventually:

> I don't want to say fully consciously, it was more of like, okay, I'm going to see how this feels and see how I exist with that knowledge for myself. It didn't matter if people respected pronouns or not because I didn't tell anybody. But that, that's kind of, more what it was. So, playing with gender for me was completely mental. […] Without having to change anything physically for me. It was more of like a mental shift of, okay, let's see how this feels mentally before we do anything. (Jasper)

In addition to their internal reflections, participants also experimented their desires through various forms of physical presentation, such as their clothing, hair length, or jewelry. Experimentation with clothing was a major part of participants' exploration, especially for trans-feminine participants. They described feeling hesitant at first to try out different clothing that was outside of the gender norm they were assigned with, but once they tried it out, they commonly felt a sense of comfort, rightness, and joy. For example, Stephanie described how she felt experimenting with her presentation when she was 10 years old:

> […] I was trying on some other item of my sister's clothes and everything, suddenly with this great clarity, I, I suddenly understood that I was going to be doing this all my life. […] Because it just felt so right. (Stephanie)

Similarly, Darcy went into more detail about her experimentation with clothing to find a feeling of rightness. After initially coming to terms with her identity at the Phish concert, subsequent visits to the concerts became the place where she continued to explore her gender identity. She described how she began to figure out her desires:

> I suppose trying things and finding that they're right. Trying different ways of dressing and finding that I enjoy them. Painting my nails and finding that I enjoy that, just feels… how it feels happy. I feel happy. I feel natural. Some things feel nervous to try and I feel fear, but then I try it and it feels good and the fear lifts. It's like a, like a release of anxiety maybe. […] Like trying hormones, and then, it's just, just, it feels right. (Darcy)

Participants also experimented with their presentation through changing their own physical appearances. During an interview with Jasper, he described his initial experimentation with a chest binder gifted by another trans person.

> So, the person I met was, I don't know if they started hormones yet or not, but they were a trans male, and that was my first introduction to anything related to trans, or being trans. And so, for me it was more curious, wanting to respect who they were, but I didn't associate that with my own identity. So, once they had their top surgery a year later, […] they asked me if I wanted one of their binders and I said sure and then I didn't wear it for a year. And then I started wearing it and felt way more comfortable in my body and then later on, I'd say within that year, was just kind of playing around with gender, and playing around with gender for me only meant mentally. I did dress more like a guy, but I always

had. And then, and then I figured out, no, I'm a guy and wanted to look and sound like one. (Jasper)

As Jasper shared, participants often didn't realize how strong their desire to transition was until they started experimenting. Darcy explained how she didn't realize the severity of her physical dysphoria until she went through a gender affirming medical procedure. Again, she describes the feeling of joy after going through the physical change:

> […] That almost felt like making a big bet on myself and it coming true, like being right and like it paying off. I don't know how, I don't understand how you can have that feeling about something that specific being, this is wrong. And if I correct it in this specific way, it will feel right. And then I went through that whole process, and I did that, and I got it fixed, and it felt right. It took some time, because there's a lot of recovery afterwards, but, just, just trying that, and just feeling how right it is. And how, how much the dysphoria I felt was gone at that point, felt great. (Darcy)

Similarly, Sawyer explains how they experiment with their appearance through these gradual and small changes:

> A lot of it was a physical transformation, but not in any like physical, or medical transition, it was just, I'm gonna change this part of myself. I always had pretty long hair and then I cut it short, and I was like, ooh, feels funky. It feels fresh. […] Those small little changes that I made for myself to kind of take back, the things that people thought were girly or people thought were very manly or very gay or very straight. I just jumble them all up and that's how I look and it's, it's really cool. That's the way I experiment at least. (Sawyer)

Given their hesitancy and fear mentioned above, participants experimented gradually as they increasingly felt safe to venture further. Riley recounted their experience when they tried out different hair lengths during their high school years. Because their gender presentation didn't fit into binary gender expectation, they were bullied in their earlier school years. As a result, Riley tried to fit into normative society and was hesitant to undergo a drastic change. Instead, they were able to utilize gradual experimentation to help them figure out what they wanted:

> […] I had super long hair that went down to my butt. And it was dyed, blonde at the time, or blonde streaks. And I had gotten that done when I was in middle school, during [a] hyper feminine phase, because everyone loved that blonde, balayage kind of look. So, I

> got it done for my birthday one year. And ever since high school had started, I had literally just been throwing it up in a bun, not brushing it, not doing anything to it, I hated taking a shower. It got kind of bad in terms of mental health and stuff, and it was really just weighing on me. But I thought if I cut my hair, then I might not like it, because I pretty much always had long-ish hair, or I might look more feminine, it would show my face more. And I might just, I wouldn't have anything to sort of protect me, if I needed to. But this, these friends, they were like, no, you can just cut it to mid length, and then cut it a little more, and then cut it to whatever you want. And you don't have to worry about it, you can just go little by little, so that's kind of what I did. (Riley)

Through experimenting with their presentation, some participants, especially non-binary participants, have shared their desire to use androgyneity as a medium to convey their non-binary identity. By fluidly changing their gender presentation, they were able to express that their identities do not fit into the binary. For example, Sawyer described that despite not fully capturing the complexity of their gender, they use androgyneity as a way to express their identity to others:

> […] it sends the message I want out into the world, which is I am not straight. I'm, I'm not straight. I, I'm not the, I'm not what you think I am necessarily. You might look at me and [think] like, that's a gay person. I'm not that either. My sexuality, my gender is very complex. And it's weird and it's exciting and it's something that changes every day. And that's the same here in physicality as it is mentally as well. (Sawyer)

Likewise, Riley shared that fluid nature of experimentation itself is how they want to be seen by the world:

> Today I'm feeling quite feminine, but I'm dressed in an outfit that's not necessarily feminine presenting. I mean, it's not, it's just a t-shirt and jeans and a sweater. Which is fine for me, which is good. But then there's some days where I feel very masculine and I'm wearing a skirt or a dress and makeup. And that's also fine. I love playing around with that. […] I don't, I don't ever wanna be seen as a binary person. I'm never fully a woman. I'm never fully a man. I'm always something in between. (Riley)

Social context was another space where the participants internally explored their desires. By changing how one interacts with others, participants tried to figure out how certain gendered performances felt to them. Participants commonly shared experimenting with their names or

pronouns, and with role-playing situations during their childhood, with their romantic partner or in online spaces.

Trying out different names and pronouns was one of the most common and accessible ways for the participants to experiment with their gender identity. Like what participants have shared above, feelings of comfort and joy were signals that they needed to embrace a desire. Interestingly, participants often described using gender-neutral names as a stepping stone before choosing their current name, similarly to the use of a more androgynous presentation discussed above. For example, Stephanie, living a double life while coming of age in the more conservative social climate of the 1970s, felt like she needed to use a unisex sounding name to hold onto her desired femininity even while she presented as male:

> I finally […] ended up with Parker because it was a name that even my cisgender friends called me. And then it could be very feminized. And so finally I found a name that I could keep for both worlds I was living in. So, something as simple as a name that you end up grappling with for a long time. […] it was nice to finally be Parker and if somebody from the cisgender world called me Parker, I can still imagine my feminine Parker. (Stephanie)

Claiming a gender-neutral name allowed participants to experiment more freely with their identity socially with fewer fears of negative social repercussions. Likewise, when Riley was hesitant to experiment with their gender initially, their high school friends suggested using initials instead of their dead name as an alternative. [7] Doing so, Riley discovered that the new name felt better which motivated them to further their exploration:

> Well, I had a friend who suggested that I just go by my pronouns because I was very anxious about having to change my name or having to be called my dead name all the time. So, they were just like, oh, why don't you just go by your initials? My initials are MJ, […] That's a name that people go by. MJ is kind of a common, not common common, but it's, it's plausible to have a name like that. So, it wouldn't really draw any attention, and I wouldn't have to come out to my parents. I could just say, oh yeah, at school I just go by my initials because it's easier, or it's just a nickname, or something like that. (Riley)

[7] A dead name refers to a name that a transgender person was given at birth before choosing their own name.

Trying out different pronouns was another powerful way for participants to experiment with gender. Darcy shared her recent experience with experimenting with her pronouns. She has consistently felt uncomfortable using masculine pronouns and that feminine pronouns fit better and brought her more joy. Darcy was initially hesitant to try out gender-neutral "they/them" pronouns until her feelings changed more recently. She explained that though she mostly identifies with "she", she has played around with gender-neutral pronouns as well, which sometimes feel like a better fit, just by asking herself internally how she felt about them:

> How do you feel about *she/her* pronouns? And what was like, yes, fuck yes. I love that. And how do you feel about *he/him*? Like blech, that's always bad. That's felt consistently bad. And then '*they'*, up until a few months ago, *they* felt, it doesn't really feel like it's for me, but that's cool. And then the last time I checked in was a couple months ago. I don't know when, sometime over the summer. And I was like, you know what? That feels right. That feels good. *She* feels, still feels good, but there's some, *they* energy there. I think that came along with sometimes when I felt physically capable as well. (Darcy)

Sometimes, participants utilized brief role-playing scenarios as opportunities for experimentation. Taking up different roles and different gender identities briefly provided them with enough safe space for participants for to explore. For instance, Sawyer tried out different gender roles in their relationship with their non-binary partner. Again, utilizing feelings of joy as affirmative signals, Sawyer was able to navigate through different gender identities during their experimentations:

> Yeah. I think I, I have in the past, as of late have asked my partner to call me different things. Because we, we got rid of the girlfriend/wife thing a while ago. But [I'm] kind of bringing it back a little now that I'm a little grown. So, the other day I was like, hey, can you, for the next five minutes just call me your boyfriend just for a bit. And then like, just say more like masc[uline] related compliments. Like, you're so handsome and like you're, you're so… I don't know what other ones there are, but like, like being boyfriend. And they did that for a while and we, we talked about it on the phone and hearing it. I was like, yeah, I do like this. And I'm like, now try like girlfriend, like try saying girlfriend. And it felt weirder, but they, they called me their wife and I was like, nice, that felt cool. (Sawyer)

Some participants have recalled that childhood role-playing sessions were their first indication that they weren't cis. When Jasper was in his childhood, he consistently wanted to role-play as male characters. He felt like he aligned more with masculine Disney characters such as Prince Charming because they were "stronger" and "had cool power ups" than female characters. His desire to role-play as a male character wasn't challenged until he grew up. Societal expectations that enforced a feminine gender role upon him was a major barrier for him to explore his gender identity:

> […] If I watched Pokémon, I wanted to be Ash. If I, when I was watching Disney movies, I wanted to be Prince Charming, that's what I felt I aligned with. And then, playing around. Like in role player or like make believe, I would always put myself as a guy character and not as a female character. […] It's more of just, that's something that I would consistently do, or I would imagine that I was a guy. But that was consistent in my childhood, and it wasn't anything that I necessarily was super adamant about. If my brothers were like, well, why do you have to be a guy? I'm like, that's just who I want to be right now. And it wasn't a big deal because it's a make believe. My parents don't think ever thought anything of it. But that was, it wasn't really me exploring or it was just, this is just who I want to be right now. The guys always had better stuff. They had better roles. They were stronger. They were, they had the cool power ups like that was it. (Jasper)

Online spaces provided another safe environment for participants to experiment with their gender identity. Because of the anonymous nature of the internet, changing out their pronouns and names as they wished was relatively easy for participants. During a COVID lockdown period, Riley utilized anonymous message boards on an internet social platform, Discord, as an experimental ground for trying out different pronouns:

> I would just sort of change my display name to be whatever name I wanted to try out […] And there's, there's some Discord servers where they have, this ping and then I'll, I'll, use whatever name and pronouns you want to try out. There're even bots for it now. […] Like that pronoun dressing room site. That kind of thing. That's kind of what I was doing for a couple months. I was just trying things out. I was just exploring it. (Riley)

Through these experiments using introspection, presentation and social interactions, participants were able to feel through what desires brought joy to them or not. Participants

utilized introspective questioning, gender neutral clothing, and names to see how they felt to them, while also using environments such as the internet or role-playing to take up different forms of identities. Desires that they embraced became a part of their own identity. Often, feeling of joy they felt after going through the exploratory measures motivated them to venture further. For the non-binary participants, experimentation itself was one of core ways to express their own identity.

Meanwhile, simultaneously with the experimentations, participants were continuously introduced with new desires that they weren't aware of before.

5.2. Seeing Possibilities

> And the person I was dating at the time kind of made friends with them and then set up a meeting where we were somewhere on campus. I don't remember where. It was just like we were... in a room, just the three of us, and kind of talked to me about, the trans guy, talked to me about his experiences, and I was just kind of, sitting there listening. […] I guess it opened up a world of possibilities. It showed me that I could continue to do the things that I wanted to do without […] being trans completely disrupting everything. (Philip)

While one can experiment with internal desires that are known, breaking free from the social expectations that bind us is much harder without witnessing alternatives. The second theme reflects how participants witnessed possibilities and expanded their sense of self through interpersonal routes. This theme answers where each element of one's gender identity came from, and how the elements came in. Participants commonly shared that they initially felt like they lacked proper descriptions to describe themselves. Furthermore, social expectations bound their view on what could be possible. However, through human relationships and the media, participants were able to learn other possibilities. As a result, this motivated them to explore with their desires more to further their knowledge about themselves.

Pre-existing social expectations bounded participants' perspectives on possible ways to live one's life. They commonly shared that they felt like there were no words that could help them make sense of themselves. For example, Stephanie shared her frustration and a feeling of being "stuck" when she faced various challenges getting recognized as a trans person. During the time she was initially engaging in the trans community in the 1970s, the definition of a "transsexual" person was narrow. Doctors only recognized certain trans people who fit into strict medical definitions based on binary gender norms; only those people who fit into the stereotypical "feminine" or "masculine" looks, and behaviour were eligible. This included their sexuality; if a person was a homosexual trans person, they couldn't receive the medical care. The only term she could use to describe herself was "crossdresser," which didn't fit her:

> […] Unfortunately, I, I was still sort of bound by medical definitions and, I had a lot of what the gatekeepers called, true transsexuals. […] And they were able to get, hormones and gender transition surgery, whereas the majority of us couldn't. So. I sort of lumped myself in there with cross dressers and stuff. But I certainly noticed that I wasn't like them in the sense that they were perfectly happy living two lives. And I hated it. I absolutely hated it. If I had a choice, I often, I told myself, well, I've had a choice, I'd much rather live as a woman. But I didn't have a choice. So, it seemed like that's what I was stuck with, with this kind of dual life. (Stephanie)

Similarly, Phillip, who was born and raised in New Hampshire, recounted how there was no education on 2SLGBTQ+ topics in his school due to a conservative climate of the state. As online queer discourse was still in its infancy during the early 2000s, it was harder for him to learn about trans issues. He explained that it was impossible for him to realize being trans could even be a possibility:

> When I was 14, it was 2002. So, this was like before there were any kind of mainstream trans people or anything like that. This was only what, this was even before same sex marriage was legalized in Canada. And it's the States, and this is New Hampshire even, so the school system is, there's no funding for it. In New Hampshire [it] has no income tax or anything like that, and so sex education is something you do once in middle school, and not ever, that I recall in high school. […] I remember my parents telling me how gay people exist, but how it wasn't natural. And both my parents are scientists. So, they kind

> of couched it in the scientific, evolutionary psychology perspective of it's not natural. And I just, I don't know, I was young. I wasn't that intellectually curious. And I was stuck in this kind of limited perspective with no way to… There wasn't even really the internet that much back then. So, there's just no frame of reference, no way to learn about anything but what's right in front of you. (Philip)

Even after realizing their transgender identities, some participants still felt their initial descriptions didn't fit them well. There were still bound by trans-normativity, where someone's transness is only defined by medical perspective based on strict binary gender norms, which made them to believe that only way be recognized as trans was following certain gendered stereotypes. Under the trans-normativity, trans or non-binary people who don't follow a normative transgender narrative, such as gender non-conformability in childhood or a strong desire for medical transition, will deem to be not trans enough. Riley explained that before realizing being non-binary could be possible, they felt like they were "faking" their identity because they didn't fit into a hypermasculine trope:

> So, I think at that time I was probably using *he/they* pronouns, something along those lines. But I kept having periods of time where then I would feel okay with being viewed as feminine, and it was really confusing, because I was like, well I'm not a girl, and I'm not a woman. But I'm okay with being seen in a feminine sense, but only sometimes. So maybe I really am faking. And maybe, maybe I'm not trans, and maybe I'm inserting myself into a community that I'm not really a part of. And so, I felt kind of guilty in that sense, that I wasn't a part of this binary. I felt again like I wasn't really fitting in. It's like, oh, I finally found this group that I identify with, and then I'm not actually a part of it. (Riley)

For some participants, there was a theme of disconnection with their own cultural heritage. As a second-generation Filipino-Canadian, Sawyer expressed that they felt disconnected from their own gendered cultural identity as they couldn't speak Tagalog. They shared their experience with their aunt as an example of the disconnect:

> It doesn't help that I don't have the language for it. Neither do they. And I don't know if it exists. For example, one of my aunts had asked when I came out, at least on Instagram, I publicly used *they/them* pronouns on Instagram, 'cause some of my family followed me.

> They asked, do you want the girls, her kids, to call, to call you *tita* or *tito*[8] or do you want me to call [you] something else? And I, I didn't even know what to say. I had no clue. I was like, oh, *tita* for now is fine. But I know it doesn't feel right and I just, I, I regret not having learned the language because it's a barrier in many ways, especially bridging the gap between my parents and myself, in terms of my sexuality and gender and how I experience the world. (Sawyer)

Similarly, Jasper, a second-generation Chinese-Canadian, shared his feeling of disconnect with his heritage. He lacked a description in Chinese that could describe his trans identity in a positive way:

> I don't speak Chinese, but I know that in the language, all of the terms for a trans person are derogatory, or negative. There's nothing that's neutral or, or positive in any way. And I believe that's common in Asian languages in general, depending on which one. But for Chinese in particular, I remember looking it up. There's no positive word for it. (Jasper)

All participants have reported that they were able to learn possibilities outside of social expectations through their human relationships. This also included learning concepts that could describe their own experiences. The human relationship came in various forms for each participant: family, friends, partner, or even random strangers. By witnessing alternative possibilities for their lives, they were able to break free from expectations that restrained them and were able to seek out the newly learned desires for themselves.

Participants commonly shared their experience seeing a trans person for their first time, and how it influenced their exploration. To illustrate, meeting a trans person in real life was an eye-opening experience for Philip. He met a trans masculine for the first time when he moved to Ottawa for his studies. Before meeting the person, he couldn’t explore his desires as he didn’t want to be seen as a “freak.” However, after seeing that being trans isn’t detrimental to one’s life, the experience “opened up a world of possibilities” for him:

> I didn't actually know that trans people were a thing back then, so I didn't really know that there was anything I could do about that for a long time until I came to the University

[8] *Tita* and *tito* are words in Tagalog to refer to older women and men respectively.

> of Ottawa and then I started meeting queer people, and talking to people about my experiences until, I realized I probably was trans. But then I went through a phase where I was like, I don't want to be a freak or whatever. Until someone that I was dating at the time introduced me to a real-life trans guy. And I was like, oh, this guy's not a freak, he's just a regular person. And obviously, that's what I am. (Philip)

Even if one's encounter with a trans person happened after one's realization, it still motivated them to seek out other possibilities within their life. Stephanie shared her experience meeting a trans person for the first time, and how this led her to come out to her friends and start engaging in the trans community work. Stephanie got into contact with the person when she found her contact information for a California-based crossdressing group, *The Society for The Second Self,* at the Ottawa Public Library. She described why she needed to find more trans people after the encounter:

> But I eventually connected with a trans woman who was older than me and she came to visit me in my apartment. And, and that was a real positive experience, even though we didn't have a lot in common. And it was still for the very first time I met a trans woman. […] Just another step out of my hole as it were. […] Actually, actually, I met her first. I met her before I came out to my friends. […] I met her in 78 and then I came out to my friends in 79. And then once I was out to my friends, I realized this, I needed to meet more friends with people, 'cause it wasn't enough. […] I was grateful that they, they were still my friends and all that kind of stuff. But I recognized that this wasn't going to help me in the long term, that I needed to find other trans people. (Stephanie)

Sometimes, participants' friends were the ones who actively informed and encouraged participants' exploration of gender. As mentioned in a previous theme, for Riley, it was their high school friends who first suggested ways that they could experiment with their gender presentation. Through their suggestions, Riley was able to gradually experiment with their hair style, and with their names.

In the case of Darcy, her Phish friends were the first people to suggest that using different pronouns and names could be a possibility for her. By doing this, Darcy's friends not only

informed her of what could be possible in her life, but also showed that the friend group was a safe, judgement-free environment for her to explore her gender:

> I felt like it was asking for enough just to accept me or something. But then immediately my friend Adam texted me and he was like, do you want to, do you want us to use different pronouns? Do you want us to use a different name? We'd love to do that. And just him asking me that got me to be able to be… I thought about that. I was like, yeah, that would feel really good if you could use, *she/her* pronouns and just call me Dana for now. […] It's a more neutral name. So, I'll start with that. And I eventually worked my way to Darcy. But it was because he asked me that, that I was able to like reflect on it. Yeah, he was like, this is a safe place for you to try this. I was like, oh, okay, cool. I will fill that space with, with this experiment. (Darcy)

Furthermore, participants' human relationships informed ways to reconnect with participants cultural heritage. For example, through their families' traditional clothing, Sawyer was able to learn ways to connect with their both their cultural and their gender identity. When they saw their father wearing a *Barong,* a traditional Filipino clothing which typically associated with Filipino men, worn on every holiday, Sawyer wished to get a barong for themselves to reconnect and express their own identities:

> There is something that I've wanted for a while […] I've wanted a barong. I think is what it's called. It's this type of shirt that usually men will wear. My dad has one, he's had one and he's worn it every single New Year's as far as I remember. […] It's basically like a button up and it's a special kind of celebration type shirt, garment. And I've wanted one for a while. I, I've missed out asking for them when they go to the Philippines. I think I'll do it the next time they go to the Philippines. But it was just something I always associated with, with men or at least my dad growing up. And I want one too now. And I hope they'll get me one. I don't see why not, but it, it could be really just nice. It's the small things like centering my, my, my racial identity through my queer and trans one. It would be, it would be really cool. (Sawyer)

Participants were further able to explore possibilities through media. Positive representation of trans people in TV or social media helped participants to break free from internalized transphobia, as well as showing that living a fulfilling life as a trans person could be possible. Moreover, participants often actively sought out information on media to learn about diversity within trans lived experiences, to affirm their unique identities.

Transgender representation in media was also an opportunity for the participants to humanize trans people. Stephanie recalled when she first saw a positive portrayal of a trans person on TV. Christine Jorgenson, a prominent American trans activist during the mid-20th century, was featured as a guest on a Canadian TV show *Front Page Challenge*. Unlike sensationalized trans portrayals during that time, Christine was treated with respect. Even though Stephanie didn't identify as trans at the time, she was able to see a trans person as a human being for the first time:

> I do remember seeing Christine Jorgensen on this television show called Front Page Challenge. Front Page Challenge was, it was a Canadian kind of guessing show, not a game show exactly, but they had, because it wasn't spectacular. It, it had four panelists, Canadian journalists mostly asking questions and trying to identify who this mystery guest was behind them. And they would just, they could only do that by asking us certain questions. And that guest was Christine Jorgensen and I, that to me, was the first time [thinking], 'wow, you can do that?' But I, I still didn't, I still didn't think that it was possible for me. […] Seeing Christine Jorgenson was probably the first kind of positive affirmation because this was not a sensational show. […] So, but for me it was just, we were just fascinating to see someone like her, I hadn't ever experienced that before in my life. (Stephanie)

Participants were able to learn about different meanings and concepts related to the queer community through media. As mentioned previously, Riley used the internet to freely experiment with their own identity. In addition to their experimentation, online queer communities, and social media platforms such as TikTok were places where they learned various queer concepts and issues, including the concept of non-binary:

> I bet I found about non-binary through a TikTok or something. It must have been something over the internet, or even through a friend. […] I learned... most of what I know now about the queer community [is] through online communities. (Riley)

Trans people in the media showed participants that being trans comes in different shapes and sizes, thus affirming trans people who don't fit into traditional binary trans-normative mold. Seeing trans influencers in the media was an "affirming" experience for Jasper where he learned

about various trans issues, including information about long-term prognosis of medical transition. He previously felt uncertain about living trans as the information wasn't readily available, but through social media, he was able to learn more about what it means to live as trans from trans people, specifically from prominent American transgender influencer Aydian Dowling, and the first openly transgender swimmer from the US, Schuyler Bailar. Jasper described how seeing these people positively impacted his view on his identity:

> And that's more sort of how I got introduced to being trans, what it meant, and those kinds of things. […] For me, that was helpful because I didn't know a lot about trans healthcare or about how to transition. […] It was affirming. It was affirming and it was helpful. […] it's just, really for me it was information gathering, and then also seeing other trans guys and how their transition was, what was possible, what it looked like, what the process was like. (Jasper)

However, the media wasn't just a place for seeking information; it was also a place to witness trans joy and hope. During their childhood, Sawyer frequently used fanfiction websites, where people uploaded fan created stories based on popular TV shows or books. Many fanfictions on the sites were written by queer authors, dealing with queer issues. The stories "gave a name to like all the things that […] were not straight" to Sawyer, while showing them with diverse lived experiences of the queer community. But the most important aspect they found was the hope and joy of the community. For Sawyer, these stories shaped how they defined their own queerness and transness: something that is full of joy, something that isn't detrimental for one's life, and something that could take any shape or form:

> There was never anything that I personally liked that ended really sad. […] Like it was always a very hopeful story. My, one of my favorite fanfic[s] that I've read is this, it's very, so long. It was for one of these, Big Bang is what they called it, where they would write up like a huge story and someone would draw art for it. One of the stories was just this sweeping adventure through like a Fay realm[9]. And they, they, it was so valiant and so exciting, and it was so, it was so queer, and I was just like, it was basically like a young adult fantasy novel for me. I've always associated my own perception of queerness and transness as what I've read, which is mostly like sweeping stories and adventure. […]

[9] A fictional world inhabited by fairylike creatures, in a popular role-playing franchise *Dungeons and Dragons.*

> A character would introduce themselves with pronouns and then I was like, whoa. It, it's, it's not even the whole thing. There was this trans person who is just trans, but they're going on this grand adventure and they're falling in love and it's a whole thing and they happen to also be trans. So, the way that informed me was, I would, I would see that, and I would go like this, this can be a huge thing for me. This can be really special for me, but it doesn't have to be everything, […] like the detrimental thing that people think it is. (Sawyer)

Ultimately, witnessing what could be possible outside of imposed social expectations introduced new desires participants could experiment with, broadening their identity. With the help of participants' personal relationships and the media, they were able to realize being trans isn't detrimental to their lives as social expectations made it out to be. Furthermore, these new possibilities showed them different ways of living as a trans person; it challenged the trans-normativity and introduced ways to integrate their own cultural identity with their gender identity.

While participants experimented with desires and learned new possibilities continuously throughout their lifetime, being in judgement-free, low stakes environments was important for participants to explore their desires most effectively, and safely.

5.3. Low Stakes Environment

> I feel I can explore that and, try stuff out without, without consequence. And it's maybe, I'm reflecting on it now, just the fact that I'm in this environment, having met trans people and being in a trans community, that, I feel finally okay to be like, okay, let's just play with stuff. Maybe I can try this and if it's a dead end then great, like nobody's gonna look down on me for that. (Darcy)

As much as the participants wanted to learn and explore their desires, doing so was difficult because of many social and cultural expectations surrounding them. The social expectations included: cisgender-heteronormative expectations, binary gender norms, families' expectations, cultural expectations, trans-normativity and more. If they went against the expectations, they were promptly met with negative social repercussions. Thus, participants had

to navigate through these expectations to find environments where they could explore their gender identity more freely. This theme shows an aspect of the lived experience about where and when the participants were able to effectively learn about their gender identity.

Participants' views of possibility and their ability to explore their identities were restrained by various social expectations. Especially for non-binary participants, trans-normative expectations also restricted their exploration. Participants often internalized these expectations, thus amplifying their fear and hesitation even further.

Darcy shared her struggle with cis-normative expectations. Cis-normativity here describes a social expectation that places being cisgender as a default form of being, while pathologizing and dehumanizing transgender people. Darcy's earliest memory of seeing a trans person in media was when she watched the 1988 comedy movie *Crocodile Dundee 2* with her dad. She remembered seeing a scene where a trans woman was getting sexually harassed by the main character for a comedic effect. The scene served to create an image of transgender people as something deserving of harassment and ridicule. Her father's amusement at the scene further reinforced the dehumanizing effect:

> I remember watching that with my dad. My dad thought it was fucking hilarious. And that's the earliest I can remember of being introduced to the concept of trans people, was them being like, oh yeah, these are people you can just sexually assault and laugh at. (Darcy)

Being exposed to the environment, Darcy consequently internalized the expectation. Even when Darcy was questioning her identity, she felt like pursuing her desires would be detrimental to her life:

> […] I was just repressing that. Well, no, you can't, I was married to a woman, to a cis woman and we had three kids together. We have three kids together. And I was like, well, I couldn't, it was just, well, no, you could never actually come out or figure this stuff out. That would just be a disaster. That would, your whole life would end basically. (Darcy)

Similarly for Philip, cis-normative social expectations were ascribed to him early by his surrounding environment. As mentioned previously, Philip grew up in a conservative environment where information about the queer community was sparse, and trans people were often described as "not natural" by his parents. As a result, he described feeling "stuck in this kind of […] limited perspective" as his parents expected him to take a certain normative life path:

> I was on this conveyor belt, with my middle-class parents and I was just like, get good grades in university, in high school and then go to university and then get a job, and it's difficult to imagine how I can continue doing those things that I, at that point in my life, had every intention of doing exactly as they planned. It's difficult to imagine doing those and being trans at the same time. (Philip)

Expectations around binary gender norms were also commonly present in participants stories. Strict roles assigned to the binary gender categories restricted participants' self-images and their exploration. The arbitrary nature of the norms became even more apparent for Stephanie when she visited Poland as a child and saw how gender norms could be different in different cultures. However, even after noticing it, she still could not act upon her desires for fear of social repercussion:

> So, I went to Poland when I was nine. And when I was there, I noticed the, the boys there were wearing these kinds of T-strap sandals that had little finer, they had finer belts, buckles and belts and everything, and far more than I'd find in Canada. And I thought to myself, oh, maybe I should buy some of those and everything like this. And then it suddenly occurred to me that if I bought, if I wore them in Canada, I'd be bullied in Canada. And yet these boys are wearing them there and they weren't being bullied there. So, then I thought, oh, this is weird. So, who makes these rules? So obviously those rules of gender are, are different here in Poland than they are back in Canada. […] I knew the word world was not geared towards somebody like me. I didn't ever saw too many people like me, and if I did, it was always like for to comic effect and television or something. It was always kind of ridiculing any kind of feminized male. So-called male. (Stephanie)

Social expectations served to ascribe certain image on participants, while erasing individual characteristics. Riley, who described themself as a "tomboy" when they were young,

experienced ostracization from their peer group due to their behaviour. Their effort to fit into the gender binary only made them more uncomfortable. Even when they tried to break free from the dichotomy, they were often forcefully put back into it by the society. For example, as much as they tried to break free from the gender binary, Riley was still met with binarily gendered expectation by their teacher in a male-dominant classroom:

> […] He thought that a way to empower me was to really push the feminism, was to really emphasize the fact that I was a girl and recommend me for all these women in STEM things and yeah, […] he tried. He, he was a good person, and I liked his class. But it made me want to cry when I thought I'm going to go to this class and just be seen as a girl and not be seen as another mechanic, as another person wanting to learn about welding. (Riley)

Struggles with social expectations, mainly trans-normativity, persisted even after participants embraced their trans identity. As described in the previous theme, Stephanie suffered under the medicalized definition of trans. Because of her physical appearance, personality, and various other aspects of her that didn't neatly fell into the medical definition, Stephanie and many others weren't considered to be "true transexuals." Consequently, they couldn't pursue medical transition. She felt like she was "stuck" during the period:

> I was still stuck in this world. I, I certainly couldn't, I was six three, obviously. I got six three and I got deep voice. I mean, I, obviously, I'm never gonna get past the gatekeeper, so I felt like I was stuck in that, that life basically. (Stephanie)

Moreover, trans-normativity led participants into following certain hyper-masculine or hyper-feminine gender norms for fear of having their trans identity erased through pressures to conform to binary social norms. Doing so negatively impacted the self-image of the participants. Both Riley and Jasper went through a hypermasculine phase due to the trans-normative expectations. Riley described feeling urged to act in a hypermasculine manner to avoid getting their identity invalidated. However, their internalized trans-normativity still brought insecurity about their own identity. Whereas for Jasper, the trans-normativity negatively influenced his

view on his own bodily image. Under the internalized normative perspective, his body didn't fit into the binary gender system to be considered "male":

> So, because I had never questioned the gender binary, I was like, you can only be a girl, or you can only be a boy. There's nothing in between. And so, when I first began my transition, it was, it was difficult to go through the process of waiting for, I'm gonna call it second puberty, waiting for all the changes to come. My voice is still high. I still have a female fat distribution. I will forever be short, that's not gonna change, for, for a guy. And so, when I first started transitioning, I was like, I want to, when I say be a guy, I mean like look and act and be like a cis guy. (Jasper)

Ultimately, these expectations were there to fulfill others' desires, not participants' own. Riley best described this nature of social expectations:

> It felt like... Like I was playing dress up, like I was like wearing a costume, but I wasn't wearing the costume for me. I was wearing it for other people. So, it felt more like I was putting other people's comfort above my own comfort, my own sense of sense of self, I guess and during that time, I was just using it as a way to push down all these feelings, just push down. […] No, no, no, I'm just a girl, I just act different. (Riley)

Because of the surrounding social expectations, especially binary gender norms, Riley couldn't dress, behave, name themselves as they wanted for a long time. Binary expectations put Riley into a box. As a result, they couldn't live a life as Riley, but as someone else others wanted to see.

However, as participants found environments less affected by social expectations, their room for exploration expanded. They commonly found the safety through supportive human relationships, such as friends, partners, or queer communities. Social acceptance of queer and trans people broadened the safety net for the participants. Again, gender neutrality, such as using gender-neutral names, or androgynous physical presentation, acted as a space where participants could experiment with their desires without serious commitment.

Shared excitement and affirmation from participants' friendship created a safe space for the participants. Throughout Darcy's journey of self-discovery, her Phish friend group has

always been there for her to support and affirm her exploration. When Darcy came out as trans, her friends were as excited as she was. Moreover, her friends were the first ones to suggest using a different name and pronouns for her. When Darcy was waiting for her surgery, her friend sent an email saying, “whether you feel it or not, there's lots of people with you.” Darcy described how her supportive human relationship helped her throughout her transition:

> I feel like I make more progress when I'm around other people. Not that it's like a linear, like A to B sort of thing, but I'm more able to like, like I said at first, I think being in community and being among trans people a lot of the time has maybe opened me up to just… It's like low stakes, low stakes exploring that I'm doing now. (Darcy)

As Darcy felt safer within her relationships, she began to explore other desires that she was hesitant to try out initially. For example, she was reluctant to try out gender neutral pronouns at first due to the trans-normative expectations. However, once she felt safe enough with the surrounding environment, she was more willing to explore her own desires. Prior to the start of this research, Darcy approached me when I was working at the Ottawa Trans Library, and said she wanted to start experimenting with gender neutral pronouns. I tried to affirm her desire and create a safe environment for her:

> […] I approached you, Chloe, and was kind of said, I think, I don't know what this means, but I've been feeling *they/them* energy more, and, and you asked, I think you specifically asked me, […] ‘do you want me to use that for you?’ and I said yeah, that would be great to try. And then, I can’t remember specifically, I'm sure it's not the only time, but we were in a text thread with a few people about some library stuff, […] you used *they/them* pronouns for me, and that felt good. Yeah, thank you for that. (Darcy)

Similarly, Sawyer described how their partner supported them throughout their exploration. Because their partner was supportive, Sawyer was able to safely explore how using different pronouns felt to them:

> I was learning more about people, and I was doing some readings and I think the first thought that I had about like, hey, I'm gonna just take a leap and do it. I was in, I was working at a nursing home, I was doing the laundry, um, in the basement. It was about 11:00 PM. And I had messaged my partner who was sleeping, and I was like, I think I

> want to use *they/them* pronouns just for a bit just to see. Because I was like, I didn't fully understand the grasp of it, but I was like, it could be nice to maybe switch up something about my identity. And having my partners enthusiastic, yeah, let's do it, was very… it was very nice cause it was just, it didn't have to be, a life changing thing. It was just something I wanted to try. (Sawyer)

Along with supportive human relationships, participants were able to find a safe environment from supportive spaces such as university 2SLGBTQ+ centres. For Philip, Sawyer, and Stephanie, they found safety in queer support groups. Stephanie described herself feeling more "stronger," and more "confident" after her involvement in a trans activist group, the *New Ottawa Woman,* later known as *Gender Mosaic*. Meanwhile, Sawyer found another safe environment for experiment at their university's 2SLGBTQ+ resource centre:

> […] It was when I started engaging more of the community that I found that, and paired with my experience online, I was like, 'there's a real opportunity.' I'm the most out I've ever been visibly because I'm, I'm literally the gay person at [the university]. And I, I think it just made me realize that, you know what? I think I could, I could do something here. I could, I could play around with how I, with how I present myself to other people. (Sawyer)

Wider acceptance of trans and queer people in a society aided participants in creating a safe environment for themselves. Positive transgender representation helped participants to break free from internalized social expectations, creating a sense that being trans isn't detrimental to their well-being. For instance, Stephanie was able to break free from pathological view on trans people after seeing Christian Jorgenson being treated with respect on TV. Meanwhile, Jasper shared how witnessing trans joy on Instagram encouraged him to pursue transition. And for Philip, he was able to understand he could still live a fulfilling life while pursuing his desires, after meeting other trans people at his university pride centre.

Participants often reported using gender neutrality to create a safe environment for themselves to explore their gender. Going against the binary gender norms required a lot of courage for the participants at first, due to social expectations. Instead, like dipping one's foot

into a cold lake one toe at a time, they used gender neutral names, presentation, or pronouns to make a gradual transition. Doing so gave them enough time and space to test out their desires without too much commitment. To illustrate, both Stephanie and Darcy used gender-neutral names before choosing more feminine presenting name. For Riley, they started using their initials, which sounded more gender-neutral, instead of their deadname. They also gradually cut their hair shorter to see how different style of presentation felt for them. Jasper created an internal gender-neutral self-image to explore how the label felt for him. Jasper described how this gender-neutrality benefited his exploration:

> But in terms of the playing around, I think for me, the gender neutrality was almost like a, like a… it was just a safe zone to be in. It gave me the space to figure things out before I did anything and gave me… It was almost like a stepping stone between being female or being male or being a guy or being a girl, to let myself sort of just explore what that meant. (Jasper)

Overall, these judgement-free environments were important for the participants to experiment with their identity without fear of repercussion. Social expectations acted as barriers for exploration; they punished ones who goes against the norms through harassment, denial of healthcare, bullying, and more. On the contrary, low stakes environments gave the participants safe spaces to go against the expectations. The environment took a form of a literal space, such as a university 2SLGBTQ+ centre, but often it included human relationships, socio-political context, media representations, and gender neutrality.

In conclusion, there were three major aspects within the lived experience of knowing one's gender identity: experimentation with self, seeing possibilities, and having a low stakes environment. Participants experimented with different desires to see how they felt to them, while also expanding their knowledge of possibilities through others, in environments where they had less risk of being judged by others. All three aspects of the lived experience were intertwined and

influenced one another. Seeing possibilities introduced new desires for participants to experiment with, while being in a low-stakes environment encouraged the participants to experiment further, informing them of alternative ways outside of social expectations, and experimentation of the participants again informing others of what could be possible. Ultimately, knowing one's gender identity meant persistent search and exploration of one's desires.

6. Discussion

> *…Around 2018, I finally set foot outside. Going to the university again wasn't easy. Just seeing all the people outside was enough to fill me with dread. On that semester I only took two courses and I tried to get through the classes quietly as possible. To my surprise, I was approached by a quite friendly German girl. I didn't trust her first, surely, she'll hurt me just like everyone else. But as the days past by with her, my guards melted away. One day, while we were working on a project together, we started talking about queer issues. She was an ally, and I felt for the first time in my life that I could safely be who I am with this person. So, I came out, and she greeted me with kindness and love. I felt alive once again. The next year, I joined the university's unofficial queer club. I never engaged with the queer community before, so it took a lot of courage. I was so surprised to see every member's uniqueness and enthusiasm. People were so nonchalant about expressing their queerness, and all of them were living fulfilling lives. And most importantly, I was seen as who I am, without having to explain myself. I finally belonged somewhere. I saw hope once again…*

The results reveal that knowing one's gender identity is not based on a fundamental characteristic, nor a sudden realization; rather, it is a gradual, relational process driven by internal desires. While participants were able to experiment with parts of their desires by themselves, the exploration was a continuous feedback loop between an individual and surrounding other. Participants actively sought out new possibilities and desires through their human relationships, synthesizing new avenues to experience their gender identity, and then, in turn, introducing these novel possibilities to others.

This supports West and Zimmerman's (1987) idea that gender is something that we do, and Butler's (2006) view on gender as performances that could be rearranged in different ways. Yet, while these theories refute the idea that being a woman or a man is an intrinsic and

essentialist characteristic, they instead describe gender as an oppressive institution constructed to maintain social hierarchy (Lorber, 1994; Lucal, 1999; West & Zimmerman, 1987) or in case of Butler, a regulatory norm which "produces the intelligible field of subjects, and [is] an apparatus by which the gender binary is instituted" (Butler, 2004, p.48). These theories are unable explain the strong emotions transgender people experience around their gender identity. If gender is an oppressive tool or purely performative in nature, how come the participants felt so motivated to pursue transition even when they were facing oppression? Butler (2004) acknowledges that being recognized in social life is crucial for one's personhood, and that such recognition is a matter of survival. Yet, the consistent invoking of joy by participants to describe knowing their gender suggests that framing gender in terms of mere survival cannot explain the full complexity of gender as a part of the self. Rather, by listening to these expressions of joy and desire, we can begin to see an emancipatory potential of gender exploration, not only for trans people but for us all.

What these results show is that to understand gender, we must first look at how desires form the core structure of one's gender identity. Rather than being a permanent status, gender identity is assembled through different desires: a desire to be socially perceived socially as a certain gender, a desire to wear particular articles of clothing, a desire to have different physiological features and so on. These desires are expressed to others through various performances. As a result, we define gender through perception of these performances. As a gender identity is an assemblage, it often shifts and morph into different shapes. Sometimes certain new desires get introduced through external sources such as human relationships, or certain desires are left out from the assemblage. Whereas common practice is to categorize

gender into two possibilities, defining gender as an assemblage of desires provides unlimited possibilities for how gender can be expressed and experienced.

The idea that gender identity is an assemblage of desires connects to Deleuze and Guattari's (1987) Desiring-production Theory. Deleuze and Guattari (1987) described a structure of desires as an infinitely interconnected web where desires influence one another. In this rhizomatic structure, there is a no start point nor an end. Rather, it is an infinitely connected assemblage of desires (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987). Desires are actively produced by one of these assemblages and then flows into others, informing them (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987). This model explains what participants have experienced in the result; they have learned new possibilities through others and went onto creating their own assemblage of desires.

While Deleuze and Guattari's theory could explain the structure of gender identity, the results also suggest that joy is another important element of this structure. As much as we might be able to glimpse into other's gender identity through their presentation, we cannot physically see or touch the shape of our own gender identity. Nevertheless, we could still feel our way through our gender identity through exploration of our desires. If desires form a structure of gender identity, then joy is its texture. Ahmed (2010) characterizes happiness as "an orientation toward the objects we come into contact with" (p.32). Happiness guides us towards objects and shapes surfaces of ourselves (Ahmed, 2010). In this sense, joy is an orientation towards one's own skin. Through joy, one can gradually figure out the contours of one's identity. To illustrate, the exploration of gender identity is like trying to make out a shape of one's own body while being blindfolded. If the movement of your hands towards your skin is the exploration process, then joy is a sensation you feel when your fingers make contact on your skin.

I want to refer to this practice of orienting yourself through joy as *praxis of joy*. Praxis of joy is a reciprocal practice where one strives to create joy for oneself and for others. Use of the term "praxis" emphasizes that joy isn't just something one feels, but something one actively pursues.

Praxis of joy emerged consistently from the participants' lived experience. There were several commonalities within participants' experience with their praxis of joy. First, before they learned the possibilities and still bound by social expectations, they felt like they are deprived of joy. However, when they started to experiment with their desires, they were able to navigate their identity through pursuing the feeling of joy. To live authentically to themselves for participants, meant pursuing desires that brought them joy and comfort. Furthermore, this pursuit of joy was reciprocal. Most participants shared willingness to support others' exploration and create safe spaces to give back the joy they have received from others.

When they couldn't pursue their desires, participants commonly felt feelings of discomfort, suffocation, hopelessness, and wrongness. The most common source of negative feelings came whenever there were barriers obstructing one's pursuit of desires. For example, because of the stigma surrounding trans issues during the time, Stephanie had to live a double life. And as a result, she described feeling like she was "suffocating," and "stuck" during this period of her life.

In contrast, when one could pursue their desires, it is followed by a feeling of joy. Participants have shared that they felt joy and comfort when they were able to pursue their desires. At the same time, they described these positive affects as an indication that they were living authentically to themselves. Moreover, participants have felt joy whenever their identities were recognized and supported by others as well. For example, to Riley, they were able to know

one's identity by "knowing how I feel comfortable." They described the way they present themselves to the world with comfort is who they are. Like a small crack in a floodgate, just realizing a possibility, or a small spark of joy from experiment, was enough to motivate participants to actively seek out other desires for themselves. Likewise, Darcy explained that she felt like she needed to transition as quickly as possible to bring more joy into her life. And after she when through the procedures she wanted, she described feeling "happiness and rightness."

Pursuing joy often highlights discomfort one might have been feeling previously. Participants brought up that sometimes their negative feelings were unrecognizable until they started exploring their desires. For instance, when Darcy started estrogen, she realized how being on different hormones had been negatively impacting her, while Jasper didn't realize how his bodily dysphoria was impacting him until he stated wearing chest binders.

However, one does not blindly follow joy without any consideration. Following happiness without questioning could reinforce certain social expectations or structures (Ahmed, 2010). For example, a parent saying, "I just want you to be happy," to a trans child, refusing to recognize their transness, reproduces a view that being trans is inherently an unhappy thing. Instead, a praxis of joy is comprised of continual internal interrogations to evaluate if certain paths feel right for them. In the results, participants didn't just follow through a prescribed transition path where one is expected to undergo all the typical gender affirming medical procedures. For Jasper, even though he could have gone through an invasive surgical procedure, he felt that the procedure wasn't crucial for him to feel joy and therefore decided not to go through with it. Through a praxis of joy, participants have extensively examined whether certain desires truly brought happiness to them or not, rather than accepting what other people anticipate making us happy.

A praxis of joy doesn't start or stop at an individual level; it is reciprocal. As one experiences joy through their exploration, one is more motivated to give back the joy to others. In the results, participants shared that they were willing to create low stakes environments for others to freely explore their gender. They shared that they have or were trying to create the space by actively supporting others' exploration and helping to facilitate queer community spaces. Part of the reason why participants wanted give back joy was because they didn't wanted others to go through the same pain they have experienced. For example, Stephanie continued her work in the trans community because she wanted to make things easier for trans kids, while Riley dedicated time in their high school to advocate for trans rights in their school. Furthermore, as participants' own confidence grew, so did their capability to embrace others. For instance, Darcy said as she felt more confident in her own identity, she felt that she could supports others better as well. Ever since Darcy started transitioning, her friends, who have supported her from the start, started exploring their gender as well. Supporting other peoples' exploration, and seeing them finding joy, brought excitement and joy back to her. Sawyer have also witnessed this positive feedback of joy. Holding spaces where people could freely express themselves as they wish was a healing experience for them.

A praxis of joy is a legitimate way to understand one's own gender identity. Lorde (1984) explained that feelings grant us knowledge and help us understand world around us. The dominant Western epistemological tradition, which values logical reasoning and material means, often disregards marginalized peoples' feelings as something illogical and baseless (Lorde, 1984). Likewise, transphobic groups use bio-essentialism to claim that gender is predetermined and there is no way to know one's gender identity other than biology. This notion that delegitimizes feelings serves to solidify structures of oppression, and in the case of trans people,

it suppresses expression of their desires. To illustrate, even though Stephanie's feelings told her that she's a woman, her knowledge was ignored by doctors as it went against the medical epistemological tradition. By embracing Lorde's (1984) idea, we can legitimize trans feelings as a "real" way to know one's gender identity. And as we start to value our feelings and allow ourselves to feel more deeply, it becomes a driving force for us to pursue all the joy that we deserve (Lorde, 1984). Like what participants have shown, specifically how Darcy, Jasper, and Phillip actively sought after their desires after witnessing life outside of the gender binary, once we realize and feel what could be possible, it empowers us to go forward with our desires. Going back to just blindly following social expectations becomes an impossibility. Thus, a praxis of joy holds power to not only validate trans feelings and identities, but it fuels resistance against an oppressive gender binary system.

A praxis of joy is a radical form of self-love. Citing Peck's (1978) book *The Road Less Traveled,* hooks (2000) defines love as "the will to extend one's self for the purpose of nurturing one's own or another's spiritual growth" (p.4). The love here isn't something you state or something you feel; it is something you must do (hooks, 2000). Someone cannot claim that they love their child, while restricting their trans children from transitioning. To love, there must be justice (hooks, 2000). Restricting a child's exploration hampers their spiritual growth. On the contrary, by hooks' definition, participants' exploration to find joy, heal oneself, further one's horizon, and nurture other's joy were all acts of love. Through their love, they've overcame barriers to finding a joyful life. This serves as an effective counter-argument against a common transphobic rhetoric that claims that instead of transitioning, one must accept and love the body that one was born with. Just as Edidi's (2017) poem at the start of this paper implied, participants

were exploring and seeking transition not because they didn't love their bodies, but because they loved themselves.

While joy was a core guiding feeling for the participants during their exploration, participants also came across feelings of pain when they perceived themselves in a way that did not coincide with their desires. Namely, Philip, Jasper, Darcy, Riley all described feeling uncomfortable with their physical presentation as they recognized their transgender identities, and likewise, Sawyer felt "weird" when they were referred to as a "girlfriend" by their partner. Ahmed (2014) explains that we become aware of our bodily surfaces through feelings of pain. One isn't always aware of boundaries that separates "inside" from "outside," but as we encounter something that presses against the boundaries, one is made to recognize it. Just as joy did, through pain, participants were able to perceive contours of their identity, and simultaneously identify desires that are "outside" of them. However, pain is relational and political, rather than being individual (Ahmed, 2014). Harm inflicted on a member of a certain communities leaves pain on the community's surface (Ahmed, 2014). In some part, the feeling of pain participants have experienced during their exploration could be attributed to ridicule, disgust, and violence gender diverse people have faced throughout human history. While the pain might not vanish entirely, if gender non-conforming people weren't mocked by other people and by the media, pain coming from dysphoria would have been less debilitating.

Unfortunately, participants have also encountered a feeling of disgust during their exploration, most prominently through transphobia expressed by other people. While joy orients oneself towards oneself and one's desires, disgust serves to preserve social expectations. Ahmed (2014) explains that feelings of disgust and fear create social surfaces between what we consider "us" and "the other." Specifically, disgust is an affect that is present when certain object

challenges and disrupt the surface itself (Ahmed, 2014). From the interviews, several participants reported encountering transphobic reaction from people. This reaction was present because of transgender people's existence itself challenges the social surface of the binary gender normativity. Through this process, the affect of disgust "sticks" to trans bodies and places them as objects to be avoided. The scene in *Crocodile Dundee 2* Darcy watched as a child is a good example that shows this othering nature of disgust. Right before the main protagonist, Michael Dundee, casually assaults a trans woman, a man in a bar approaches him and proclaims, "that girl? She's a guy!" Dundee reacts to this with a disgusted facial expression. The disgust expressed by Dundee sticks to the trans woman at that moment. To Darcy, and for the audience, this affect breaks off from the confines of the screen and sticks to an impression about all trans bodies. The scene serves to separate normative cisgender bodies from pathological transgender bodies. Experience such as this reinforced internalized transphobia and disgust for Darcy even after coming to terms with her transgender identity.

Participants have commonly shared a feeling of being "stuck" when they couldn't pursue their desires because of perceived social expectations. Cvetkovich (2012) calls this affect an "impasse;" it is a feeling of blockage when one cannot find a way forward. It happens usually when surrounding circumstances don't allow any movement, or when one couldn't think of a way forward (Cvetkovich, 2012). Instead of just moving forward, Cvetkovich (2012) suggests that creative and queer ways might be a way out of impasse. This presents a potential way to break free from the social expectations. For example, participants used gender neutrality as a safe space for exploration in situations where they couldn't move forward with their transition due the transphobia. Participants creatively combined different elements of gender expression to circumvent the impasse. Another example is Stephanie and Riley's use of gender-neutral names

as an expression of their identity while being stuck in the hostile environments. Through these, not only did they find a way around the impasse, but they created new possibilities of presenting gender as well, while resisting social expectations. As both Butler (2006) and Lucal (1999) have previously shown, participants' redeployment of gendered performances ultimately challenged and disrupted the gender binary.

I argue that a praxis of joy is another way around impasse. Unlike disgust and fear, which create boundaries and restrict possibilities, praxis of joy disrupts these boundaries and allows alternative possibilities. Praxis of joy allows one to fully embrace oneself to the point that one feels comfortable enough to accommodate other desires for oneself. Ahmed (2010) explains that we define our bodily horizons through joy. From this perspective, to seek out more joy through exploration means expansion of one's horizon of identity. Disgust involves rejecting something out of oneself and distancing oneself from others; it only serves to solidify one's boundary (Ahmed, 2014). On the contrary, praxis of joy is reciprocal, which involves inviting people into oneself, and reaching out to others. Sharing joy "forms a bridge" (Lorde, 1984, p.56) between different individuals and help us understand one another better. For instance, Darcy was hesitant to experiment with non-binary pronouns at first because of her insecurity with her identity. However, as she experienced more joy through others' validation, she was more willing to take risks and further explore her identity. By inviting people into one's exploration and creating safe spaces for more joy to be discovered, a praxis of joy blurs the line between one's own assemblage of desires from others.

Meanwhile, the results present several implications to previous sociological and feminist thinking. First, the idea that gender identity is an assemblage of desires could fill in the gaps between Butler's (2006) Gender Performativity Theory and the lived experience of trans people.

While one might not be intrinsically gendered by birth, the expression of our desires, in other words, the outbound flow of our desires towards others is what the people perceive as gender. Everyone has a unique flow of desires of their own, and the flow itself is oriented towards different directions. However, people arbitrarily categorize together certain desires into binary gender assemblages. For example, as Butler (2006) argued, wearing skirts, softer gestures, and having developed mammary tissues aren't intrinsically gendered. Yet these aspects are grouped together into gendered categories. These gendered assemblages then again inform other people and continues the cycle, thus creating what Butler (2006) explained as "stylized repetition of acts" (p.191). By recognizing fluid nature of gender, one could add or subtract certain desires from gendered assemblage, thus challenging the binary system and diversifying forms of gender categories.

Goffman (1979) and West and Zimmerman's (1987) symbolic interactionist perspective on gender provide another framework to analyse the results. They both explain that gender is a series of performances we learn through daily social interactions (Goffman, 1979; West & Zimmerman, 1987). These theories are seen in the results; gendered social expectations participants have encountered taught them on how they must behave in the world. Furthermore, as West and Zimmerman (1987) have explained that the social repercussions participants have experienced such as bullying, and transphobia could be seen as society's reaction to protect its social norms based on binary gender system. However, as the participants have shown, these social repercussions can be avoided and changed through a community effort. Within the safe spaces created by the trans community, participants were able to challenge reproduction of the societal norms. Furthermore, like how Stephanie was involved with a trans rights group pushing

for the Bill C-16, which expanded protection of transgender people under law, participants were capable of actively confronting repercussions, rather than just being subjected to it.

The results once again affirm Merleau-Ponty's view on the corporeal nature of human perception. He claimed that our knowledge of the world isn't perceived through intellectual means, but rather through embodied actions (Merleau-Ponty, 1945; van Manen, 2014). These results illustrate that one's own perception of gender identity is a corporeal achievement, rather than a purely rational one. We explore ourselves through bodily manner to perceive our own sense of self. For example, it was through experimentation with one's physical presentation, such as trying on chest binders or receiving gender affirming medical care, that participants were able to clearly perceive their desires and joy. While participants were also able to experiment through their own introspection, they have commonly shared that the feeling of joy and comfort became more prominent once they were able to embody these changes.

In addition, these results highlight the ambiguous nature of Merleau-Ponty's phenomenological bodies, that there is no one true objective meaning to everything, and everyone's perception of their own bodies are different from what others perceive (Merleau-Ponty, 1945; van Manen, 2014). Corresponding to the theory, while participants' self-images of their own bodies did not fit into gender normative binary bodies, to the participants' own perceptions, their bodies still align to their own gender identity. For example, Jasper didn't feel like he needed surgical procedures to make himself look closer to the typical male body. And for Stephanie, even though medical professionals in the 1970s did not see her as a woman, she still maintained that she was a woman. To their perceptions, their bodies were still coincided with their gender identity regardless of what body type they had. How both Riley and Sawyer viewed their bodies as shifting alongside with their identity, and how Sawyer called different parts of

their body interchangeably with different gendered terms with their partner, add another dimension to the theory by showing one's own corporeal perception of one's body is also fluid in nature. Applied with Merleau-Ponty's idea of phenomenological bodies, the result challenges the concept objective gender categories based on the binary, while illustrating how our subjective perception of our own bodily gender could be more diverse than what could be observed from the outside.

The results also show how social expectations are internalized as part of one's identity. Described by Philip as something akin to being on a "conveyor belt," participants had to navigate their own identity within a frame of other's expectations. This phenomenon fits into Cooley's (1902) concept of Looking Glass Self. The theory explains how one look at oneself through various reflection of themselves on others (Cooley, 1902). These reflected images of oneself aren't objective images, rather they are subjective imaginings of how one might be viewed to others (Cooley, 1902). A combination of cis-heteronormative expectations, and an affect of disgust stuck on trans bodies created a reflection of "disgusting trans bodies" for the participants. Internalizing this reflection, participants tried creating a normative cisgender image to avoid becoming an object of disgust. For example, as much as performing hyper-femininity hurt Riley, they had to do so to avoid getting bullied.

Furthermore, Cooley's theory could be also applied to explain participants' experiences with the trans-normative expectations. Like in the case of Riley and Philip, they were compelled to present in a hyper-masculine/feminine way when they initially came out. Their identity could have been easily revoked and be considered "not trans enough" for not following certain trans-normative stereotypes. Therefore, participants had to internalize the stereotype to avoid being invalidated. This phenomenon is exacerbated by the fact that many trans people rely on gender

affirming medical care that still gatekeeps their services based on the trans-normative perspective. Moreover, even queer-peer groups could act as a "reflective surface" for trans people. As Riley have experienced from their trans peer group, one might be urged to follow the group's own expectations rather than letting one explore their identity on their own terms. For Riley, being isolated from the group during the COVID lockdown drastically lessened the effect of the reflected self.

While the core theme was consistent with all the participants' lived experiences, there were some outliers within the results, based on their individual situations. Factors such as their generation, cultural background, and their gender identity all contributed to this difference.

Generational differences contributed to difference in participants' lived experiences. Older trans people, such as Stephanie and Philip, experienced far more challenges exploring their gender identity compared to the younger participants. This was due to a comparatively conservative period that they grew up in. For example, during the 70s, there were less media representation of trans people than modern times, and stigma around trans people was more prevalent. These made it difficult for Stephanie to live as herself for majority of her life. In addition, while younger participants were able to connect with other trans people and gather information through the internet, Stephanie's options were limited to magazine advertisements and words of mouth. Even with the availability of the internet, Philip had trouble finding resources because the 2SLGBTQ+ rights discourse still majorly focused on marriage equality during the early 2000s in New Hampshire. This shows that socio-political environment one grows up in, and availability of media technology all contributes to how one navigates own gender identity.

One's lived experience with gender exploration also varied based on one's cultural background and immigration status. Participants who were second generation immigrants in Canada experienced more intense social expectations, especially from their parents. This could be attributed to the pressure immigrants felt to conform to the dominant society. Meanwhile for the participants of Asian descent, the fact that stigma surrounding gender non-conformability is still relatively dominant in these societies, their parents might have felt that their children were deviating from their heritage. Then the pushback Asian participants experienced could partially be explained as their parents trying to maintain an Asian cultural connection with their children. Furthermore, as Jasper and Sawyer have experienced, a sense of disconnect they felt from their cultural identity acted as a barrier for their exploration. Without a word to express both of one's cultural and gender identities, one must fit oneself in a term that might not be a proper description of oneself. Additionally, in Ottawa, where the majority of the population is White (Statistics Canada, 2022), being able to see one's own cultural representation aids in seeing alternate possibilities for oneself. However, as the example of Sawyer's father's barong, the sense of disconnect also acted as a catalyst for them to explore further and create a unique form of gender expression of their own.

There were differences in the lived experiences based on one's gender identity as well, specifically between the non-binary participants and the others. Non-binary participants more consciously saw their exploration as lifelong one, highlighted by Riley's quote "…I'm never gonna stop learning about myself." Furthermore, how they presented themselves was inseparable with their experimentation. They recognized that they were able to express their non-binary identity through the ways they experimented with different elements of gender. On the contrary, other participants have shared that while they are still open for more explorations, their

exploration was more active during their initial transition period. Viewed from Deleuze and Guattari's (1987) theoretical lens, while everyone's assemblage of identity will differ from one another, binary trans people's flow of desires orients more towards the binary gender assemblages.[10] And vice versa, they can inform themselves through the binary gender system, thus reducing a need to explore further. Meanwhile for non-binary individuals, they have comparatively less reference points than the others, thus pushing them to explore their desires more on their own terms.

Considering of all the things discussed above, using an intersectional lens shows that intersecting identities of an individual effects how one navigates one's gender identity. For instance, prevalent transphobia and sexist powers within the medical field, and pressure to conform to the dominant society as an immigrant made it impossible for Stephanie to pursue the medical transition. Meanwhile, the White centric, English dominant Canadian society, combined with the trans-normativity within the trans community itself made it harder for Sawyer to find a representation of themselves relatively to White, binary trans people. It is important to note that, to use an intersectional perspective does not mean adding up different elements of one's identity (Bowleg, 2008). Rather, it means that we need to look at how different power relations based on a larger socio-political context create unique challenges for an individual (Bowleg, 2008; Collins & Bilge, 2020). Various oppressive powers based on sexism, transphobia, racism and more all intertwined and created distinctive barriers for each participant that hindered their exploration.

[10] I have used a term "binary trans people" to refer to the participants who didn't identify as non-binary. However, this doesn't mean that their identity fits perfectly within the binary. It is used only to differentiate between those who felt closer to a certain binary category and those who did not.

7. Conclusion

> *…Hope transcends time. A few years later, I was pursuing my master's and started volunteering at a local trans community centre. Occasionally, queer kids and teens from the neighborhood visited the centre. Seeing them just being themselves, finding connection with each other in a space that I've created filled me with full of hope. Hope in the past that helped me survive up to this moment. Hope that I was creating in this space. And hope for the future I saw from these people. Hope was echoing in the space, towards the past, to present, and to the future…*

In conclusion, this hermeneutical phenomenological research has revealed that exploration of desires was a central meaning behind the lived experience of knowing one's gender identity for transgender participants. Most people in our society, mostly cisgender people, regard their gender as given, and rarely question how they know their gender identify in the first place. However, trans people must continuously question and navigate through their gender identity as their gender identity does not coincide with what they're assigned with. Several scholars have attempted to explain how transgender people develop their identities (Devor, 2004; Goldberg & Kuvalanka, 2018; Kuper et al., 2018; Levitt & Ippolito, 2014; Pollock & Eyre, 2012; Pullen Sansfaçon et al., 2020). Moreover, feminist and sociology scholars have introduced multiple theories on gender, mainly explaining it as a social construction or performances (Butler, 2006; de Beauvoir, 1956; Garfinkel, 1967; Goffman, 1979; Kessler & McKenna, 2006; Lorber, 1994; Lucal, 1999; West & Zimmerman, 1987). However, these studies and theories cannot explain how transgender people know their gender identity in the first place.

To explain this phenomenon, this study has utilized van Manen's (2016) hermeneutical phenomenology based on Husserl (1931) and Heidegger (1962) to explore what it means to know one's gender identity for transgender people. Through the criterion sampling augmented with snowball sampling, total of 6 participants were recruited, with different gender identities, age, and cultural backgrounds.

After conducting semi-structured, open-ended interviews, this study has found out that the core meaning behind knowing one's gender identity was an exploration of desires. Participants have shared that they've been subjected to series of social expectations that narrowed their view on possibilities. But once they witnessed what could be possible through their relationships or through the media, they started experimenting with their desires to figure out what felt good for them. Gender identity for the participants meant a collection of desires that brought them joy. Spaces without fear of judgement was crucial for the participants' exploration. The experience was continuous, rather than being a linear process with a clear start or an end. Moreover, the exploration was relational; participants was consistently informed by their relationships, while also informing, and creating other safe spaces for others.

By revealing that desires constitutes the core structure of one's gender identity, and gender being the expression of these desires, this study fills important empirical and theoretical gaps between the social constructionist view of gender and the lived experience of transgender people. The performances of gender were coming from one's desires. Doing so, it effectively validates trans identities as "real," while also avoiding essentializing gender categories. At the same time, the analysis emphasizes an important role joy plays in the development process, proving the need to centre the affective nature of one's identity for future research on this field. Moreover, by showing the continuous nature of trans people's exploration, the study disputes the linear stage models of transgender identity development. Trans people go through extensive explorative process before deciding their transition, and it continues throughout their lifetime.

The results suggest implications for transgender care for the future. There results show us that judgement-free, low-stakes environment is crucial for transgender people's identity development and well-being. The environment was created through supportive human

relationships such as friends or a queer community or took a form of literal physical spaces such as a university 2SLGBTQ+ support centre.

The findings suggests that, first, more 2SLGBTQ+ community spaces should be made available. During the interview, Philip has shared that finding these spaces became harder as he graduated from his university. Permanent safe spaces are crucial to ensure trans people of all ages could comfortably explore their gender identity, and access information regarding trans lives, such as medical care providers. Furthermore, as major part of one's exploration involves human relationships, these spaces will help transgender people to connect and form communities.

Next, public spaces such as schools must become a safe space for queer and trans youths. Especially for trans youth who are still in the closet, it is important to not to out their identities to their parents. In a study conducted in 2021, only the half of the trans youth said that they were supported by their parents, and for racialized trans youth, the rate dropped to 36.5% (Navarro et al., 2021). However, schools are still not perceived as safe for trans youth, shown by the fact that in the same study, one out of five students avoided school because of fear of harassment (Navarro et al., 2021). Similar story was shared by Riley about how their school and teachers continuously refused to recognize their identity. Schools need to proactively support trans youth to safeguard their well-being and assist their exploration.

The results further develop previous models of transgender identity development. They refute the assumptions contemporary stage-based identity development models that there are a start and an end point to one's journey. Devor (2004) and Pollock and Eyre (2012) argued in their models that transgender people arrive and finish the exploration process once they finish their transition. In contrast, both Sawyer and Riley expressed that they don't intend to finish their

exploration, showing more willingness to experiment with their gender even further, finding joy through it. While this could be attributed to them being non-binary individuals, more binary-leaning participants such as Darcy, Jasper and Philip all experienced continuous shifts in their sense of identity even after their social adjustment (Pollock & Eyre, 2012), integration and them feeling sense of pride (Devor, 2004). To the participants, there were no start or endpoint of their exploration; it was a constant momentum within themselves.

This does not mean the linear models above are now made useless. One might wish to not continue their conscious exploration further, as Stephanie has expressed during the interview. This might arise due to psychological fatigue one might experience during their life. In the case of Stephanie, living one's majority of life during an environment where one's identity is in constant severe threat of being invalidated, having a stable sense of self, and "not having to explain" oneself anymore to others can be invaluable. While we cannot truly know if one's identity would seize to shift after "completing" their exploration, if one makes a conscious decision to do so, then the models would prove to be useful. Ultimately, considering the socio-political context surrounding individuals, and looking into their lived experience after reaching the endpoint of their process would be important if one wishes to apply the model-based approach on transgender identity development.

The results also highlight importance of emotions during trans people's identity development. As shown in Kuper et al. (2018) and Pullen Sansfaçon et al.'s (2020) articles, exploration through intrapersonal and interpersonal ways was a major theme of one's gender development process. Similar to what was shown in the results, participants from both studies have shared that feedback from their human relationships were crucial for their exploration (Kuper et al., 2018; Pullen Sansfaçon et al., 2020). Moreover, exposure to other trans people or

representation in media were crucial for developing awareness of one's sense of self (Kuper et al., 2018). While these studies focus one the process of the trans identity development, this study adds into the literature by showing how affects of desire and joy become the core structure of one's gender identity. Themes of feeling get brough up in both studies; however, they failed to focus on this aspect and its significance during the process. In comparison, it became evident in this study that a praxis of joy guided participants' exploration. If exploration was how one develop one's identity, joy and desire were driving force behind it.

Nevertheless, our society seems to believe that one could easily manipulated into being trans, or one could impulsively decide to transition. As I'm writing this, several Canadian provinces including New Brunswick and Alberta have passed a law which mandates kids to get consent from their parents to use their pronouns and preferred names in their schools (Bennett & Derworiz, 2024; French, 2024; Ibrahim, 2023). This has been a part of growing anti-trans rhetoric within the nation, amplified by the leader of the Conservative party, Pierre Poilievre, who previously expressed that gender affirming care for children should be banned, and that trans women do not belong in female spaces (Zimonjic, 2024). These policies and rhetoric deny the low stakes environments trans people need to safely explore their identities. Especially for transgender children, who are often subjected to transphobia coming from their parents, schools need to be a sanctuary. Outing trans kids to their parents will not only impede their identity development, but also cause direct harm on their well-being.

Anti-trans movements pressing for the parental right to surveil and scrutinize children's gender identities has harmful implications for all children, trans or cis. All people learn about themselves through exploration and learning. For example, we are born without a knowledge of what hobbies we enjoy but have to try out different activities first to find out what brings joy to

us. I am a big video game person. But I didn't know that until I started playing them around when I was 12. I tried out all sort of games and found out strategy and story-based games brought most enjoyment to me, while racing and puzzle games only bored me. Only after then I was able to say that part of my identity is a person that enjoys strategy and story-based games. Like this example describes, we find and expand definitions of ourselves as mothers, musician, feminists, or bibliophiles through exploration. Subjecting children's exploration to parental surveillance as a means to control how a child expresses their gender will serve to limit the multitude of ways in which the self can be constructed.

Nevertheless, I recognize limitations of this study. First, while I attempted to capture diverse experience as much as possible, transgender people's experiences are different based on their gender identity, cultural background, age, economic status and more. The core experience may be similar, how they experience exploration will differ due to the fact. To explore how certain groups of trans people experience "knowing" of their own gender identities different from one another, further research looking specifically at those groups is needed. Second, the findings and the subsequent analysis still don't explain agender people, who doesn't experience any sense of gender. Future studies focusing on how specific group of gender diverse people, such as non-binary, agender, or older trans people explore their desires are needed. Highlighting this need is that 49 people signed up on the first day of the recruitment for this study. All the people were eager to share their stories, and some of them were insistent that they needed to be interviewed. This proves to show that trans people want their voices to be heard, and we must do more to remember their tales.

Part of the motivation of this study for me was to share my own story as well. Throughout this paper, I've included moments of my life as a practice of epoché, but also to look

back on the path I've walked. I once felt so lost. Everything seemed bleak. But after talking with people, and reflecting on their experiences for this study, moments from that bleakest part of my life started shining again. Countless days of introspection, all the support I got from my friends, pages after pages of trans people's stories on the internet forums, cascading feelings of despair, jealousy, suffocation, depression, joy, euphoria, love, and hope now all feel inseparable from me. I survived. I've grown. I've explored and will explore again. After this study, I'm excited to learn more about myself more than ever.

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9. Annex

9.1. Interview Guide

The purpose of this interview guide is to guide the researcher to cover all the topics she wants to cover. As this is an open-ended, semi-structured interview, some specific questions may not be asked, or not asked in the same manner.

As suggested by Creswell & Poth, (2018), and Ironside (2004), this interview will use two broad phenomenological questions. No further prepared questions will be used. Instead, follow-up questions will be used to bring out a more detailed description of the lived experience of the participants.

1. Main Questions
    - 1.1. "Can you please describe how you first came to realize your gender identity?"
        - 1.1.1. Lived space - How the specific location, online, society or a nation relates to one's experience.
        - 1.1.2. Lived time - How one's past, current experience and future expectations relates to one's experience.
        - 1.1.3. Lived body - How one's own body, identity relates to one's experience.
        - 1.1.4. Lived human relationships - How one's relationship with friends, family or communities relates to one's experience.
    - 1.2. "Can you please describe what it means to know your own gender identity as a transgender person?"
        - 1.2.1. Lived space - How the specific location, online, society or a nation relates to one's experience.

1.2.2. Lived time - How one's past, current experience and future expectations relates to one's experience.

1.2.3. Lived body - How one's own body, identity relates to one's experience.

1.2.4. Lived human relationships - How one's relationship with friends, family or communities relates to one's experience.

2. Follow-up Questions Examples

2.1. "You've used the term ___ to describe your experience. Can you explain it in more detail?"

2.2. "What did that mean to you?"

2.3. "Can you give me an example of what you've described?"

2.4. Is there anything we haven't talked about that you think might be relevant? (At the end of the interview)

9.2. Codebook

Name	Files	References
Exploration of Desires	6	523
Experimentation within Oneself	6	81
Exploration in Social Context	6	30
Exploration of Sexuality	3	4
Exploration Through Interactions	3	4
Exploration Through Names	4	13
Exploration Through Role-Playing	2	9
Exploration Through Presentation	5	26
Exploration - Physical	2	3
Exploration Through Medications	1	1
Exploration Through Presentation	5	22

Name	Files	References
Exploration within Oneself	6	25
Exploration Through Questioning	5	13
Learning Descriptions that Fit Me	3	7
Reconnecting with Myself	1	5
Low Stakes Environment	6	202
Judgement-free Environment	6	80
Low Stakes Exploration	6	28
Normalized Queerness	4	13
Supportive Human Relationships	6	28
Supportive Community	4	5
Supportive Coworkers	1	1
Supportive Friends	3	18
Supportive Parents	1	1
Supportive Partner	2	2
Supportive Spaces	5	11
Supportive Community Spaces	4	10
Supportive School	1	1
Social Expectations	6	88
Binary Gender Expectations	6	18
Cis-normative Expectations	4	14
Cultural Expectations	1	4
Families Expectation	5	13
Heteronormative Expectations	2	2
Internalized Expectations	3	5
Normative Family Expectations	1	1
Repercussion For Defying Expectations	6	23
Transphobia	5	11
Trans-normative Expectations	4	6
Seeing Possibilities	6	101

Name	Files	References
Learning Desires Through Media	5	22
Learning Desires Through Online	2	5
Learning Desires Through Research	1	1
Learning Through Human Relationships	6	53
Learning Desires Through Community	2	11
Learning Desires Through Family	2	3
Learning Desires Through Friends	6	14
Learning Love Through Friends	1	2
Learning Desires Through Others	5	21
Learning Desires Through Partner	3	4
Not Having a Name	6	23
Cannot Realize Desires without Experiencing it	1	2
Disconnect with Own Self	1	1
Praxis of Joy	6	125
Deprivation of Joy	5	21
Repressing Desires is Hard	3	4
Pursuing Joy	6	86
Being with Others as Myself Brings Joy	6	23
Living Authentically Brings Joy	3	7
Following Desires Brings Joy	5	19
Expression of Desires	4	9
Pursuing Desires	2	4
I'm No Longer Hiding Myself	4	9
Freedom From Binary Gender Roles	3	3
Freedom from Internalized Expectations	1	1
Freedom From Queer-normativity	1	1
I Don't Have to Hide My Desires	2	4
I don't have to hide myself	3	9

Name	Files	References
Who I am is How I'm Comfortable with	6	31
Reciprocal Joy	5	18
Supporting Others' Desires	5	9
Supporting Others Exploration	5	9