Gender Pleasure: The Positive Affective Component of Gender/Sex

by

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Abstract

This dissertation proposes and explores the construct of "gender pleasure," or the positive affective experience of gender/sex. Although much of the research in psychology concerns the negatives of gender/sex, such as sexism, transphobia, and gender dysphoria, gender pleasure highlights how gender/sex can also be a source of joy and affirmation. In Chapter 1, I situate this dissertation within gender/sex research in psychology, particularly research centering gender/sex diversity and gender/sex as a social process. I then review literature relevant to people's positive gender/sex experiences, particularly for people minoritized on the basis of their gender/sexes and/or sexualities.

In Chapter 2, I describe a study that aimed to explore "gender euphoria," a term related to gender pleasure that originated within gender/sex minority communities as a positive contrast to gender dysphoria. Despite gender euphoria's importance to many people, no psychological research had directly explored this term's meanings and related experiences. I therefore administered a qualitative survey to community members ($N = 47$) about where they had heard the term being used, how they would define gender euphoria and gender dysphoria, the relation between these terms, and their gender euphoric experiences. Analyses generated five themes: (1) gender euphoria describes a joyful feeling of rightness in one's gender/sex, (2) gender euphoric experiences can be external, internal, and/or social, (3) "gender euphoria" originated in and circulates in online and in-person gender/sex minority communities, (4) dysphoria describes a negative feeling of conflict between gender/sexed aspects of one's self, and (5) the relationship between euphoria and dysphoria is complex. I conclude that these results can inform qualitative and quantitative research, gender affirmative clinical practice, political fights for transgender rights, and understandings of gender/sex experiences for people of many identities.

In Chapter 3, I describe my second study that extended understandings of gender pleasure beyond gender euphoria. To do this, I conducted focus groups with gender/sex/ual minorities diverse in terms of race/ethnicity (*N* = 64). Analyses generated four themes: (1) Accepting one's self and living in authenticity and freedom provide joy, relief, and comfort; (2) Interpersonal gendered experiences that are affirming and free from judgement provide validation and belonging; (3) Gender norms and intersecting social locations and systems of power shape experiences of gender pleasure; and (4) Gender pleasure involves purely positive experiences, relief from negative experiences, and increases in positive affect. These results have implications for positive psychology research with gender/sex/ual minorities, thinking of gender/sex as a process, and clinical practice.

In Chapter 4, I propose a model of gender pleasure as resonance between people's gender/sex orientations, identities, and statuses (van Anders, 2015). I also demonstrate how the study of gender pleasure can contribute to gender/sex diversity research and more by attending to the ways gender/sex/ual minorities find enjoyment and happiness within their gender/sexes despite oppression. I conclude with the many potential avenues that this dissertation opens for understanding gender/sex in more comprehensive ways, ultimately in service of supporting the flourishing of people of all gender/sexes and sexualities.

Chapter 1

Introduction

What brings people pleasure? Pleasure is typically defined in psychology and/or neuroscience as the positive affective enjoyment of an experience (Berridge & Kringelbach, 2008; Russell, 2003). In other words, pleasurable experiences are any experiences that *feel good*, and this feeling good can be conscious or unconscious (Berridge & Winkielman, 2003). Positive emotions, like happiness, excitement, and relief, are thought to be affective states that are pleasurable and relatively intense (Cabanac, 2002). Experiences of pleasure, then, can involve positive emotions and/or simply "liking" something (e.g., enjoying a piece of chocolate).

Pleasure has been conceptualized and measured in a multitude of domains in psychology, including sexuality, social activities, intellectual activities, basic needs, mastery of the environment, nurturance, spirituality, entertainment, interests/pastimes, food, drink, sensory experiences (smell, touch, etc.), nature, substance use, and imagination (Berenbaum, 2002; Gard et al., 2006; Gooding & Pflum, 2014; Kennett et al., 2013; Pascoal et al., 2016; Snaith et al., 1995; Zhao et al., 2019). Thus, pleasure is a multifaceted experience related to an impressive array of aspects of human life. However, pleasurable experiences related to people's gender/sexes has been largely unexplored in psychological research.

Terminology and Theoretical Frames

So what is gender/sex? The relationship between sex and gender has been one hotly contested area within psychology and beyond. Though definitions vary, psychologists often think of sex as bodily characteristics like genitals, chromosomes, and gonads. Gender is often thought of as the sociocultural corollary of sex, or the cultural meanings, roles, identities, and ideologies placed upon sex (Muehlenhard & Peterson, 2011). This distinction has been useful for feminist projects that seek to illuminate the inequitable ways women and men are treated within cultures and to challenge biologically essentialist views of gender differences (e.g., Rubin, 1975). However, the attention to gender over sex has sometimes left sex uncritiqued and taken as a precultural given (van Anders, 2015a). This is despite research demonstrating that the features that have "counted" as female, male, or intersex have changed across cultures and time (Fausto-Sterling, 2000). Research has also shown the dynamic interplay between people's sexed bodies and sociocultural genders (Dozier, 2005; Fausto-Sterling, 2019; van Anders et al., 2015). This means that the distinction between gender and sex is often muddied, making it difficult or impossible to tease them apart for many individual people or phenomena. For these reasons, van Anders (van Anders, 2015a; van Anders & Dunn, 2009) has proposed "gender/sex" to recognize their complex entanglement or interconnectedness. Thus, I use gender/sex as an umbrella term to mean gender *and/or* sex, or their interconnectedness, throughout this dissertation to avoid staking claims as to whether a phenomenon is biological, sociocultural, or both. However, when a topic is specific to gender or sex, I use the specific term.

Instead of "gender/sex pleasure," however, I use the term "gender pleasure" throughout this dissertation despite the risk that this can convey that only gender is intended and sex is omitted. However, having "sex" in a term about pleasure might confusingly imply that the term is referring to *sexual* pleasure, a common and well-understood term. As is made evident by Studies 1 and 2, people can certainly derive gender pleasure from their bodies and aspects of sex, so sex is meant to be included in gender pleasure. I generally use "gender/sex/ual minorities" to refer to people who have been minoritized on the basis of their gender/sexes and/or sexualities in a cisheteronormative and binaristic system of power, such as transgender, nonbinary, intersex, Two Spirit, gay, lesbian, and queer people, rather than simply referring to a statistical minority (van Anders, 2015). This distinction is useful because, in any given context, people with minoritized gender/sex/ualities may or may not be the statistical minority, but they are still embedded in a system of power that devalues and decenters their identities and experiences. I use "gender/sex minorities" to refer specifically to people minoritized on the basis of their gender/sexes, such as trans, intersex, Two Spirit, and/or nonbinary people.

In this dissertation, I explore the question: Do people experience pleasure from their gender/sexes and, if so, in what ways? My thinking around this topic originated from expansive views of "sexual orientation," including theorization from Ahmed (2006) and sexual configurations theory (SCT; van Anders, 2015). Ahmed takes seriously the spatial metaphor implied by the term "orientation" to think about how our sexual orientations "are about the directions we take that put some things and not others in our reach" (p. 552). Over a lifespan, these orientations continually repeat and evolve to create a personally unique sexual path, albeit constrained by culture. This theorizing about orientations spurred my thinking about how the ways we embody our gender/sexes put some experiences within reach but not others.

SCT (van Anders, 2015) is similarly expansive and argues that people's sexualities can be oriented towards all kinds of erotic and nurturant activities, features of people's bodies, the number of sexual partners, and more. Thus, rather than more simplistic notions of sexual orientation as only the gender/sexes one is attracted to, people's sexualities seem to orient, at least in part, around what brings them sexual pleasure more generally (or what they imagine will bring them sexual pleasure). SCT also posits that people can have gender/sex orientations, or that people not only have a gender/sex *status* (the gender/sexed ways people move through the world) or *identity* (how people label themselves and/or see themselves within communities), but also kinds of gender/sexes they are drawn to for their own existences. I reasoned, then, that people's gender/sexes may orient, at least in part, around what brings them *gender* pleasure (or what they imagine will bring them gender pleasure).

In the rest of this chapter, I first situate this project within psychological gender/sex research more broadly. I then expand upon my thinking about the construct of gender pleasure, including reviewing relevant literature that gives clues to these kinds of experiences. Lastly, I outline the two studies I conducted to explore this construct with gender/sex/ual minorities.

Gender And Sex (or Gender/Sex) in Psychology

Gender and sex have been conceptualized and studied in psychological research in a multitude of ways throughout the past century. Here, I describe various traditions of research on these topics (gender and sex, as well as gender/sex when relevant) in psychology and where I see my project fitting with them. This is not to comprehensively review how these concepts have been studied in psychology, but rather to identify intellectual lineages that have informed my project.

One dominant way gender and sex have been treated in psychology is as static, categorical, binary variables of woman/man or female/male (Rutherford, 2020). Researchers in this tradition often explore differences and similarities between cisgender[1] (or cis) women and men or boys and girls as well as within-gender or -within-sex variability (Stewart & McDermott, 2004). This research has demonstrated the vast array of domains in which what I would call gender/sex potentially can matter, including cognition, emotions, sexuality, and more (e.g., Alexander & Charles, 2009; Hyde, 2005; Pietrzak et al., 2002). These differences and similarities are sometimes explained through biological mechanisms, such as evolutionary theory (e.g., Buss & Schmitt, 1993). Within feminist psychology though (which I see as more relevant to this dissertation), explanations usually feature various forms of social constructionism (sometimes combined with biological considerations; e.g., Eagly & Wood, 2012).

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[1] "Cisgender" refers to people who identify with the gender/sex they were assigned at birth.

The term "social constructionism" has many meanings, but it generally refers to the ways humans create shared social realities through language, interpersonal interactions, and institutions (DeLamater & Hyde, 1998). Social constructionists, then, are concerned with how societies and individuals create and maintain gender/sex categories, roles, and stereotypes. Feminist social constructionists in particular pay attention to the ways these differences reflect and perpetuate a patriarchal hierarchy that privileges men, masculinity, and maleness (van Anders et al., 2022). Research on the underrepresentation of women in science, technology, engineering, and math (STEM) compared to men is just one example, where psychologists have demonstrated that gendered stereotypes of scientists and scientific culture negatively affect women's interest in and sense of belonging within STEM careers (Carli et al., 2016; Cheryan et al., 2013; Moors et al., 2014; Stewart & Valian, 2018). The substantial body of literature on gender/sex differences has provided invaluable knowledge of the ways gender/sex operates and how these produce gender/sex inequities. However, this tradition often focuses on cisgender women and men and is therefore unable to account for the full terrain of gender/sex diversity (Barker & Richards, 2015; Hyde et al., 2019; Morgenroth & Ryan, 2018; Rutherford, 2019; Tate et al., 2014).

In contrast to much of the research on differences, psychological research taking a gender/sex diversity view includes and centers minoritized gender/sexes (van Anders, 2015a). Psychology has a long history of pathologizing people who do not fit within a cisgender binary

(Ansara & Hegarty, 2012; Ashley, 2020; Drescher, 2010). Gender/sex diversity research, however, takes seriously the vast variations in aspects of gender/sex across and within people in non-pathologizing ways. Sometimes this research is done under the moniker of "queer psychology," a coalescing subdiscipline devoted to critically questioning gender/sex/ual categories, intersecting social locations, and the systems of power that shape them (Hegarty, 2011; Nadal et al., 2021). In one example of gender/sex diversity research, Tate and colleagues (2014) have proposed a "gender bundle," which consists of birth assigned gender category (usually female or male from a cultural authority), current gender identity (self-labeled), gender roles and expectations (how people fit or not within various gender stereotypes and norms), gender social presentation (how people express their genders), and gender evaluations (how people view and treat members of their gender "ingroup" and "outgroup").

SCT (van Anders, 2015a) also delineates several aspects of gender/sex for individuals, including gender (masculinity, femininity, and gender diversity), sex (sex diversity, femaleness, and maleness), and gender/sex (womanhood, manhood, and gender/sex diversity). As mentioned above, SCT also delineates identity, status, and orientation. SCT and other gender/sex diversity research contends that the various aspects of gender/sex vary widely across people. Though our culture may expect certain gender/sex aspects to "coincide" (e.g., that birth assigned gender category is the same as current gender identity), gender/sex diversity research takes the position that these aspects can coincide but also "branch" from one another (van Anders, 2015), and that there is no one "natural" or "correct" way gender/sexes are constructed individually or societally. Thus, this area of research takes as a starting point that gender/sex consists of many social, psychological, and biological features, and that people can have multiple gender/sexes or relationships to gender/sex. In these ways it seeks to decenter normative gender/sex.

One line of social constructionist thinking that *has* incorporated gender/sex diversity focuses on how gender/sex is produced in everyday social interactions. Theorists across disciplines have argued that gender can be thought of as something one *does* or *performs*, and these performances create the social reality (or “illusion” as some see it) of gender/sex categories (Butler, 1990; Kessler & McKenna, 1978; Ridgeway & Correll, 2004; West & Zimermman, 1987). In other words, people behave and express themselves in ways influenced by gender norms, and in turn people read gender/sex onto others’ behaviors and bodies. Specifically in Butler’s (1990, 1996, 2004) formulation, gender is not simply an outward manifestation of an inner truth or biologically determined, but rather it is performative in the sense that the “daily social rituals of bodily life” (2004, p. 48) create our very notions of gender/sex difference. These theorists also argue that gender performances are tied to social structures like gender ideologies, government surveillance, and more that privilege some gender/sexes (e.g., men, cisgender people) over others (e.g., women, transgender people).

Theorists interested in what I would call gender/sex who focus on it as an interactional social process have often incorporated minoritized gender/sex in their thinking. For example, Kessler and McKenna (1978) produced their theory in part from considering the ways trans[2] people “accomplish” their gender/sexes. Butler (2004) has stated that their ideas stemmed from the gender creativity of drag performers. Despite this, these theories have been critiqued for failing to center actual trans people’s voices (and only theorizing *about* their experiences) and for not fully recognizing that gender/sex is not only a product of social interaction, but also a deeply held internal identity for many people (of both minoritized and majoritized gender/sexes;

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[2] I use “trans” to mean “transgender” and related terns like “transsexual,” which is seen as outdated and offensive by some, but is also a somewhat common identity term amongst trans communities (Kuper et al., 2012; van Anders et al., 2019).

Nagoshi & Brzuzy, 2010; Serano, 2013; Stryker, 2006; Tate et al., 2014). Butler (2015) has clarified their view that while they remain agnostic as to *why* people vary in their subjective experience of their own gender/sex, "every person should have the right to determine the legal and linguistic terms of their embodied lives" (para. 9).

I see this dissertation as combining the "gender/sex as an interactional social process" and "gender/sex diversity" perspectives. I am interested in the positive affective consequences of the intrapersonal and interpersonal processes of embodying and expressing gender/sexes. Thus, I aim to recognize the interpersonal and cultural production of gender/sex while at the same time valuing people's deeply internal experiences of gender/sex. I also focus on those minoritized on the basis of their gender/sexes and/or sexualities as a starting point for understanding gender pleasure. Although I conceptualize gender pleasure as potentially relevant to gender/sex/ual majorities, I decided to start with understanding minoritized experiences for a few reasons. First, I align this dissertation with work in trans studies which has shown in a multitude of domains the value of centering "subjugated knowledge," or the embodied knowledge of minoritized people, for illuminating gender/sex features of our culture that may otherwise be taken for granted (Stryker, 2006a). This is similar to feminist standpoint theory, which holds that people marginalized on an axis of power who critically engage with their positionality have unique insights into the way that axis operates (Harding, 1986). Thus, people minoritized on the basis of their gender/sex/ualities may and frequently do already have sophisticated frameworks for understanding the complexities of their gender/sex experiences, and I seek to meaningfully attend to this knowledge to build the construct of gender pleasure. A second main reason for this decision is that gender/sex/ual minorities may have the most to gain from greater understandings of their positive gender/sex experiences. In a cisheteronormative society that produces many harms for gender/sex/ual minorities, the recognition and promotion of their positive experiences may work to mitigate these harms and promote flourishing.

An example of work that combines the two perspectives (gender/sex as an interactional process and gender/sex diversity) is Levitt's (2019) framework for understanding LGBTQ+ gender. According to this theory, gender for LGBTQ+ people functions across four domains: psychological, cultural, interpersonal, and sexual. Each of these domains intersects with four central effects gender has on individuals and their social context: identity, security, belonging, and social values and their internalization. These intersections created sixteen functions of gender. For example, in the psychological domain, identity involves "being driven toward authentic gender expression and identity" (p. 9) and belonging involves "creating mutual understanding and social acceptance of authentic identity" (p. 9). Thus, this theory recognizes that gender, rather than being an inert demographic variable, has dynamic functional qualities, especially for minoritized people. Another notable example of research in psychology that combines these perspectives is Morgenroth and Ryan's (2018, 2021) theoretical framework for how the gender/sex binary is both perpetuated and disrupted. I return to Morgenroth and Ryan's model in more depth in Chapter 3.

Intersectionality has also become an important framework for this dissertation. Kimberlé Crenshaw provided the term intersectionality (1989, 1991) to describe insights from Black feminist thought into the failings of single-axis views of oppression (e.g., Collins, 1986, 2000; Combahee River Collective, 1983). Crenshaw (2020) describes intersectionality as "a lens, a prism, for seeing the way in which various forms of inequality often operate together and exacerbate each other" (para. 2). In this frame, gender/sex does not stand alone, but rather is co-constituted with other social locations like race, class, and disability, and with related systems of oppression like racism, classism, and ableism. Despite my knowledge of intersectionality and of critiques that much of the queer theory that informs my work is based in unmarked whiteness (e.g., Tinsley, 2008), I failed to incorporate an intersectional lens explicitly in my research designs until Study 2. Thus, I return to a more extended discussion of intersectionality in Chapter 3.

The Negative Aspects of Gender/Sex

As feminist psychology is often concerned with gender/sex as a hierarchical system of power relations (Stewart & McDermott, 2004), much of the research in this area has documented and theorized painful gendered experiences, or the harms this system produces. For example, women regularly experience sexism in the workplace and the home (Cikara et al., 2009; Stamarski & Son Hing, 2015). Trans individuals often are subjected to transphobic microaggressions and physical violence, and racialized trans people often experience the worst of this violence (Galupo et al., 2014; James et al., 2016; Snorton & Haritaworn, 2013; Ussher et al., 2022). Many trans folks also experience gender dysphoria, meaning the discomfort or negative feelings about one's sex assigned at birth or gendered expectations that are associated with that sex (Erickson-Schroth, 2014). Mental and physical health research with gender/sex/ual minorities also largely focuses on "problems," or the negative aspects of health, rather than the promotion of well-being or other positives (Vaughan et al., 2014). Together, this might lead to a perception that people oppressed by a patriarchal cisheteronormative society experience gender/sex in *only* negative ways. But, might there also be pleasure that can come from gender/sex?

Positives of Minoritized Gender/Sex

A growing body of work has explored the positive aspects of the lives of LGBTQ+ people. While not always focused on gender/sex, this research provides avenues for thinking about gender/sex and LGBTQ+ identities beyond disparity models. One content analysis of positive psychology articles within LGBT research found substantial inclusion of the following themes: love, integrity, citizenship, vitality and positive emotion, fairness, spirituality, self-regulation, and creativity (Vaughan et al., 2014). Of these, "vitality and positive emotion" seem to be the most relevant to gender pleasure, and the authors state that discussion of these concepts were limited mostly to identity-related pride and general well-being. They thus conclude that "explicit attention to the positive affectivity of sexual and gender minorities has not yet been a central focus of the literature in this area" (p. 320).

Resilience is another positive construct that has been gaining increasing attention in LGBTQ+ research. Resilience is generally defined as the ability to adapt to and recover from adverse life experiences, and can stem from a combination of personal and socioecological factors (Luthar et al., 2000). In LGBTQ+ contexts, researchers have shown many factors that contribute to resilience, including family support, "fictive kinship" (i.e., chosen family), spirituality, caring relationships, activism, personal traits (e.g., optimism), physical health, self-efficacy (i.e., a sense of agency over one's life), active coping strategies (e.g., practicing self-acceptance), and the integration of intersecting identities (e.g., race/ethnicity and sexuality; Follins et al., 2014; Peel et al., 2022; Witten, 2014). These studies are important in that they provide clearer pictures of how LGBTQ+ people can lead healthy and fulfilling lives despite oppression, but they rarely focus on the positive experiences themselves, especially related to gender/sex. Thus, there is relatively little work on when gender/sex can feel good or what people *like* about gender/sex. However, there is a small body of work that points to the pleasures of gender/sex.

A few qualitative studies have looked directly at the positive emotions experienced by gender/sex minorities. Budge and colleagues (2015) interviewed trans men about their identity processes and their positive experiences related to being trans. They found that trans men expressed coming into their identities with an initial confidence and courage. Then, through further identity development (including transition) and positive interpersonal experiences, they experienced a further increase in confidence as well as in comfort, connection, feeling alive, amazement, pride, and happiness. A study with gender/sex minority youth also found that they experienced a range of pleasant feelings like happiness, comfort, feeling accepted, and hope in relation to developing their gender/sex identities (Budge et al., 2021). These studies clearly demonstrate that gender/sex minorities have pleasurable experiences related to their gender/sexes. However, these studies' analyses focused on the emotions themselves rather than the experiences that elicited these emotions. The focus on emotions also leaves out other kinds of pleasurable experiences (e.g., simply liking something). These studies were also limited to particular groups, like trans men or gender/sex minority youth, leaving much room for understanding gender pleasure for gender/sex/ual minorities in general.

Gender pleasure is also clearly apparent for those who experience gender euphoria. Though definitions of this term vary, Ashley and Ells (2018) describe gender euphoria as the "distinct enjoyment or satisfaction caused by the correspondence between the person's gender identity and gendered features associated with a gender other than the one assigned at birth" (p. 2). Though the fields of medicine, psychology, and psychiatry have largely focused on dysphoria as the defining feature of trans identity (Lev, 2013), members of the trans community have mobilized “gender euphoria” in part as a response to this medicalization. The existence of this term suggests that some may associate gender/sex-related experiences with an immensely positive affective state, and that these positive experiences can and do motivate social and medical transition-related decisions (Rachlin, 2018). Instances of these kinds of experiences can be found in qualitative studies of trans experiences, as the following exchange between a trans woman participant and an interviewer[3] exemplifies:

> One morning I was standing [in front of the mirror] and I turned sideways and I went, 'Damn, there's a little something there [i.e., breast development].' [Q: How did that make you feel?] I was in the best mood. I was like, 'I don't believe this; look at this!' I can see the woman. She's there. It's not pretend. It's not padded bras and tons of padding and taping and everything else. Now it's real. (Schrock, Reid, & Boyd, 2005, p. 328)

Of course, other people may find that objects like bras and padding are euphoric in themselves, and they may even experience *dysphoria* from the notion that these items do not confer “real” womanhood. This suggests that gender euphoria and its relation to dysphoria are likely highly individualized experiences, sometimes even having opposite relationships across people.

There is still much to learn about gender euphoria. Though it is a term that has been circulating for decades (Mantilla, 2001), there had been no published academic studies directly examining the meanings of the term gender euphoria when I began this dissertation work. This left many gaps in researchers’ understanding of this term and its related experiences. For example, Ashley and Ells (2018) provided a definition of gender euphoria, but this did not address whether individuals who use this term conceptualized it in the same way. Additionally, some researchers use gender euphoria to describe specific phenomena, like the distress relief transfeminine people might feel from hair removal or as a type of trans resilience (Bradford et al., 2021; Lambrou et al., 2020). However, this literature does not make clear the experiences in general that people might describe as gender euphoric. I return to these spaces for knowledge and address them empirically in Chapter 2.

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[3] Schrock et al. use he/him pronouns for the interviewer but otherwise do not specify his gender/sex identity or gender trajectory (i.e., his relationship to his gender/sex assigned at birth).

Beyond gender euphoria, others experience pleasure from intentionally playing with or disrupting gendered expectations, like those who do drag or other kinds of gender performance. Performers often report that drag is a way to play with gender, feel empowered, and enact social change through imagining and creating new ways of being gendered (Egner & Maloney, 2016; Shapiro, 2007). As Butler (1990) noted, “Part of the pleasure, the giddiness of the performance is in the recognition of a radical contingency in the relation between sex and gender in the face of cultural configurations of causal unities that are regularly assumed to be natural and necessary” (p. 187). That is, for some people, there is a distinct pleasure in occupying a gender/sex space that calls into question the inevitability and naturalness of femininity following from femaleness and masculinity following from maleness. Relatedly, those who engage in cosplay, a type of recreational performance art intended to portray fictional characters, also report a pleasure in their expression of their characters, many of whom have different gender/sexed bodies and expressions than the cosplaying person (Gn, 2011). Research on enjoyment of more common experiences of gender/sex disruption is scant, though one dissertation found that some young adults recount their enjoyment of embodying different gender/sexes in high school theatre productions (Benjamin, 2017). Many people also seem to delight in the act of dressing as another gender/sex on Halloween. Thus, at least for some individuals, gender expression and gender/sex embodiment can be experienced as joyful, playful, and empowering.

Introducing Gender Pleasure

With this dissertation, I propose the term "gender pleasure" to describe the positive affective experiences (i.e., enjoyment, liking, and positive emotions like joy, excitement, delight, gratification, happiness, and relief) that come from people's gender/sexes. Gender/sex minorities' positive emotional experiences, gender euphoria, and the joy of doing drag highlight that those with minoritized gender identities, expressions, and/or histories indeed seem to experience a kind of pleasure from their gender/sexes (Ashley & Ells, 2018; Budge et al., 2015; Egner & Maloney, 2016). So why use the term "gender pleasure" instead of gender euphoria? First, gender euphoria is a term created by trans individuals and communities with a specific meaning; researchers should not be coopting it for different questions, concepts, or ends. And, gender euphoria may be one way people experience gender pleasure but, with gender pleasure, I aim to describe a potentially wider range of phenomena. In addition, as gender euphoria is a direct response to and transgression of the term "gender dysphoria," it is usually conceptualized as being relevant to only those who experience dysphoria or who identify as transgender or nonbinary (Ashley & Ells, 2018; Rachlin, 2018); my hope with gender pleasure is to frame a concept that may be relevant to trans and/or nonbinary individuals but also others. And, since the medical field created and promoted the term "gender dysphoria," gender euphoria may carry a transition-related connotation and/or be tied to medical or health frames. I aim to use a term that can be relevant for transition-related experiences and/or ones tied to health, but also encompasses a range of gender/sex experiences (potentially) relevant to people of all identities. In sum, I situate gender pleasure as a more general phenomenon. Gender/sex is relevant both personally and socially to most, if not all, people (Ridgeway & Correll, 2004; West & Zimermman, 1987), and thus it is possible that any person may experience pleasure from their gender/sex, regardless of identity or transition status. For these reasons, I use "gender pleasure" as a way to potentially include specific examples, like gender euphoria, but also extend these concepts to any positive affective experience related to people's gender/sexes.

In what ways might gender pleasure manifest? Though a newly articulated concept, sociological theory provides a framework for the various domains in which gender pleasure may occur. Risman (2004) posits that gender/sex operates at three distinct but interacting levels: the individual, the interactional, and the institutional. For example, at the individual level, people internalize gender norms, adopt gender/sex identities, and act in gendered ways. At the interactional level, people evaluate others' gender expressions, treat others in ways that reflect these evaluations, and police gender/sex boundaries. At the institutional level, people's gender/sexes are regulated through organizational policies like maternity/paternity leave, state documents like sex markers on birth certificates, and cultural ideologies. If we apply these three levels to gender pleasure, we might expect pleasure to come from embodying one's gender/sex (individual), having social experiences related to one's gender/sex (interactional), and/or being recognized by social structures as one's gender/sex (institutional).

The institutional domain has been the focus of much of the empirical work on gender/sex in fields such as sociology, anthropology, social work, and political science. For example, researchers have analyzed societal and organizational structures that affect how gender/sex is constructed in society as well as analyzed trans healthcare insurance coverage (Armstrong et al., 2006; Bakko & Kattari, 2020; van Anders et al., 2014). Though psychological research is also valuable for understanding people's interactions with societal structures, I am choosing to focus on the individual and interactional domains as a starting point for understanding gender pleasure[4]. These domains have received some attention in the literature (see next two sections), which provides a basis for further exploration. Furthermore, I relied on self-report methods of people's experiences (see Chapters 2 and 3), as I theorized that people are best able to report on their individual and interactional experiences. Therefore, in the next sections, I describe how existing research on gender/sex at the individual and interactional levels give clues as to what kinds of experiences might be important to explore and how they might feel.

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[4] Of course, I also recognize that institutions (e.g., healthcare, government, education) always loom over our intrapersonal and interpersonal experiences.

Gender Pleasure at the Individual Level

Due to the social importance of gender expression, much of the research on individual-level experiences has focused on physical appearance-related behaviors. For example, feminist sociological work has examined cis women's gender expressive behaviors, framing them largely as either sites of resistance or self-subjugation (Clarke & Bundon, 2009; Dellinger & Williams, 1997; Kwan & Trautner, 2009; Weitz, 2001). In one study, Dellinger and Williams (1997) interviewed cis women about their makeup practices in the workplace. These women experienced or expected negative consequences for not wearing makeup, such as being perceived as not healthy, not heterosexual (in a homophobic context), or not credible. Nevertheless, these women also reported feeling more confident when wearing makeup and transforming the meaning of makeup to be about feminine community and self-care. What this literature often concludes is that we engage in gendered behavior within a system that restricts the available choices. Butler (2006) describes this doing of gender/sex as not reading from a script, but rather improvising within a set of constraints. This insight is echoed in other domains, such as Bay-Cheng's (2019) argument that all young women have sexual agency that is constrained and channeled through life circumstances, including sexist oppression. Additionally, though these studies do not extensively analyze the affective component of gendered behaviors, they do contain evidence that people enjoy gendered practices. For example, older women identify lipstick as something that makes them feel good (Clarke & Bundon, 2009), and Dellinger and Williams (1997) noted about their participants that "[m]ost of those interviewed defined makeup as pleasurable" (p. 170).

Though cis individuals must contend with gendered appearance norms, these norms can take on particular significance for trans individuals. Gender expression is generally seen as an indicator not only of one's conformity or nonconformity to gender norms, but also as an indicator of one's genitals or other sex characteristics (Kessler & McKenna, 1978; West & Zimermman, 1987). Thus, trans people, and especially trans women, are seen as either deceivers, in which their gender presentation "hides" their "true sex," or make-believers, in which they are evaluated as failing to accomplish normative femininity or masculinity (Bettcher, 2007). In either case, their gender presentation is subject to scrutiny[5], and this form of oppression could make for particular relations to gender pleasure.

Perhaps because of the scrutiny of trans people's gender presentation, empirical work on trans people's gender expressive behaviors has largely focused on "passing" (being evaluated as one's gender/sex by others) and/or disruption of the gender/sex binary for political reasons (Connell, 2010). For example, studies in the workplace have demonstrated that trans people adopt various strategies for their clothing, hair, makeup, and other appearance-related concerns based either on motives to pass or to challenge coworkers cisnormative assumptions (Connell, 2010; Schilt, 2006). As research on positive trans experiences demonstrates, trans people also can feel an immense relief, freedom, and even joy when able to dress in ways that authentically convey their gender/sexes (Budge et al., 2015, 2021; Schrock et al., 2005; Thanem & Wallenberg, 2016). One trans woman in a study of positive aspects of being trans exemplified this pleasure when she said, ‘It was horrible wearing a costume every day. [I feel] joy at being able to dress and interact as a woman . . . picking the clothes I will wear each day, brushing and drying my hair just right’ (Riggle et al., 2011, p. 150). Thus, while quotidian gender expression might be seen as merely strategic or frivolous, many people experience it as positive, sometimes quite powerfully so.

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[5] Importantly however, gender presentation does not always signify sex in some subcultural contexts, like queer and trans communities (Bettcher, 2013).

Gender Pleasure at the Interactional Level

Research on gender dysphoria and euphoria gives clues as to what kinds of social interactions might be experienced as positive by gender/sex minorities. One study of nonbinary people’s perceptions of supportive and disaffirming behaviors in a social work context identified language as a key determinant of their feelings of support (Cosgrove et al., 2021). As one participant said, “When inclusive language that doesn’t force me into a false binary is used, I feel instantly more at ease” (p. 14). This included the use of correct pronouns, names, and gender identity terms. A study of the social context for gender dysphoria noted that, beyond language, being treated as an incorrect gender/sex can trigger dysphoria (Galupo, Pulice-Farrow, & Lindley, 2020). For example, being flirted with by heterosexual men can be disaffirming for people who are not women, and many gender/sex minorities receive unwelcome stares and disapproving looks. It stands to reason that the converse of these experiences, like being seen as or celebrated for their gender/sexes, might induce gender pleasure. Indeed, Budge and colleagues’ study (2015) with trans men demonstrated the central role of positive interpersonal interactions, such as people using their correct pronouns and successful dating experiences, in positive emotional experiences related to their trans identities (Budge et al., 2015).

Other evidence points to the pleasure in gendered communities and relationships, something that may be experienced by people of any gender/sex. For example, feminist women-only spaces have been shown to foster feelings of safety, a freedom of emotional expression, and a "euphoric joy" (Lewis et al., 2015). Relatedly, social media posts from trans and nonbinary people recount the euphoria from being in supportive communities that make space for gender exploration and foster connection through shared experience (Edwards, 2018; nbmaybe, 2019). Common accounts of "girls' nights" or "boys' nights" also point to a distinct enjoyment of gendered communities.

The Present Two Studies

The current literature on gender/sex experiences suggests that people can have positively-valenced experiences related to their gender/sex, or what I am calling "gender pleasure." Though largely unexplored in psychological research, gender pleasure could take many forms and be experienced by people of all kinds of gender/sexes. In this dissertation, I aimed to explore this newly articulated construct of gender pleasure and provide an outline of how individuals, particularly those with minoritized gender/sexes and sexualities, understand and experience this phenomenon. Gender euphoria is an established term in the trans community and thus provides an initial entry point into understanding gender pleasure. However, even gender euphoria had yet to be studied empirically by academic researchers. I thus utilized an online qualitative survey in Study 1 to explore community members' definitions of gender euphoria and the kinds of experiences that might be gender euphoric. With Study 2, I aimed to broaden our understanding of gender pleasure beyond gender euphoria by exploring positive gender/sex experiences at the individual and interactional levels. With this study, I also addressed a lack of attention to racial/ethnic diversity and racialization found in Study 1 and other studies of positive gender/sex experiences (e.g., Budge et al., 2015, 2021). To this end, I conducted online focus groups to explore gender pleasure experiences with people diverse in race/ethnicity, gender trajectory, and sexuality.

Chapter 2

Gender Euphoria Qualitative Survey

Gender dysphoria, or the distress arising from conflicts between a person's gender identity or expression and their assigned gender/sex, has been central to psychological sciences' understandings of transgender (or trans) identity and experience for decades (American Psychiatric Association, 2013a; Pang et al., 2017). However, trans theorists and community members have criticized this focus on dysphoria for its sole attention to the negative, over-medicalized aspects of gender/sex minority experiences (e.g., Ashley, 2019a; Silbernagel, 2019). Partly as a result, some trans and nonbinary individuals are using "gender euphoria" to describe their powerfully positive experiences of gender (e.g., Menon, 2016; Newman, 2018). Despite the importance of this term to gender/sex minority communities, very little is known in psychological research about how people conceptualize gender euphoria, what kinds of experiences may lead to gender euphoria, and its relationship to dysphoria. In this chapter, I describe my qualitative survey research exploring these aspects of gender euphoria as the first step in my development of the construct of gender pleasure more broadly. A version of this chapter has been published in the *International Journal of Transgender Health* (Beischel, Gauvin, et al., 2021).

Gender Dysphoria: Conceptualizations and Existing Research

Gender dysphoria, as a way of describing distress over a person's assigned gender/sex, was popularized by U.S. psychiatrist Norman Fisk in the 1970's (Fisk, 1973). Since then, debates about what gender dysphoria is and its relation to mental health have been taken up by clinicians, theorists, and trans community members, among others (Ashley, 2019b; Lev, 2013). Although the most recent version of the International Classification of Diseases and Related Health Problems (ICD-11; World Health Organization, 2018) has removed gender identity disorders, Gender Dysphoria is an official diagnosis in the fifth version of the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual* (*DSM-5*; American Psychiatric Association, 2013), despite arguments that this continues to pathologize gender/sex diversity (Lev, 2013; Whalen, n.d.). Because of its place in the *DSM-5* and its origins in medicine, gender dysphoria often holds medicalized connotations even when it does not always refer to a diagnosis (Ashley, 2019b), and a diagnosis of Gender Dysphoria is often a pre-requisite for accessing resources for biomedical transition (American Psychiatric Association, 2013b; Ashley, 2019a). Accordingly, much of the psychological research on gender dysphoria has come from the clinical literature. For example, researchers have developed several scales of gender dysphoria to assist clinicians in diagnosis and treatment (Cohen-Kettenis & Van Goozen, 1997; Deogracias et al., 2007). However, many trans individuals report feeling that these scales do not represent the totality of their gender dysphoric experiences (Galupo & Pulice-Farrow, 2020). This could be because existing scales often rely on binary understandings of gender/sex (e.g., using only “woman” or “man” in their item choices) and fixed understandings of gender dysphoria (Pulice-Farrow, Cusack, et al., 2019).

In light of the limitations of clinical models of gender dysphoria, recent qualitative work has aimed to understand dysphoria from community members themselves. One study has highlighted the bodily manifestations of dysphoria, often described as a disconnect from one’s body or parts of it (Pulice-Farrow, Cusack, et al., 2019). These bodily manifestations can be accompanied by physical and emotional distress, which some relieve through social and/or biomedical transition.

Other work with community members has shown that dysphoria can also be social in nature (Galupo, Pulice-Farrow, & Lindley, 2020). Social gendered experiences, such as being misgendered or treated in a non-affirming way, can trigger dysphoria. Sometimes these social experiences are internally processed, such as focusing on others' perceptions of one's gender/sex. Again, sometimes these experiences and their impacts are lessened by transition. However, transition is not possible or desirable for some, especially for people with nonbinary identities whose identities may not be affirmed by existing biomedical transition options (Galupo, Pulice-Farrow, & Pehl, 2020). In all, this work demonstrates the multi-faceted, biopsychosocial nature of gender dysphoria that goes beyond clinical understandings. This work also highlights the value of relying on community understandings to develop psychological constructs and theories that attempt to represent these communities' experiences. However, focusing only on dysphoria leaves out a range of gender/sex experiences, including positive ones.

Gender Euphoria: Conceptualizations and Existing Research

In contrast to gender dysphoria, gender *euphoria* has received much less attention, both in research and wider culture. Scholarly works that have mentioned gender euphoria present varying conceptualizations and operationalizations. Ashley and Ells (2018) define gender euphoria as "a distinct enjoyment or satisfaction caused by the correspondence between the person's gender identity and gendered features associated with a gender other than the one assigned at birth" (p. 2). Other researchers have operationalized gender euphoria as distress relief and wellness promotion as measured by the Positive and Negative Affect Scale (Bradford et al., 2021), or as a form of trans resilience (Lambrou et al., 2020). As some of the only instances of gender euphoria in published research, each of these definitions and operationalizations presents a useful step forward in our understanding of this experience. These varied conceptualizations, however, may pose problems for further research, as gender euphoria could encompass all of these ideas and more. Without a common understanding of what is *meant* by “gender euphoria,” researchers who use this term may actually be describing only a particular aspect of this experience or something else entirely. Furthermore, because gender euphoria has received so little attention, those who are studying positive gender/sex experiences may be unaware that this term already exists, which could hinder researchers’ ability to accumulate knowledge across studies. The limited attention to gender euphoria in research means clinicians may also be unaware of the term or not understand what it means to their clients. The absence of knowledge about gender euphoria could reify the clinical focus on negative experiences of dysphoria, and could do so at the expense of fostering positive gender/sex experiences. Fuller conceptual clarity about gender euphoria’s meaning(s) could therefore facilitate systematic investigation of this phenomenon and provide a basis for common understanding amongst researchers and clinicians.

While the term gender euphoria has only rarely appeared in academic literature (cf. Ashley, 2019a; Ashley & Ells, 2018; Bradford et al., 2019; Lambrou et al., 2020; Rachlin, 2018), it is a topic of conversation in trans and nonbinary communities, particularly online. The term dates back to at least 2001 (Mantilla, 2001), though it seems to have entered wider circulation in the past few years. For example, a crowd-sourced online zine titled *Gender Euphoria* (Newman, 2018) contains a collection of stories, essays, poems, and artwork that demonstrates the freedom, joy, and love inherent in people’s gender/sex experiences. As the editor describes it, this zine is a “historical document in which trans and non-binary people are dictating our own stories as whole, full historical subjects capable of immense joy” (Newman, 2018, p. 4). Several YouTube channels have dedicated videos on the topic of gender euphoria (e.g., Edwards, 2018; Hardell,

2018) and the term shows up in searches on Tumblr, Twitter, and Reddit. Clearly, this term is used by trans and nonbinary people despite its limited uptake in psychological research. Community knowledge of gender euphoria is therefore likely to be a rich source of information for psychological understandings of this experience.

What kinds of experiences might we expect to be gender euphoric? As gender *dysphoric* experiences can be bodily and/or social (Erickson-Schroth, 2014; Galupo, Pulice-Farrow, & Lindley, 2020; Pulice-Farrow, Cusack, et al., 2019), we might expect gender euphoric experiences to follow suit. Indeed, one study found a relationship between increased body hair removal and positive affect in transfeminine individuals (Bradford et al., 2021) and another found that being gendered correctly, through the use of names and pronouns, resulted in feelings of joy and affirmation for some nonbinary young adults (Cosgrove et al., 2021). However, there is little consensus as to the relationship between dysphoria and euphoria, both conceptually and experientially. Some sources define euphoria as the opposite of dysphoria (e.g., Newman, 2018), which could have the implication that dysphoria is intrinsically linked with euphoria— e.g., that whatever a person is dysphoric about (e.g., body hair), its opposite will result be euphoric (e.g., body hair removal). However, others contend that euphoria is a separable experience from dysphoria, in that some people may experience euphoria without experiencing dysphoria and vice versa (Ashley, 2019a). Thus, we might expect gender euphoric experiences to be related to the body and/or to social life, but they may not necessarily have ties to dysphoric experiences. And, people may conceptualize euphoria and dysphoria as opposites or see them as having a more complex relationship.

Current Study: Qualitative Exploration of Gender Euphoria via an Online Survey

Despite its importance to gender/sex minority communities, gender euphoria is not a commonly or well understood experience in psychological research. Qualitative surveys are well-suited for investigating new and/or poorly understood topics among geographically dispersed participants (Braun et al., 2020). As such, I administered an online survey that asked participants diverse in gender/sex and sexuality open-ended questions about gender euphoria: what it means, who uses it, what kinds of experiences elicit it, and its relationship to dysphoria. With this survey, I aimed to utilize community knowledge and lived experiences to construct an understanding of gender euphoria that might be useful for researchers, clinicians, and communities.

Method

Materials

Gender/sex Questions and Other Demographics

Participants answered several open-ended and multiple-choice questions about their gender/sex. Throughout these questions, I defined key terms for participants, like *transgender*, *cisgender*, *binary*, and *nonbinary*. First, participants provided open-ended responses to "What is your current gender and/or sex?" and were provided with a list of examples, like *nonbinary*, *cisgender woman/man*, and *intersex*. Second, I asked "When we describe who participated in our study, which of these gender and/or sex categories should we include you in?" Options included, *A trans/transgender category*, *A cisgender category*, *Neither cisgender nor transgender describe me*, or *These options don't work for me*. If participants chose either of these last two options, they were able to elaborate in a text box. Lastly, I asked them "Here is a related part of gender and/or sex; which of these categories should we include you in?" Options included *Binary, Nonbinary, Neither binary nor nonbinary describe me,* or *These options don't work for me*.

Again, if participants chose either of these last two options, they were able to elaborate in a text box.

I also asked participants to report on other demographics via open-ended responses, including age, religion, country of residence, sexual orientation/identity, and race/ethnicity, which I then categorized (Table 2-1). Participants also answered categorical questions to assess employment and student status, income, education level, and disability identification using demographic scales the van Anders lab developed (see Table 2-1). We have used these scales in our lab (e.g., Beischel et al., 2021; Chadwick et al., 2019; Schudson et al., 2019) and developed them by exploring best practices in the field (e.g., for income, we looked at research about socioeconomic status and income ranges).

Questions About Gender Euphoria and Dysphoria

I asked participants a series of open-ended and multiple-choice questions about gender euphoria and dysphoria to assess these five domains: (1) their encounters with the term, (2) their gender euphoric experiences, (3) how they define gender euphoria and dysphoria, (4) their understandings of the relationship between euphoria and dysphoria, and (5) their understandings of the valence of gender euphoria and dysphoria (positive and/or negative).

First, I asked about their encounters with the term with the following prompt:

> *Where have you heard or seen people use the term "gender euphoria"? This could include the kinds of people you've heard use this term as well as in what context (for example, on certain websites, in certain spaces, etc.).*

I then asked how frequently they heard or saw other people use the term (on a 5-point scale from “Every day or almost every day” to “Never”). They then responded to “*What are some experiences you have seen people describe as gender euphoric?*”

Second, I asked about participants' own experiences with gender euphoria. I asked first whether they had experienced gender euphoria themselves (responses options were "Yes," "No," or "Maybe"). If participants answered "No" to the question asking if they had experienced gender euphoria, they were asked, "*If you'd like, this is a space for you to elaborate on why you said no, that you had not experienced gender euphoria.*" If participants answered "Yes" or "Maybe", they were presented with the following prompt:

> *Can you describe an experience of gender euphoria*[6] *that was especially memorable or impactful? What were the circumstances? And how did it feel? We're interested in the variety of people's experiences, so it might help to think about something you did personally that caused you to feel gender euphoria, what someone else did, and/or what you encountered in the world.*

To capture more common ways people might experience gender euphoria, I also asked of participants who answered "Yes" or "Maybe" to the previous question, "*Is there a more common or everyday way you might experience gender euphoria? What are the usual circumstances? And how does it feel?*" And, to capture future or imagined experiences of gender euphoria, I asked, "*Is there something else you think might result in gender euphoria that you haven't experienced yet? What might that be?*" I then asked how frequently they experience gender euphoria (on a 5-point scale from "Every day or almost every day" to "Never").

Third, I asked participants about their personal definitions of gender euphoria and dysphoria. I asked, "*Please define the term 'gender euphoria.' Do not worry about giving the 'correct' definition – we are interested in how you personally understand what this term means, however that might be.*" I then asked, "*We're also interested in how the concept of gender*

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[6] Wording for these questions were changed slightly for those who answered maybe: e.g., "Can you describe a time *when you might have* experienced gender euphoria…"

euphoria relates to gender dysphoria. Are you familiar with the term 'gender dysphoria'?" (response options: "Yes", "Maybe", "No"). Those who said "Yes" or "Maybe" were asked, "*Please define the term 'gender dysphoria.' Again, do not worry about giving the 'correct' definition – we are interested in how you personally understand what this term means, however that might be.*"

Fourth, I asked participants about the relationship between gender euphoria and dysphoria. I first asked, "*Do you feel that there is a relationship between the concepts of gender dysphoria and gender euphoria?*" (response options: "Yes", "Maybe", "No"). Those who said "Yes" or "Maybe" were asked, "*How might you describe this relationship between gender dysphoria and gender euphoria?*" Those who answered "No" were asked, "*Why do you think there is no relationship between gender dysphoria and gender euphoria?*"

Fifth, I asked participants about the valence of gender euphoria and dysphoria. For those who had indicated early that they had experienced gender euphoria, I first asked, "*From your experience, how positive and/or negative of an experience is gender euphoria?*" I then asked, "*How does your answer above (the positive and/or negative nature of gender euphoria) relate to gender dysphoria? If you have not experienced gender dysphoria you can say so here.*"

Finally, I wanted to know if there were aspects of gender euphoria I had missed. I explained to participants that we were psychology researchers interested in understanding the different ways people use this term and their related experiences. Accordingly, I asked, "*Is there anything else about gender euphoria that you think we should know or understand?*"

Participant Demographics

The final sample included 47 participants (M_{age} = 26.6 years, *SD* = 6.8, range = 18-56). Fifty-two participants originally consented to the study; however, three participants did not finish and two provided low quality answers (e.g., answering only "good" to all questions). I recruited participants through e-mail listservs and the social media profiles of the research team, including Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram, with a focus on gender/sex-diverse communities. Eligible participants included those who were over the age of 18, who had heard of or used the term "gender euphoria," and who lived in the US or Canada.

Most participants were under the age of 24 (94%), were students (57%), and had college education or higher (96%). Participants self-identified their race/ethnicities and I categorized them as white (85%), African American (4%), and further race/ethnicities (11%) that were Ashkenazi, East Asian, Mexican American, Multiracial, and South Asian. Participants also self-identified their sexual orientation/identity and I categorized them as queer (28%), gay or lesbian (21%), bisexual (15%), asexual (13%), heterosexual or straight (9%), pansexual (6%), demisexual (4%), and questioning (2%). Finally, participants self-identified their gender/sexes via a combination of open-ended and multiple-choice questions and I categorized them as cis women (26%), trans men/masculine (26%), nonbinary or genderqueer (26%), trans women/feminine (9%), agender (4%), allogender (neither cisgender nor transgender), women (4%), cis men (2%), and nonbinary men (2%). See Table 2-1 for further demographic details with the above plus recruitment source, occupation status, disability identification, and nation.

Table 2-1. *Participant demographics*

Demographic		*N* (%)
Age		
	18-27	32 (68.1)
	28-37	12 (25.5)
	38-47	2 (4.3)
	48+	1 (2.1)
Recruitment Source		
	Facebook	22 (46.8)
	Twitter	12 (25.5)

	Email listserv	3 (6.4)
	Other	5 (10.6)
Occupation Status		
	Student only	4 (8.5)
	Student and employed (part- or full-time)	23 (48.9)
	Employed non-student (full-time)	12 (25.5)
	Employed non-student (part-time)	4 (8.5)
	Unemployed non-student	4 (8.5)
Education		
	Less than high school	1 (2.1)
	High school graduate	1 (2.1)
	Some college/university	16 (34.0)
	Finished training other than college (e.g., vocational school)	0 (0)
	Graduated from college (in the US: community college)	1 (2.1)
	Graduated from university (in the US: 4-year college)	9 (19.1)
	Some graduate or professional school	3 (6.4)
	Received master's degree	11 (23.4)
	Received doctoral degree	5 (10.6)
Yearly Household Income		
	Less than $10,000	3 (6.5)
	$10,000-$14,999	8 (17.4)
	$15,000-$24,999	5 (10.9)
	$25,000-$49,999	11 (23.9)
	$50,000-$99,999	9 (19.6)
	$100,000-$149,000	4 (8.7)
	$150,000-$199,000	4 (8.7)
	$200,000 or more	2 (4.3)
Race/Ethnicity[a]		
	White	40 (85.1)
	African American	2 (4.3)
	Ashkenazi (Jewish)	1 (2.1)
	East Asian	1 (2.1)
	Mexican American	1 (2.1)
	Multiracial	1 (2.1)
	South Asian	1 (2.1)
Disability Identification		
	Yes	13 (27.7)
	No	33 (70.2)

Nation		
	USA	37 (78.7)
	Canada	10 (21.3)
Sexual Orientation/Identity[a]		
	Queer	13 (27.7)
	Gay/lesbian	10 (21.3)
	Bisexual	7 (14.9)
	Asexual	6 (12.8)
	Heterosexual/straight	4 (8.5)
	Pansexual	3 (6.4)
	Demisexual	2 (4.3)
	Questioning	1 (2.1)
Gender/Sex[a]		
	Cis woman	12 (25.5)
	Trans man/masculine	12 (25.5)
	Nonbinary/genderqueer	12 (25.5)
	Trans woman/feminine	4 (8.5)
	Agender	2 (4.3)
	Allogender[b] woman	2 (4.3)
	Cis man	1 (2.1)
	Nonbinary man	1 (2.1)

[a] I categorized sexual orientation/identity and race/ethnicity from answers to free-response questions
[b] Allogender = neither cisgender nor transgender

Procedure

I e-mailed interested participants individualized links to the survey. After giving their informed consent, participants answered the series of demographic questions. Next, they answered the series of multiple-choice and free-response questions about gender euphoria and dysphoria. Participants were free to say as much or as little as they liked for each free-response question (average word count of responses = 25.8, range = 0-348). Participants were then debriefed and, in a separate survey, were given the opportunity to enter an e-mail address for a $5 gift card if they wished to be compensated. Participants spent a median of 22.1 minutes taking the survey. All research activities were approved by Queen's University's General Research Ethics Board and were deemed exempt from regulation by the University of Michigan Institutional Review Board.

Analytic Method

Another coder and I analyzed the data using conventional qualitative content analysis, which is well-suited for describing poorly understood phenomena (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005). My goal was to understand people's various experiences and conceptualizations of gender euphoria, and how people see the relation of gender euphoria to gender dysphoria. Throughout this analysis, I adopted a critical realist epistemology, which holds that an observable reality exists but is constrained in its knowability through unseen, interacting social forces (Sprague, 2016; Ussher, 1999). I therefore worked to faithfully represent participants' experiences while recognizing that these experiences, and participants' articulations of them, have been shaped by their historical, cultural, political, and linguistic contexts.

My epistemological stance also holds that the social locations of the researchers necessarily affect the research process, including how we conducted analyses. The research team included Stéphanie Gauvin, and Dr. Sari van Anders, and myself. I am a genderfluid, queer, white, non-disabled Ph.D. candidate. Stéphanie is a queer, white/Jewish, cisgender woman who is a Ph.D. candidate. And Dr. van Anders is a white/white-adjacent/Jewish queer-ish cisgender non-disabled woman who is a professor.

Procedurally, coders first independently read through all of the responses and took notes on the breadth of the data to ensure data immersion. Together coders reviewed their notes and identified common themes which were then used to construct a preliminary coding scheme. We then independently coded a small portion of the data using this scheme and met to discuss discrepancies and refine the scheme. We then independently recoded another subsection of the data. Coders did this several times until we felt that the scheme accurately reflected the data and was parsimonious enough for coding. Then, we independently coded another small portion of the data and calculated intercoder reliability of each code using Cohen's kappa. For codes with insufficient reliability ($\kappa < .7$) we met to refine the coding scheme and recoded the data until all codes were sufficiently reliable. Reliability checking was done not as a measure of generalizability of the coding scheme, but rather as an opportunity for reflexive discussion between coders (O'Connor & Joffe, 2020). I then coded the remainder of the data using this coding scheme. Finally, Stéphanie coded a portion of the data at the end of the dataset to check for coding drift. Codes with insufficient reliability ($\kappa < .7$) were discussed and refined, then recoded in the entire dataset.

After coding, I organized codes into themes that reflected the major patterns in the data and reviewed the coded extracts and entire dataset to refine the themes and ensure they accurately reflected the data. Coders then met to discuss and further refine and name themes. As encouraged by best practices for qualitative survey research (Braun et al., 2020), the themes represent findings from across the dataset rather than summaries of responses to each question.

Results

Quantitative Descriptives

Participants answered several scaled and categorical questions about gender euphoria (see Tables 2-2 and 2-3 for exact values). Participants reported encountering the term "gender euphoria" approximately monthly on average. When asked if they had experienced gender euphoria themselves, the majority said "yes" or "maybe." When I broke down experience of gender euphoria by gender/sex, however, only two of the cisgender participants said "yes," with the rest saying “maybe” or “no.” In contrast, of the non-cisgender participants, the majority said “yes,” and the remainder largely said “no.” For participants who experienced gender euphoria, they reported experiencing it approximately weekly on average. For those who said that they “Maybe” experienced gender euphoria, they reported experiencing it somewhere between monthly and less than monthly on average.

When asked if they were also familiar with the term “gender dysphoria,” most participants said “yes,” with a few saying “maybe” or “no.” Of those who were familiar with gender dysphoria, most reported there was a relationship between gender dysphoria and euphoria, some reported there might be a relationship, and a few reported there was no relationship.

Table 2-2. *Frequency of responses to categorical questions*

Question	Yes	Maybe	No
Experienced gender euphoria themselves	26 (55%)	6 (13%)	15 (32%)
Cisgender	2 (15%)	5 (38%)	6 (46%)
Non-cisgender	24 (73%)	1 (3%)	8 (24%)
Familiar with gender dysphoria	41 (87%)	2 (4%)	4 (9%)
Thought there was a relationship between dysphoria and euphoria	29 (62%)	11 (23%)	2 (4%)

Table 2-3. *Descriptive statistics for scaled questions*

Question	Mean (*SD*)
Frequency of encountering the term "gender euphoria"	3.04 (0.97)
Frequency experiencing gender euphoria	
Responded "Yes" they had experienced gender euphoria	2.08 (0.89)

Responded "Maybe" they had experienced gender euphoria	3.67 (0.82)

Note: Response options were "Daily or almost daily" (1), "Weekly" (2), "Monthly" (3), "Less than monthly" (4), and "Never" (5)

Qualitative Results

I organized participants' open-ended responses into five themes: (1) gender euphoria describes a joyful feeling of rightness in one's gender/sex, (2) gender euphoric experiences can be external, internal, and/or social, (3) "gender euphoria" originated in and circulates in online and in-person gender/sex minority communities, (4) dysphoria describes a negative feeling of conflict between gender/sexed aspects of one's self, and (5) the relationship between euphoria and dysphoria is complex. Below, I describe each theme and provide illustrative quotes from participants accompanied by their gender/sex category and age.

Gender Euphoria Describes a Joyful Feeling of Rightness in One's Gender/Sex

Participants described gender euphoria as entailing a range of positive emotions. I deemed many of these emotions as joyful, including happiness, excitement, and a "high." As one participant vividly described it:

> The first time I remember feeling gender euphoria was when I first tried on my [friend's] binder. I had been kinda questioning my gender but I wasn't positive. I put that on, and looked down and couldn't see my chest at all. I was flat. I looked in the mirror and it just looked right. I felt a rush go through my body and I burst into laughter and a huge smile and began running my hands across my chest. I ran to my friend and was excitedly jumping and exclaiming "look how flat I am! Look!!" And [I] have a huge goofy grin on my face. (genderfluid demigirl, 21 years old)

Other descriptions included: “a breath of fresh air” (transgender woman, 24), “trans celebration, happiness, wonder, hope,” (nonbinary, 21), “a moment of elation or connection with one’s gender” (transmasculine nonbinary, 25), “sheer joy and contentment,” (nonbinary/genderqueer, 34) and “a little shiny gender breakthrough” (nonbinary, 24).

Participants commonly mentioned the relationship between gender euphoria and confidence or feelings of attractiveness. When experiencing gender euphoria, they reported feeling like they could “do anything” (cis woman, 23) and thinking “wow, I’m hot” (genderqueer/transmasculine, 25). One participant reported feeling a more ambivalent relationship with what is deemed attractive for men when thinking about what might cause gender euphoria in the future:

> Another thing I think is actually working out and getting muscular. I know it's a stupid perpetuation of male beauty to be muscular and fit but I really think it would help me feel more masculine and more confident in my body. (nonbinary/genderfluid/transmasculine, 22)

Other participants reported that gender euphoria involves a feeling of affirmation or validation. As one participant said, “I often get ‘clocked’ for being queer because of how I dress and present myself. As long as it’s not in a derogatory way, I feel seen for who I am” (genderqueer, 26). Gender euphoria made them feel a certain kind of freedom or liberation, especially when they felt at home in their gender/sexes. One participant described this powerful feeling of authenticity when they said, “The first time I wore a packer, I slipped a rolled sock into my boxer briefs and cried because it felt so right” (trans man, 26). Another participant said during an experience of gender euphoria, they “started to feel this sensation of being ‘righted,’ like when you crack your back, or get a popcorn kernel out of your teeth” (trans woman, 24).

Participants regularly emphasized just how positive gender euphoria can be. For example, one person said:

> It's literally life saving. I wish I could describe it to those of you who haven't had it before, but existing in a space, in a moment where your body and gender align [and] feel right with each other when so often that is not the case is ELECTRIC. It's what keeps trans folks alive, those moments of feeling fully and euphorically ourselves. (nonbinary, 21)

Several participants mentioned crying or wanting to cry from the intensity of the joy that gender euphoria can bring. However, a few described it as positive, but not intensely so. For example, one person said it is "a quiet sort of happiness" (transmasculine, 20) and others described it as a sense of comfort or contentedness.

Participants also mentioned temporal dimensions to the feeling of gender euphoria. Some said that it is a transitory feeling—that it is acutely positive but fades quickly. Others described changes over time in how intensely gender euphoria is felt, with several participants indicating that "firsts" were the most powerful. For example, "someone being called their preferred pronouns the first time may experience a much greater sense of euphoria compared to having their pronouns used correctly the 100th time" (genderqueer, 26). One person suggested gender euphoria is *defined* by these impactful, first experiences. However, many others viewed everyday experiences as gender euphoric, albeit less intensely so.

While gender euphoria was mainly described as wholly positive, some individuals had mixed feelings about these kinds of experiences. Several participants explained that gender euphoria can highlight gender *dysphoria* or other aspects of their identities in ways previously unknown. One participant poignantly described this kind of realization and her attendant mixed feelings:

> When I went to look in the mirror, I saw that it [a body shaper] had given me very visible breasts. I had shaved my face, chest, and arms just before, and not only feeling but also seeing myself with bare skin and breasts, I knew in that moment that that is how I always wanted to feel and how I always wanted to look. That realization was both affirming and terrifying. I felt great because in that moment I knew for sure I was trans, but I also felt deeply upset and scared because in that moment I knew for sure I was trans. I sank to my bathroom floor and cried. (trans woman, 24)

Gender Euphoric Experiences Can be External, Internal, and/or Social

Participants expressed that they experienced or imagine they will experience gender euphoria from a diverse set of experiences that I grouped as 1) external or physical, 2) internal or psychological, and 3) social. Though I present these separately, I note that many times participant experiences represented a complex entanglement of these three domains.

External or Physical Gender Euphoric Experiences. Participants experienced or imagined they will experience gender euphoria in relation to a range of external or physical aspects of their gender/sexes. These included references to changes in their sexed bodies, such as genitals, face shape, and fat distributions, often facilitated by biomedical transition (i.e., hormones and surgery). As one person said, “With the huge boost of confidence I have received from my hormonal transition, I expect that the feeling of looking down at my body after a surgical option I'm considering would be quite euphoric” (trans woman, 24). Body modification outside of biomedical transition was also commonly discussed, including packing (an object in one’s pants to be, or facilitate the feeling and appearance of, a penis) binding (a tight wrapping around the chest to be, or facilitate the feeling and appearance of being, flat-chested), and voice training (modifying one's vocal pitch and patterns). Sometimes these modifications were not related to transitioning to "another gender," as with one cisgender woman who expressed interest in binding and said, "I still want to be perceived as a woman, but I just like the way my shape looks with fewer curves" (cis woman, 26). Participants also mentioned haircuts as a means of modifying their bodies, sometimes in quite creative ways. For example, one nonbinary participant stated:

> I have a hair cut where I can transition easily from a femme hair down look to a masculine "man bun" look. This is super great because if my gender feeling shifts during the day, I can experience the feeling of gender euphoria easily by changing the way I'm wearing my hair. I know it when I walk in and see my reflection and either think "wow, yeah!" Or "wait... that's not right". And I'll shift. (genderfluid demigirl, 21)

Other external aspects included items placed *on* the body, such as clothing, shoes (e.g., heels), cosmetics, nail polish, and drag. Often, wearing clothes associated with one's identified or felt gender/sex rather than assigned sex was gender euphoric. But other times, relations between participants' gender/sex and clothing were more complex, as with this nonbinary participant:

> When it's summertime and I wear overalls and dress what some would consider to be "visibly queer" that is gender euphoric. When I can wear a dress without feeling like I have to be wearing the dress, knowing I can be non-binary but still wear a dress, that's gender euphoric for me. (nonbinary, 21)

Internal or Psychological Gender Euphoric Experiences. Participants also expressed feeling, or imagining they will feel, gender euphoria from experiences that were internal or psychological. Some participants described a sense of self-affirmation from thinking of themselves in certain ways or engaging in certain behaviors. For example, one participant noted, “When I refer to myself, when it’s appropriate, I refer to myself with my preferred name and pronouns. It makes me feel more confident in my skin” (transmasculine nonbinary, 25). In fact, one participant expressed that external or social experiences are not relevant for their gender euphoric experiences:

> I don’t believe that [my gender] has to be consumable or digestible by others for it to be valid. In fact, I experience the most comfort and euphoria when I know that other people will never be able to label, consume, or insert their gaze on my gender because that act of defining belongs solely to me. (nonbinary, 23)

Sometimes this self-affirmation was facilitated by a mirror—seeing on the outside what they experience on the inside. One participant recounted a particularly impactful experience putting on a dress in a mall:

> When I…stepped out of the stall and saw myself in the mirror [I] was almost moved to tears. I have no other good way to describe it but I saw myself back. I just could look at my reflection and could think "this is me". In that moment I had gained more self confidence then I could remember having. Even my friends saw a difference in my overall disposition. (cis woman, 23)

Others discussed self-reflection or self-discovery as euphoric. For example, one person said that “reading and writing about being trans and non-binary” (nonbinary, 21) was euphoric for them. And some referenced their sexuality or their queerness as being tied to gender euphoria.

Social Gender Euphoric Experiences. Lastly, participants described feeling, or imagining they will feel, gender euphoria from interactions with other people and societal structures. These could include interactions with strangers, family, community members, healthcare providers, educators, the government, and society in general.

Participants described the validation received from "passing" or being read or assumed as their identified gender/sex. This validation could be due to external appearances cueing their gender/sex. For example, "My first [experience] with gender euphoria was taking off my shirt as a child and being seen as a little boy rather than a little girl" (nonbinary/genderfluid/transmasculine, 22). However, these experiences were not only due to visual appearance. As one person said:

> The first time I was cast as a male character over clearly cisgender voice actors made me extremely happy. I was worried being pre-t indefinitely would kill all chances of mine for those roles, but after years of self voice training, I've found a type! (transmasculine nonbinary, 25)

Often participants would know they were being gendered correctly through people's use of their names and pronouns or gendered referents (e.g., ma'am, sir). Some nonbinary participants indicated that *confusion* from others was validating for them, as people struggled to identify them as either women or men. One person said, "on my non-binary days if someone just couldn't figure out what I was and just stuttered out while trying to gender me. That would be very good" (genderfluid demigirl, 21).

Simply being in various communities was also experienced as gender euphoric. Sometimes participants specifically mentioned trans communities, which afforded them certain validations that wider culture denied them. As one person said:

> I spent a long time thinking that I wasn't trans enough to qualify for the term because I wasn't 100% dead set against my assigned gender at all times. Discovering that there was a whole community of people who don't fit the mold of "male" and "female" and that I wasn't alone in my experience was incredibly euphoric for me. I went from feeling like nothing about me fit to feeling much more settled within my own experience. (nonbinary/genderqueer, 34)

Others mentioned that being in spaces or communities specific to their gender/sex was gender euphoric. One woman said she feels gender euphoria when “women talk to me like I'm their close friend or confidante, when I resonate with speech or media by women for women, when women compliment aspects of my womanhood or femininity, when I'm included among women” (trans woman, 24).

Participants mentioned other specific contexts in which they experienced gender euphoria with other people. This included bathrooms, relationships, and sex. For example, one person said they heard others describe experiencing gender euphoria from “certain gender-stereotypical sexual experiences (notable examples include transmasculine people using a strap-on for the first time, transfeminine people receiving penetrative sex)” (trans woman, 24).

“Gender Euphoria” Originated in and Circulates in Online and In-Person Gender/Sex Minority Communities

“Gender euphoria” as a term is fairly new and, according to comments from participants, seems to be circulating largely in the communities that created it: gender/sex minority communities both online and in-person. Participants often mentioned social media platforms where they had heard the term including Facebook, Twitter, Reddit, Tumblr, and Instagram. As one participant said, “I mostly see it from other trans or non-binary folks who are discussing their gender journeys on social media" (nonbinary, 24). Others mentioned audio and video platforms such as YouTube or various podcasts. In addition, participants mentioned encountering the term in-person with their social networks, such as friends, family, romantic partners, and their various communities. They had also heard the term from therapists, teachers, books, activist circles, and LGBTQ resource centers.

Participants also delineated the gender/sexes and sexualities of the people from whom they had heard the term. Many said they encountered the term mainly or exclusively in gender/sex minority communities and that this is where the term originated. As one person said, "I have never heard a cisgender person say it" (nonbinary, 23). However, some participants specified that they had heard the term in broader LGBTQ contexts.

Relatedly, participants discussed whom gender euphoria usually applies to. When defining gender euphoria, several participants delineated that this experience is primarily rooted in trans and nonbinary lives. One participant defined it a bit more broadly as "the electric feeling of happiness and excitement in expressing one's gender, *especially when that gender identity and expression are marginalized or ostracized*" (nonbinary, 24, emphasis added). Some gender/sex minority participants speculated that cisgender people might experience gender euphoria, or something analogous. However, because cisgender identities are seen as the default, they imagined this experience would be less noticeable or invisible to cisgender people. A few cisgender participants *did* recognize experiences that could be deemed gender euphoric but expressed uncertainty as to whether the term accurately applies to them. As one cisgender woman said:

> I like to wear make ups, perfume, colorful clothing, long skirts. I guess these give me a sort of gender euphoria, but as a cis woman, I am not sure if I am allowed to use such

> term to explain my experiences in a privileged group. I feel that the term was invented for those with non-binary gender identities to describe their experience, and I am unsure if my experiences of being a cis woman identifying with typically "feminine" things should be counted as "gender euphoria. (cis woman, 25)

Though the term has been circulating in these communities, participants pointed out that it still is not a widely known concept. One participant said, “It's rarely talked about explicitly in trans and/or non-binary circles in my experience and academics should be careful not to assume community members are familiar with it as a concept” (nonbinary, 31). Several participants expressed that gender euphoria is often overlooked in research and that they would like to see its further uptake in academia. Interestingly, while some commented on the recency of the term, one participant said that it had been “nearly a decade” (transmasculine, 30) since they first heard the term, which suggests it is not as new as some other participants believed.

Dysphoria Describes a Negative Feeling of Conflict Between Gender/Sexed Aspects of One’s Self

Participants also defined gender *dysphoria* and, in contrast to euphoria, they described it as entailing a range of negative feelings arising from a conflict or disconnect between various gender/sexed aspects of one’s self. These negative feelings included discordance, discomfort, pain or distress, sadness or depression, anxiety, and disconnection. As one person put it, “dysphoria is an amalgam of negative feelings of dissonance” (nonbinary, 24).

According to the participants, these negative feelings arose from a discord or “mismatch” between various aspects of ones’ gender/sex and/or assigned gender/sex at birth. This could be discordance across a number of aspects: one’s internal self-concept versus external appearance, gender identity versus sexed body, current gender/sex versus experienced or desired gender/sex, and/or self-concept versus treatment from others. As one person said, “Gender dysphoria is the sadness or dissonance that you feel when you're reminded that your external self doesn't match up with or isn't perceived by others to match up with your internal sense of self” (trans man, 26). Participants also recognized the cultural component to these feelings of mismatch, such as when one person said, “I also strongly suspect that it is related to societal expectation of what it means to be a particular gender” (trans woman, 34). Accordingly, many mentioned the act of assigning gender/sex at birth as an important source of this feeling of discordance.

The Relationship Between Euphoria and Dysphoria is Complex

Nearly all participants agreed that euphoria is a positively-valenced experience whereas dysphoria is negatively-valenced. Beyond this agreement, participants’ delineations of the emotional relationship between dysphoria and euphoria were highly varied. Some felt that dysphoria was a more constant or chronic feeling whereas euphoria was a rarer and thus more intense feeling. As one person said:

> Gender dysphoria is essentially my default state of being, such that the pain it causes isn't always high enough to register on my radar - gender euphoria in contrast is a much rarer experience, making the positive feelings I get from it being much more memorable in my mind, and thus having a bigger impact. (trans woman, 24)

Another person described dysphoria as “an itch I can’t scratch. It isn’t as all consuming” (genderfluid demigirl, 21). However, others felt that dysphoria was *more* intense and thus harder to cope with. As one person put it, “Dysphoria is more clearly negative, whereas euphoria is slightly above neutral” (nonbinary, 27). Others mentioned that dysphoria’s intensity and impact varied, whereas euphoria was “more consistently positive” (genderqueer/ transmasculine, 25).

Participants also described the various ways euphoria and dysphoria can feed into or influence one another. As one person said, “if you've experienced a lot of dysphoria in the past, for instance, the euphoria resulting from even relatively minor things like someone referring to you by the correct pronouns can be exponentially more intense as a result of that contrast” (nonbinary/genderqueer, 34). This contrast was sometimes described as gender euphoria being a relief or freedom from dysphoria. Accordingly, some believed that euphoria and dysphoria were nearly always linked. One person said, “I think you could make the case that if one experiences euphoria but not dysphoria, their euphoria is still freedom from dysphoria they didn't consciously realize they felt” (trans woman. 24) and another went as far as to say, “I believe that people with gender dysphoria are the only ones that can really experience gender euphoria. As a cis woman without gender dysphoria, I don't think I can experience true gender euphoria” (cis woman, 25). In contrast, another participant said, “I think someone could experience gender euphoria without having experienced gender dysphoria” (cis woman, 28). Others stated that euphoria and dysphoria could be experienced simultaneously.

Conceptually, participants mostly agreed that dysphoria and euphoria can be thought of as opposing experiences, either as two sides of the same coin or two ends of a spectrum where “one end is the good feelings of your gender experience and the other is all the bad feelings” (trans woman, 24). Others felt that thinking of them simply as opposites was too reductive for how complicated and individualized the relationship between them is.

Participants also mentioned the relationship between the experiences that cause euphoria and dysphoria. Some mentioned that similar experiences cause euphoria and dysphoria. As one person said, “Typically dysphoria and euphoria are related to similar body parts or social interactions. For example, I get dysphoria when someone misgenders me, but euphoria when someone genders me correctly" (genderqueer/transmasculine, 25). Others stated that euphoria and dysphoria are or can be caused by different kinds of experiences. For example, one person said, "I feel as if the dysphoria is more societally related than gender euphoria is" (trans woman, 34). And again, some said that this relationship differs across people.

Lastly, a few participants mentioned the ways people utilize the terms gender dysphoria and gender euphoria. Some argued that euphoria is a better organizing principle to unite disparate trans identities, partly because not every trans person experiences dysphoria. However, some felt that this idea had gone too far and that the term euphoria was sometimes used to discount experiences of dysphoria. For example:

> Some trans people dislike the idea of dysphoria entirely, or simply dislike that dysphoria focuses on the negatives, and so they created the term "gender euphoria" to focus on the positive experiences of being trans. I think that in the several years that the term "gender euphoria" has been around, other people have latched on it and added onto the use of focusing on the positive by using it to describe their experiences of realizing they are trans, with a small group of trans people weaponizing the term to then say that dysphoria doesn't actually exist. (transmasculine, 30)

Discussion

I conducted an exploratory online qualitative survey of gender euphoria—what it is, people's related experiences, where the term circulates, and its relationship with dysphoria. Using thematic analysis, I found that participants (who were all gender/sex/ual minorities) conceptualized and experienced gender euphoria as powerfully positive and related to gender identity, gender expression, sexed body, and gendered social life. Participants' responses provide a rich basis for researchers, clinicians, and communities to further understand and explore this important psychological phenomenon.

Gender euphoria generally describes a joyful feeling of rightness in one's gender/sex, according to my first theme in participants' responses. This echoes Ashley and Ells' (2018) description of gender euphoria as a "distinct enjoyment or satisfaction" (p. 6). While joy or happiness encompasses much of the emotional tenor of gender euphoria, participants also described feelings of confidence, attractiveness, and affirmation. This suggests that past operationalizations of gender euphoria as increased positive affect, decreased negative affect, and resilience are likely tapping into the broad range of positive emotions gender euphoria can elicit (Bradford et al., 2019; Lambrou et al., 2020). Seemingly central to these positive emotions are a constellation of feelings related to authenticity, rightness, or being "at home." Though "authenticity" has been criticized as forwarding an essentialist view of the self, it is nevertheless an important component to fulfillment and positive development for many people, especially those who have been denied access to living an authentic life through cisnormative systems of oppression (Davies, 2020). My findings corroborate the importance of feelings of authenticity and support calls for creating space for all people to explore the gender/sexed aspects that feel right to them.

In the second theme, participants recounted experiences of gender euphoria that involved a combination of their physical bodies and objects placed on their bodies, internal psychological processes, and interactions with others and society. Past qualitative work on gender dysphoria has identified both bodily and social experiences as important domains for *negative* experiences (Galupo, Pulice-Farrow, & Lindley, 2020; Pulice-Farrow, Cusack, et al., 2019), and I found similar domains for positive experiences. My finding that some participants experienced gender euphoria in relation to internal psychological processes is also similar to findings that internal processing of social experiences can lead to dysphoria (Galupo, Pulice-Farrow, & Lindley, 2020). My data extend these findings as some participants described these processes as *purely* internal, involving self-affirmation and self-definition. Rather than being rooted in others' perceptions or transition-related behaviors, these internal experiences were private and generated from within.

Participants' descriptions of their gender euphoric experiences can also extend theories of gender as performance. As I described in Chapter 1, the social enactment of gender is sometimes described as a kind of performance, wherein how a person "does" their gender (e.g., expresses themselves in feminine or masculine ways) is read by others as conveying information about their sexed body and/or gender identity (Butler, 1988; West & Zimermman, 1987). The current study's findings contribute to this perspective by highlighting the affective component of gender performance—it can feel good (or bad), sometimes intensely so. My findings also suggest that some gender/sex experiences are seemingly unrelated to performance or expression, as evidenced by the subtheme of internal psychological experiences. Though gender is socially constructed and enacted, trans studies scholars have argued that a sole focus on social construction may eclipse some people's resolute feelings of an internal gender identity (Nagoshi & Brzuzy, 2010; Serano, 2013; Tate et al., 2014). My findings corroborate the importance of interiority to (some) people's felt sense of gender/sex and suggest that this interior sense of self has affective components.

My third theme makes clear that gender euphoria originated in gender/sex minority communities, and it is members of these communities who are predominantly using this term. Though about a quarter of the sample were cisgender, they mostly discussed hearing the term being used by trans and nonbinary people in their lives rather than reporting experiencing it themselves. This finding is perhaps unsurprising given the term's linguistic ties to gender dysphoria. What was slightly less clear is who exactly *experiences* gender euphoria. Though there was some diversity in perspectives amongst participants, gender euphoria was largely seen as specifically a transgender and/or nonbinary experience. Some cisgender participants did describe positive gender/sex experiences but most were hesitant to label them as gender euphoria because, to them, the term seemed specific to trans contexts.

The utility of the construct of "gender pleasure" is thus supported by the finding that some cisgender participants reported positive gender/sex experiences but were hesitant to label them as gender euphoria. Gender pleasure for cisgender folks may be harder to recognize than gender euphoria is for non-cisgender folks. As some participants postulated, and as past research on cisnormativity has supported, cis experiences are the default so are not often made obvious or visible (Abed et al., 2019; Bauer et al., 2009; Beischel, Schudson, et al., 2021a). This invisibility may suggest that gender pleasure is relevant only for gender/sex minorities. Indeed, some experiences the participants described seem fairly specific to those who were assigned a gender/sex at birth that did not accurately describe them. These experiences might include people using the right name and pronouns, biomedical transition care, and changing gender/sex markers on documents. However, other experiences seem potentially shared with cis individuals, and it is an open question whether these would induce gender pleasure in a cisgender context. These experiences might include wearing clothing that shows off a person's body in ways they like, dressing in drag, and being in community with members of a person's gender/sex. Future research could help flesh out gender pleasure and its relation to gender euphoria with people of diverse gender/sexes, including majority ones (see Chapter 3).

In my fourth theme, participants identified feelings of conflict or discord as central to definitions of dysphoria, which was conceptually opposite to the feelings of harmony and authenticity that they identified as characterizing euphoria. However, not everyone conceptualized euphoria and dysphoria as opposites. In fact, according to my fifth theme, participants had little consensus on this relationship. Some did feel that euphoria and dysphoria were opposites, but others said there was a more complex relationship between them. Some felt that dysphoria was more chronic and less intense than euphoria, while others felt the reverse. And, some felt that euphoria and dysphoria were nearly always linked while others contended that people can experience one without the other. Participants may not have even been sure themselves, as about a quarter of participants said "maybe" there was a relationship between euphoria and dysphoria.

What might explain these varied and sometimes contradicting conceptualizations of the interrelations between gender euphoria and dysphoria? One explanation is that many participants rooted their descriptions in their own experiences of euphoria and dysphoria. It is clear from these data and others' that gender/sex identities and experiences can be highly individual (Diamond & Butterworth, 2008; Erickson-Schroth, 2014). In contrast, transnormative narratives privilege one particular path to a transgender identity that is binary and medicalized (Johnson, 2016). Though some trans individuals find personal affirmation or utility in this narrative, many people's gender/sex journeys do not follow this path, and indeed sometimes people's paths intentionally disrupt transnormativity (Bradford & Syed, 2019). In support of the pluralism of transgender narratives, I found that euphoria and dysphoria did not always reflect a linear, binary desire to become "the other gender." Many people described *nonbinary* experiences of euphoria, such as strangers being visibly confused by their gender expression. They also described shifting gender/sex aspects of themselves not to be perceived as a different gender/sex but rather to feel more authentic and comfortable. These highly individualized gender/sex experiences may therefore explain the wide variety of conceptualizations of gender euphoria and dysphoria. Accordingly, any universalizing statement about the relationship between euphoria and dysphoria is likely to misrepresent at least some people's experiences.

Limitations

The sample had important limitations that may have affected the range of experiences and conceptualizations represented in the data. Most participants were white and had at least some college education. Social scientific and other scholarly work has extensively demonstrated that gender is experienced differently across race/ethnicity and social class, and that systems of privilege and oppression shape these experiences (Collins, 2000; Crenshaw, 1991; Han, 2009; Weitz, 2001). For example, racialized minorities and/or people with low incomes often face substantial barriers to obtaining transition-related healthcare (James et al., 2016; Snow et al., 2019). Access to gender euphoria then, and the experiences that may elicit it, is not equitably distributed across race/ethnicity and class (and likely other axes of social location). Gender euphoria may also take different forms for people with different cultural backgrounds, considering gendered experiences and identities themselves vary across race/ethnicity and cultural background (Kuper et al., 2014; Singh, 2013). Additionally, research has demonstrated generational differences in gender/sex minority experiences (e.g., Barsigian et al., 2020). As the sample was quite young (most were younger than 28 years), I may not have captured the breadth of experiences of gender euphoria across the lifespan. Future research is therefore needed to investigate gender euphoria in samples more diverse, especially by race/ethnicity, class, and age. Furthermore, I recruited only for those who were familiar with the term gender euphoria, as I was interested in people's knowledge of the term. There are likely many people who experience gender euphoria or something like it without using or knowing the term. This group may have unique experiences that I did not capture.

Implications for Research and Practice

The results have many potential implications for further research and practical applications, with the above limitations in mind. First, the findings provide the basis for future qualitative and quantitative research on the positive aspects of gender/sex experiences. Rao and Donaldson (2015) call for more attention to diversity and minority social locations in positive psychology, a field dedicated to understanding the life-giving and energizing aspects of human experience. The current study represents one example of the important insights into minority experiences, and into social identities in general, afforded by exploring experiences that are fulfilling, affirming, and joyful.

Of course, there is still much to be learned about gender euphoria and related experiences. The characteristics of people who experience gender euphoria, the social and physical conditions that foster it, and its physical and mental health outcomes are all open arenas for further qualitative and/or quantitative inquiry. The data suggest that gender euphoria is not a rare occurrence for those who experience it—many of the participants reported that they experienced it weekly or monthly. This suggests that experience sampling methods, like daily diaries, are one potential way to understand gender euphoria as it happens (rather than through recollection). The current study also provides an important basis for a quantitative scale development of gender euphoria. The participants' experiences and conceptions of euphoria and dysphoria make clear that euphoria is a unique construct and not simply the absence of dysphoria. One measure of gender dysphoria does contain a "gender affirmation" subscale with four items (e.g., “It feels good to live as my affirmed gender”; McGuire et al., 2019). However, the present study’s data suggest gender euphoria is multifaceted—containing at least physical, psychological, and social aspects—and thus warrants a unique scale that captures its multifaceted nature. Regardless of the method, starting from people’s own understandings of their experiences is likely to be fruitful. My findings demonstrate that relying on community knowledge for under-researched phenomena is an invaluable source of data as it centers people’s own voices in describing their lives and can help to avoid imposing meaning onto communities.

Second, my findings have important implications for clinical practice. The fact that participants described immensely positive effects of gender euphoria, including being “life-saving,” underscores the importance and urgency of understanding and cultivating gender euphoria for gender/sex minority communities, who are disproportionately likely to experience depression, suicidal ideation, and anxiety (Connolly et al., 2016; Snow et al., 2019; Valentine & Shipherd, 2018). Clinicians working with clients who experience gender dysphoria might benefit from not only helping to manage the clients’ dysphoria but also to facilitate euphoria by having them explore what brings them joy, contentment, and validation. This can follow a therapeutic strengths-based approach that emphasizes the positive aspects of human life, like happiness, courage, and resilience (Padesky & Mooney, 2012). As some participants mentioned, gender euphoria as a term is not even widely known within gender/sex minority communities. It may therefore be beneficial to clients to merely introduce the term to them and have them reflect on its place in their lives.

The gender minority stress and resilience model is one important framework for understanding the potential role of gender euphoria in mental and physical health. Based on the minority stress model for sexual minorities (Brooks, 1981; Meyer, 1995), this model posits that gender minorities experience unique stressors that are both distal (e.g., misgendering, violence, rejection) and proximal (e.g., internalized transphobia, identity concealment) with negative impacts on mental health (Hendricks & Testa, 2012; Testa et al., 2015). In addition to stressors, the model also incorporates resiliencies among gender minority people, including community connection and pride, that buffer against stress-related effects on mental health. However, models and measures of gender minority stress and resilience have yet to incorporate gender euphoria, and my research is suggestive of potential avenues for doing so.

One avenue for considering gender euphoria and gender minority stress is that additional resilience factors beyond community connectedness and pride could exist in the inverse of stress factors. The participants described many experiences of gender euphoria, such as affirmation through correct gendering as echoed in other studies (Pulice-Farrow, Bravo, et al., 2019), that were the opposite of the stressors proposed by this model, such as non-affirmation (Hendricks & Testa, 2012). Another possibility is that gender euphoria may act as a *mechanism* by which resilience factors buffer against stress. Affect is a strong predictor of physical health, mental health, and life satisfaction (Kuppens et al., 2008; Layous et al., 2014; Xu et al., 2015). The present study's participants reported gender euphoria as joy, and these feelings may increase positive affect in general and/or reduce the impact of negative experiences on affect. However, gender euphoria may also have more complex links to gender minority stress. Some participants noted that euphoric experiences can actually highlight their *dysphoria*. Experiences of gender euphoria could therefore have what might seem to be paradoxical connections with minority stress and not reflect interactions between stressors and resiliencies.

My findings also have implications for the medicalization of trans and nonbinary experiences more generally. The participants' diverse experiences indicate the continued need for the social and institutional development away from the dysphoria-centered medical model of gender/sex minority experience, without erasing the importance of dysphoria itself for many. While the shift from Gender Identity Disorder to Gender Dysphoria in the *DSM-5* was intended to reduce the pathologization of trans identity, trans people often still protest its inclusion in the *DSM* at all (Johnson, 2019; Whalen, n.d.). While some trans people strategically use this medical model to access healthcare and make their experiences legible to cisgender people, many often disagree with the medical framing of dysphoria as an illness located inherently in trans experiences rather than as the distress produced by living in a cisnormative society (Johnson, 2019). A wider recognition of the importance of gender *euphoria* in people's lives may help decenter dysphoria in medical contexts in favor of a more multifaceted understanding of gender/sex experiences that can include but does not necessitate dysphoria to access gender affirming services (should they be wanted).

In my research, some participants indicated that euphoria may be preferable as a central component of gender/sex minority experience compared to dysphoria. In making this argument, some claimed it is more universal. Likely, neither euphoria *nor* dysphoria should be seen as prescriptively central in a universal sense. Instead, the centrality of euphoria to some participants points to the ways that dysphoria is not centered for everyone. My results further impact the ways that dysphoria is centered, including as a within-individual illness. Many of the participants described social experiences as the origin of their euphoria, though many also experienced it in the absence of other people. This highlights the importance of the social environment in producing affective gender/sex experiences. Clinical conceptualizations of gender/sex minority experience would therefore do well to incorporate the importance of the social environment and to listen to trans people's own conceptualizations of their dysphoric and euphoric experiences.

Relatedly, the current study provides support for continued policy and social change to support people of all gender/sexes. I propose, as others have, that the fight for transgender rights can be framed not only as reductions in gender-related harm, but also more equitable access to gender-related joy and pleasure. For example, Ashley and Ells (2018) propose that gender euphoria can be just as legitimate a justification for transition-related medical care as gender dysphoria, and should thus be covered under private and public health insurance. In support of this argument, some of the current study's participants described euphoria as the guiding force for their transition, including decisions such as starting hormones and obtaining surgery. Additionally, given the benefits of gender euphoria in the context of a violently transphobic society (James et al., 2016), all people can and should work to construct a society in which gender euphoria can be freely sought and nurtured.

Conclusion

There is little published research on gender euphoria despite its importance to gender/sex minority communities. My qualitative survey provides a fuller understanding of this experience for use in research, clinical practice, and social change. Participants described gender euphoria as a joyful feeling of rightness and experienced it in relation to their bodies, minds, and social lives. It is clear from these data that some people experience not only a "push" away from their assigned gender/sex, but also or instead a "pull" towards gender/sexed aspects that feel more authentic and enjoyable. With this community-oriented knowledge, my study advances psychological understandings of gender/sex minority experience by recognizing that discomfort is not its only or main feature—inherent to these experiences are also affirmation, satisfaction, and joy.

Chapter 3

Gender Pleasure Focus Groups

With Study 2, I aimed to flesh out experiences of gender pleasure that go beyond gender euphoria by conducting focus groups exploring gender pleasure with gender/sex/ual minorities. In Study 1, I explored gender euphoria as a concept and experience. I found that participants (who were all gender/sex/ual minorities) conceptualized and experienced gender euphoria as powerfully positive and related to their gender identities, gender expressions, sexed bodies, and gendered social lives. Participants described a wide range of experiences that elicited gender euphoria, including biomedical transition, wearing affirming clothing, others using their correct pronouns, and self-affirmation; this broadly aligned with the individual and interactional domains of gender as a social structure (Risman, 2004). Many participants conceptualized gender euphoria as mostly relevant to gender/sex minority communities, especially as it originated in these communities. Some cisgender participants did describe positive gender/sex experiences but were hesitant to label them as gender euphoria because, to them, the term seemed specific to gender/sex minority contexts. This evidence supports my contention that gender euphoria should be reserved for describing specific transgender and nonbinary experiences. With Study 2, then, I aimed to broaden our understanding of gender pleasure to include cisgender folks and other kinds of positive gender/sex experiences beyond gender euphoria in a new sample of gender/sex/ual minorities.

Gender/Sex and Sexual Minorities' Experiences of Gender

I focused on gender/sex/ual minority experiences as the next step in exploring gender pleasure because research has demonstrated that minoritization produces distinct features of gender/sex that likely affect people's positive experiences. Gender/sex minorities in particular experience gender, both internally and socially, in ways shaped by cisheteronormative societal structures and beliefs. Transgender and nonbinary people are often subject to intense social scrutiny, regulation, and violence for their gender identities and expressions (Dietert & Dentice, 2013; Galupo et al., 2014; James et al., 2016). Many also experience dysphoria arising from conflicts between gender/sexed aspects of their lives, including how they are treated or perceived by others in contrast to how they view themselves (Galupo, Pulice-Farrow, & Lindley, 2020; Pulice-Farrow, Cusack, et al., 2019). But, as I demonstrated in Study 1 and as others have demonstrated, gender/sex minorities also experience gender euphoria and resilience (Bradford et al., 2021; Cosgrove et al., 2021; Lambrou et al., 2020). This constellation of gendered experiences suggests that gender/sex inheres unique meanings, processes, and impacts for trans and nonbinary people.

Cisnormative gender regulation, however, does not only affect gender/sex minorities. Gender theorists have long argued that heterosexuality is essential to Western societies' schemas of what it means to be a man or a woman (Bem, 1981; Butler, 1990, 1996). Consequently, those who do not or cannot claim exclusive heterosexuality have their legitimacy as women or men questioned. Indeed, the regulation of sexuality is often accomplished through the regulation of gender expression and vice versa (Baams et al., 2013; Martin-Storey, 2016; Pascoe, 2005; Renold, 2002). This means that sexual minorities, even cisgender ones, must contend with gender policing, making gender salient (sometimes painfully) for many cisgender sexual minorities (Pollitt et al., 2019). However, these forms of social control also provide opportunities for “pushback” or resistance. For example, sexual minorities sometimes use drag as a way to express gender in creative ways, dismantle cisheteronormative gendered expectations, and explore their own gender identities (Egner & Maloney, 2016; Levitt et al., 2018; Shapiro, 2007). Some LGBTQ+ people also use femme or butch identities to reclaim minoritized gender expressions as a source of power, authenticity, and community (Blair & Hoskin, 2016; Eves, 2004; Feinberg, 1993; Hoskin & Taylor, 2019; Nestle, 1987; Rothblum, 2010). Altogether, this evidence suggests that gender/sex/ual minorities have particular relationships to gender/sex that are shaped by power and oppression, but also resistance and creativity. I theorized, then, that gender/sex/ual minorities were uniquely positioned to articulate their gender pleasure experiences in contrast to negative ones, and thus offered a logical next step for exploring this construct.

Intersectional Considerations for Gender Pleasure

Many factors beyond gender/sex or sexuality may affect experiences of gender pleasure. Intersectional theory and research has demonstrated that what it means to be a woman, for example, varies according to other axes of a person’s social location, like their race/ethnicity or disability status (Cole, 2009; Crenshaw, 1991). These axes form a “matrix of domination” in which axes of oppression (e.g., racism, sexism) intersect to produce unique constellations of privilege and disadvantage across intersections (Collins, 2000). From an intersectional perspective, gender/sex is co-constructed with other dimensions in ways that entangle their contributions and the forms that oppression on these bases take. Therefore, it is important to pay attention to the ways in which gender/sex experiences differ across and/or are co-constituted by social locations and how social inequalities (e.g., racialized transphobia, as well as racism and transphobia) influence these experiences and one another.

Race/ethnicity, or racialization, is one salient factor that affects the gender norms individuals must contend with. For example, Black women often report feeling compelled to pay particular attention to their gender expression to act as a role model for other women of color, as well as to transform racial stereotypes that position Black women as not feminine enough (Dellinger & Williams, 1997; Weitz, 2001). For example, some wear Afros or dreadlocks as intentional protest against a misogynoir system in which Black women are expected to conform to white standards of beauty (Bailey, 2014; Weitz, 2001). Conversely, Asian men face stereotypes of hyperfemininity compared to white men (Schug et al., 2015). For queer Asian men, this feminization is compounded by stereotypes of femininity for gay men. As such, queer Asian men report managing this double stigma by either presenting a hypermasculine gender expression, such as with masculine clothing or muscle building, or elevating their femininity through drag (Han, 2009). Thus, the stereotypes that are placed upon racial/ethnic minorities and their navigation of these stereotypes can affect expressions of gender, and, theoretically, experiences of that gender expression.

Research centering racialized trans people demonstrates how racist stereotypes and social structures can impact their gender/sex experiences in unique ways. For example, trans men of color often face a paradoxical relationship with transition: on one hand they may experience joy from embodying or being seen as their gender/sex but, on the other, they must face the racialized realities of discrimination against men of color. Black trans men report experiencing more intense surveillance in stores after transitioning due to racist stereotypes of Black men as criminal (Dozier, 2005). Yet, this treatment signals that their manhood has been understood and thus may feel affirming. In one study of trans identity development, a Black trans man made this point succinctly when he noted, “I knew I was passing because white women were uncomfortable around me" (Fiani & Han, 2018, p. 6). Additionally, as noted in Chapter 2, racialized minorities and/or people with low incomes often face substantial structural barriers to obtaining transition-related healthcare (James et al., 2016; Snow et al., 2019), making access to gender pleasure inequitable across race/ethnicity and class (and likely other axes of social location).

Beyond stereotypes, race/ethnicity is an important axis to consider for gender pleasure as gender identities and experiences themselves vary across race/ethnicity and nation[7]. For example, the "stud" identity sits at the intersection of being assigned female at birth, having a masculine gender, and being a racial/ethnic minority (Kuper et al., 2014). Similar to butch identities originating from white, working class, lesbian communities (Nestle, 1987), the stud identity emerges from subcultures structured by race and class. In First Nations contexts, the identity of Two Spirit signifies a "suprabinary" gender (gender beyond woman/man) and foregrounds Indigenous spirituality and culture rather than Settler notions of LGBTQ identity categories (Robinson, 2020). The identities of butch, stud, and Two Spirit make clear that race/ethnicity and nation co-constitutes gender/sex identities and experiences. Importantly, many people of color have an understanding of this co-constitution—all of the participants in Singh's (2013) study of trans youth of color said they could not separate their racial/ethnic identity from their gender identity. These intersections between gender/sex and race/ethnicity, in addition to gendered experiences of racism, suggest that gender pleasure may be inflected with race/ethnicity and racism for gender/sex/ual minorities of color. Of course, white LGBTQ+ people's identities are also co-constituted with their race/ethnicity, though the ways in which white people's experiences are inflected by their whiteness is often invisible or ignored by them (Case et al., 2012; Pratto & Stewart, 2012) and thus may not be as easily or willingly articulated. Therefore, to better understand how these various intersections affect gender pleasure, in Study 2 I included race/ethnicity as an important consideration in the study's design and analysis.

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[7] Of course, many cultures have various gender identities and structures beyond Western ideas of woman and man (e.g., hijras in India; Nanda, 1986). However, I limit my discussion of gender across race/ethnicity to Western contexts as my samples in both studies were from the U.S. and Canada.

Current Study: Qualitative Focus Groups Exploring Gender Pleasure with Gender/Sex/ual Minorities

With Study 2, I aimed to better understand gender/sex/ual minorities' gender pleasure via online focus groups. Focus groups are well-suited to exploring the breadth of poorly understood phenomena, as participants are able to relate to and build off of each other's experiences (Braun & Clarke, 2013). Online focus groups are particularly useful for the exchange of information between people, and participants can feel less inhibited in discussing sensitive topics than in-person methods (Farquhar, 1999; Schneider et al., 2002). Furthermore, gender/sex/ual minorities often identify online interaction with other gender/sex/ual minorities as crucial for their identity formation (Cavalcante, 2016; Gagné et al., 1997; Schudson & van Anders, 2019), and thus an online focus group might provide a familiar context in which to discuss gender-related experiences.

The sample and method of Study 2 expanded beyond Study 1 in several ways. First, Study 1 included only those who were familiar with the term gender euphoria. With Study 2, I recruited gender/sex and sexual minorities who may or may not have already had a mental framework (like "gender euphoria" provides) for their positive gendered experiences. Second, as participants in Study 1 conceptualized gender *euphoria* as relevant mostly to trans and nonbinary people, I included cisgender sexual minorities to understand gender *pleasure* more broadly. Third, Study 1's qualitative survey method did not allow for follow-up questions. Focus groups, in contrast, allow researchers to ask participants to expand on their experiences, providing for a broader understanding of gender pleasure. And lastly, the majority of participants in Study 1 were white. As reviewed above, race/ethnicity is an important social axis that inflects people's gender/sex experiences. In Study 2, I recruited for diversity in race/ethnicity and created dedicated focus groups for participants of color.

Methods

Recruitment and Screening

I recruited participants via paid advertisements on Facebook and free advertisements on Reddit specifically aimed at LGBTQ+ communities. I e-mailed interested participants (i.e., those who contacted me) individualized links to a screener survey. After giving their informed consent, participants had to confirm the following eligibility criteria: that they were 18 years of age or older; identified as LGBTQ+, of trans experience, and/or same-gender-loving; lived in the US or Canada; had access to the Internet and a computer or tablet; and were willing to participate in an online text-based focus group about their gender-related experiences. They then answered a series of demographic questions and indicated their availability for a focus group. All research activities were approved by Queen's University's General Research Ethics Board and were deemed exempt from regulation by the University of Michigan Institutional Review Board.

I invited eligible participants who completed the screener (*N* = 639) to sign up for focus groups in a separate Qualtrics survey. Participants could choose to sign up for one of 12 groups. These 12 groups were organized into four categories (with three timeslots per group): gender minority people of color, general gender minority (open to all race/ethnicities), gender majority people of color, and general gender majority (open to all race/ethnicities). I created separate gender majority and minority categories as experiences with transition, trans identity, and/or nonbinary experiences may uniquely impact the experience of gender pleasure. I recognize that "majority" and "minority" are complex and overlapping categories. For example, some people are both cisgender and nonbinary and some do not identify as either cisgender or transgender (Barker & Richards, 2015; Beischel et al., 2022; Darwin, 2020; Schudson et al., 2017), so this dichotomization is imperfect. Thus, I wanted to enable participants to choose the best group for their identities and experiences. I did this by labeling the groups as "majority" and "minority" and giving examples of who may be in each (e.g., "cisgender men" and "agender", respectively), but I refrained from providing definitive inclusion/exclusion rules. I encouraged participants to join whichever group they might be more comfortable in and to contact the researchers if they felt there was not a group for them (which no one did). People of color were also able to choose whether they would like to be in a group with other people of color or a more general group. I included this option to allow participants of color the choice to discuss their experiences, especially those related to race/ethnicity and racism, in an environment where others may share these experiences. However, some participants of color may not have wanted their race/ethnicity to define their group for my study, and thus they had the option to be in a general group. Almost all participants of color chose to be in the groups for people of color.

I compared the groups participants chose with their screener responses to verify the fit of the group they chose. I contacted 16 people whose screener responses did not seem to match the group they chose. At participants' request, I changed four participants to the group indicated by the screener responses and confirmed two participants' choices to be in their correct groups. Five participants did not respond and five responded in ways that made clear they were either automated or done by the same person. I did not invite these ten participants into the final focus groups. I sent invitation emails to all other participants who signed up for groups to confirm their sign up and give them information for how to participate.

Materials

In the screening survey, participants answered several open-ended and multiple-choice questions about their gender/sex (Beischel et al., 2022). Throughout these questions, I defined four key terms for participants: *transgender*, *cisgender*, *binary*, and *nonbinary*. First, participants provided open-ended responses to "What is your current gender? (e.g., woman, agender)." Second, I asked, "When we describe who participated in our study: Which of these categories would you like us to include you in?" Options included: *A trans/transgender category*, *A cisgender category*, *Neither cisgender nor transgender describe me*, or *Unsure*. If participants chose either of these last two options, they were able to elaborate in a text box. Lastly, I asked them, "And, which of these categories would you like us to include you in?" Options included: *Binary, Nonbinary, Neither binary nor nonbinary describe me,* or *Unsure*. Again, if participants chose either of these last two options, they were able to elaborate in a text box. These multiple-choice questions allowed me to arrange coded open-ended responses into the "Gender/Sex 3x3" (Beischel et al., 2022) with intersecting dimensions of gender trajectory (cisgender/transgender/allogender [neither cisgender nor transgender]) and binary relation (binary/nonbinary/allobinary [neither binary nor nonbinary]) (see "Participant Demographics" section below and Table 3-1).

In the screener, I also asked participants to report on other demographics via open-ended responses, including age, religion, sexual orientation/identity, and race/ethnicity, which I then categorized (see "Participant Demographics" section below and Table 3-2). Participants also answered categorical questions to assess employment and student status, income, education level, country of residence, and disability identification (see Table 3-2).

Participant Demographics

There were 639 participants who completed the screener. Based on their focus group sign-ups, I sent 90 participants invitations for a focus group and 65 of these participated (*M* age = 31.7 years, *SD* = 11.0, range = 18-64). I coded these 65 participants' free-response gender/sexes into the Gender/Sex 3x3 (Table 3-1; Beischel et al., 2022). I also coded race/ethnicity and sexual orientation/identity from free-response questions. These demographics as well as country of residence, disability identification, and education can be found in Table 3-2.

Table 3-1. *Open-ended gender/sexes arranged in the Gender 3x3 (Beischel et al., 2022)*

	Binary	**Nonbinary**	**Allobinary**
Cisgender	Man/Male 16 Woman/Female 13 Cis Woman 1	Woman/Female 3 Genderfluid 1	Woman/Female 1
Transgender	Man/Male 2 Transmasculine/gender non-conforming 1	Nonbinary 10 Agender 3 Demi-woman/genderfluid 1 Genderfluid 1 Genderqueer 1 Nonbinary, bakla 1 Trans man 1 Trans man, 2spirit 1 Two-spirit 1	Transmasculine 1
Allogender		Nonbinary 3 Genderqueer 1 Questioning 1 Non-binary transmasc demiboi 1	

Table 3-2. *Demographics of focus group participants*

Variable	*n*
Race/ethnicity[a]	
White	28
Multiracial/Biracial	6
African American/Black	4
East Asian (Taiwanese-Canadian, Chinese)	4
Southeast Asian (Filipino)	4
Asian/Asian American	3
Indigenous/First Nations/Métis	3
Indigenous and white	3
Hispanic and white	2
South Asian	2
Black and Mi'kmaw	1
Black-mixed	1
Merina (African-American/Asian-American)	1
Middle Eastern	1
Missing	1
Country of residence	
Canada	36
USA	28
Sexual orientation/identity[a]	
Gay	19
Queer	12
Bisexual	8
Lesbian	8
Pansexual/Panromantic	7
Asexual	1
Bisexual and queer	1
Demiromantic asexual	1
Demisexual	1
Demisexual and bisexual	1
Heterosexual	1
Pansexual and queer	1
Queer, grayace, polyromantic, and	1
polyamorous	1
Queer, polysexual, and gay	1
Questioning	1
Disability identification	
No disability	40
Disability	24
Education	
Less than high school	1
Some high school	1
High school graduate	3

Some college/university	16
Finished training other than college (e.g., vocational school, trade school)	1
Graduated from college (in the US: community college)	9
Graduated from university (in the US: 4-year college)	11
Some graduate or professional school	6
Received master's degree	14
Received professional degree (e.g., M.D., LL.B.)	2

[a] I categorized race/ethnicity and sexual orientation/identity from answers to free-response questions

Focus Group Procedure

All 12 focus groups lasted 90-120 minutes each and occurred in July 2021. Thus, these groups occurred in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, and I took this into account throughout study design (e.g., I asked whether the pandemic had shaped their experiences) and analysis (e.g., I noted when certain experiences seemed related to the pandemic). The moderator and participants interacted via Adobe Connect, a chat-based platform wherein focus group members interacted only with written text. Previous research has demonstrated that chat-based focus groups produce similar insights as face-to-face groups (Woodyatt et al., 2016). They also have several benefits, including more equitable discussion (as interruption is not a factor) and the elimination of transcription. Participants reported greatly enjoying the method, especially in the context of "Zoom fatigue" caused by the ubiquity of teleconferencing during the pandemic. Specifically, they were grateful that they did not need to monitor their appearance on a webcam and liked being able to articulate their thoughts in writing before sharing them. One participant also reported that they could not have been in a group where they had to participate verbally as they were not out to members of their household.

I moderated the general focus groups and my research assistant Jane Mao, who identifies as a gender/sex minority and a racial/ethnic minority, moderated the groups for participants of color. Jane acted as a supporter during my focus groups to assist with any technical difficulties and I acted as the supporter during theirs. The supporter and the moderator met after each session to discuss how the group went and any potential improvements for the following groups. The moderator facilitated their focus groups in a semi-structured format by asking key questions and following up as necessary (for full moderator guide see Appendix 1). The goal of these focus groups was to understand participants' diverging and common experiences of gender pleasure.

The focus group started with asking about positive feelings from behaviors and experiences related to gender expression, such as clothing choices, hairstyles, accessories, and so on. Questions then expanded into other individual-level domains that might produce gender pleasure, like bodily experiences, as well as experiences at the interactional level, such as interactions with friends, family, and strangers. In the beginning of the groups, we encouraged participants to bring up their other social identities/locations (beyond gender/sex) as relevant, and we also asked specifically about these near the end. We also asked whether the COVID-19 pandemic affected their gender/sex experiences in general.

Moderators used follow-up questions to encourage participants to elaborate on key experiences, to contextualize when/where they have had these experiences, to clarify the valence of experiences, and to relate their experiences to their gender/sexes if the connections were not clear. Moderators adopted a relational tone to build rapport with participants. This included affirming participants' experiences, sharing their own relevant experiences, and generally using colloquial language when appropriate.

Analytic Method

I conducted a reflexive thematic analysis (RTA) of the focus group transcripts. RTA is a useful method for exploring patterns of meaning across accounts of experiences (Braun & Clarke, 2006, 2021, 2022). RTA can be either experiential or critical and inductive or deductive (Terry et al., 2017). I used an experiential, mixed deductive/inductive RTA. By experiential I mean that analysis focused on participants' comments to engage with what they thought, felt, and did, rather than adopting a critical orientation that focuses on participants' comments to engage with language as constructing reality. For the deductive portion, I included two major codes suggested by Study 1: intrapersonal and interpersonal experiences. Inductive coding also allowed for analysis of other kinds of experiences that did not clearly fit these domains.

RTA as a method is theoretically flexible (Braun & Clarke, 2021, 2022), and in this study the philosophy of hermeneutical phenomenology underpinned my analyses. Hermeneutical (or interpretive) phenomenology, based on the writings of 20th century philosopher Martin Heidegger, is concerned both with describing people's lived experiences and interpreting them in the context of their "lifeworlds," or their social and physical environments (Neubauer et al., 2019; Reiners, 2012). In the context of my study, I was interested in participants' specific experiences of gender pleasure, how these experiences felt, and how these experiences related to their cultural environments. Accordingly, in the Results section I provide descriptions of participants' experiences, staying fairly close to the words they used. In the Discussion section I then interpret these experiences in light of my broader understandings of how gender/sex and intersecting identities and systems of power operate societally (i.e., through an intersectional lens; Cole, 2009; Collins, 2000; Crenshaw, 1991). Hermeneutical phenomenology includes a commitment to understanding how the researchers' own prior experiences and perspectives shape the research process (Neubauer et al., 2019; Reiners, 2012). Thus, I attempted to maintain awareness of my own life experiences and scholarly knowledge throughout data collection and analysis. One example of this is reflected in my choice to relate to participants personally in the focus groups (as described in "Focus Group Procedure" above) and in my inclusion of deductive codes based on Study 1.

Procedurally, Jane and I engaged in RTA in a collaborative, iterative process. RTA involves six major phases (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Terry et al., 2017). First, we familiarized ourselves with the data by reading and re-reading transcripts of the focus groups and making casual observational notes. Second, we generated codes that summarized the data with meaningful labels that captured the overarching content of the data, focusing on people's positive experiences (i.e., we did not code experiences that were only negative). We independently coded a portion of the transcripts then met to compare codes and iteratively refine the coding scheme. In line with reflexive RTA, we conducted this process not to generate a statistically reliable codebook, but rather as a way to collaboratively think through the meaning of our codes and the data (Braun & Clarke, 2021). Third, we constructed preliminary themes by reading through the coded data and generating central organizing concepts that represented participants' experiences. In this step, we paid attention to differences and similarities between groups to understand how gender/sex and race/ethnicity intersected with gender pleasure. Fourth, we reviewed potential themes by looking back at the codes and the original data to evaluate whether the themes represented the data well. Fifth, we labeled themes with a clear, descriptive name. Sixth and lastly, I produced the report by elaborating on the kinds of experiences within each theme and using illustrative quotes where appropriate. I lightly edited some quotes for typos, and when presenting interactions between multiple people in the group, I removed irrelevant intervening messages for clarity. With each quote, I list their self-identified race/ethnicity, sexuality, gender/sex, and age along with their chosen pseudonyms to provide context for the quotes. I specified whether the women and men were cis or trans based on their categorical responses to the gender trajectory question (no women or men were allogender). All other identifiers came from the free-response demographic questions.

Results

I generated four interrelated themes from the focus group data: (1) Accepting one's self and living in authenticity and freedom provide joy, relief, and comfort (Figure 3-1a); (2) Interpersonal gendered experiences that are affirming and free from judgement provide validation and belonging (Figure 3-1b); (3) Gender norms and intersecting social locations and systems of power shape experiences of gender pleasure (Figure 3-1c); and (4) Gender pleasure involves purely positive experiences, relief from negative experiences, and increases in positive affect (Figure 3-2).

Theme 1: Accepting One's Self and Living in Authenticity and Freedom Provide Joy, Relief, and Comfort

Participants reported experiencing diverse forms of gender pleasure from actions and experiences generated within themselves. I call this level "intrapersonal" to highlight that, though these kinds of experiences may involve other people, they originate in a person's relationship with themselves (Figure 3-1a). In this theme, I see these pleasures as involving two subthemes: self-acceptance and affirmation as well as living in authenticity and freedom. These occurred at four levels, listed here from the most internal to the most external: mind, bodily composition, bodily actions, and bodily adornments (Figure 3-1a).

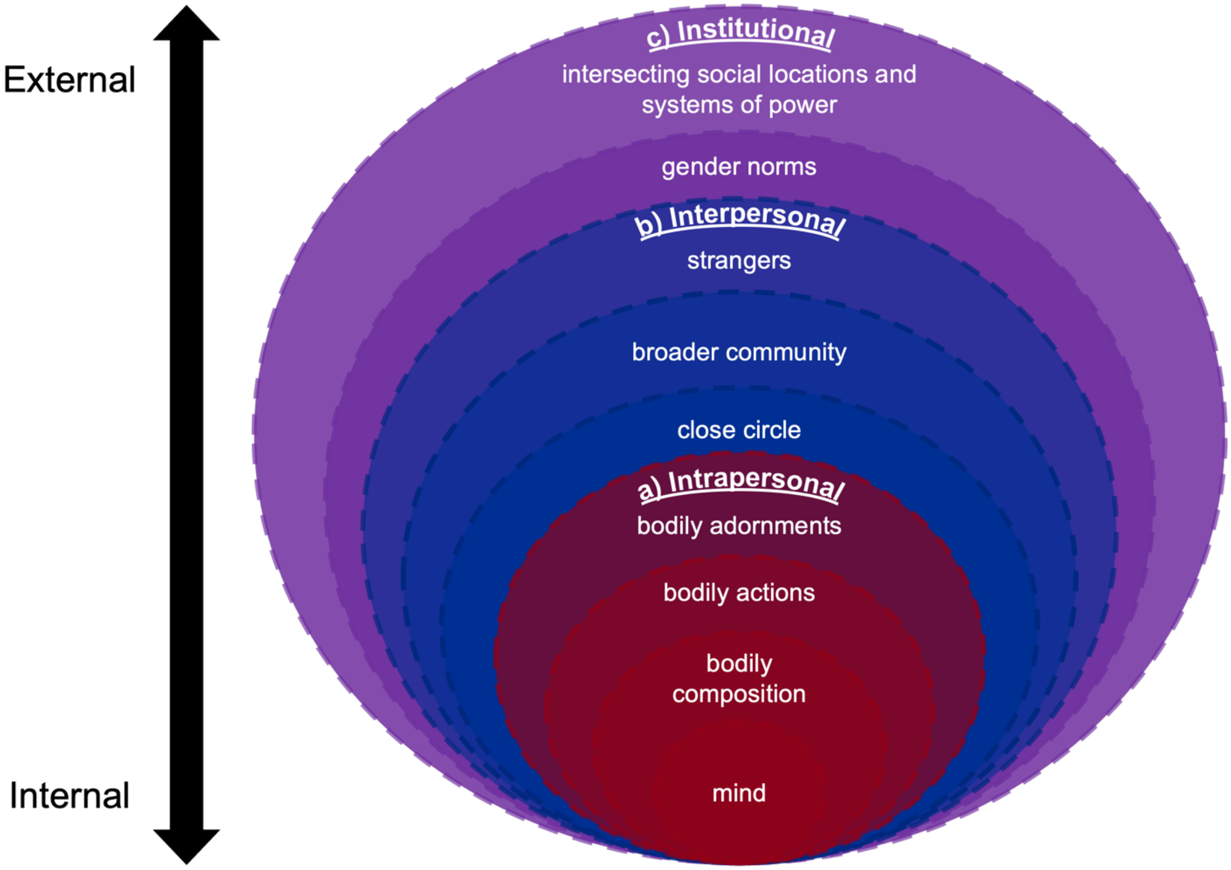

External
Internal
c) Institutional
intersecting social locations and systems of power
gender norms
b) Interpersonal
strangers
broader community
close circle
a) Intrapersonal
bodily adornments
bodily actions
bodily composition
mind

Figure 3-1. *Levels of gender pleasure from most internal to most external: a) intrapersonal experiences, or experiences generated from within participants, b) interpersonal experiences, or experiences generated from people within participants' social environments, c) institutional experiences, or experiences involving societal level structures.*

Self-Acceptance and Affirmation

The most deeply internal form of gender pleasure participants recounted might be their ability to accept and affirm their own identities and experiences. This often involved appreciating what their bodies had to offer. They liked feeling that their face, body, voice, height, reproductive capacity, and more matched their sense of their gender/sex and what they wanted to present to the world. For example, Alex (Métis, pansexual, trans man, 19) said, "i love that my body can be comfortable for me and also make me a parent... im proud saying im a trans man and that i also wanna carry my own children and experience pregnancy." Participants sometimes explicitly contrasted their own self-comfort with others' perceptions. These participants viewed their self-esteem as rooted in themselves first and foremost: e.g., “I really have a devil-may-care attitude about what people think I should do with my body” (Beyoncé, Black, gay, cis man, 25).

Participants also found joy in exploring and learning about their identities as well as comfort in finding identities that worked for them. Sometimes this involved a kind of self-reflection, or looking back on their own development. As Tygr (Indigenous and white, queer, nonbinary, 37) said, “Yeah I spent 15 years in punk bands at a time when the riot grrl movement was happening. Seeing the evolution between that me, which is still sometimes present, to the non-binary identity and the changes in my music and art styles are pretty cool.”

Another internal, psychological experience of gender pleasure derived from reflecting on life positives. Participants sometimes recounted that positive experiences were not often at the forefront of their minds when they thought about their gender/sexes, and that it felt good to bring positivity to their awareness. Some participants specifically referenced the focus group as an enjoyable opportunity for this kind of reflection.

Living in Authenticity and Freedom

The other way participants experienced gender pleasure intrapersonally was through living in accordance with their own sense of their authentic self even if it went against the grain. This was especially true when participants felt thoroughly free to express themselves how they wanted.

One way living authentically manifested was through bodily transformations. Participants dyed, cut, and grew out their hair (both on their heads and bodies). They tattooed and pierced their skin. And, gender/sex minorities in particular obtained hormones and surgery, and they wore packers (an object in one’s pants to be, or facilitate the feeling and appearance of, a penis) and binders (a tight wrapping around the chest to be, or facilitate the feeling and appearance of being, flat-chested). For some, these bodily changes felt good in that they helped close the gap between their ideal selves and actual selves and/or made people feel at home in their bodies, sometimes for the first time in their lives. For example, Dagon (white, pansexual, agender, 33) and Dino Rex (white, queer/grayace/polyromantic/polyamorous, transmasculine, 35) had quite similar experiences with their top surgeries (i.e., removal of chest tissue) that exemplified this feeling:

> Moderator (Will Beischel, they/them): Can yall think of the BEST you have felt in your skin in relation to your gender? Or something that just really stands out to you?
>
> Dagon (They/Them): first swim in the ocean naked after my top surgery
>
> Dino Rex (He/Him): right after top surgery. Waking up and for the first time in my whole life I felt peace
>
> Dino Rex (He/Him): and then the next year, going into the pacific ocean. i hadnt been in water in 10 yrs and being able to SEE myself. it was a whole new relationship to my body
>
> Moderator: @Dagon that sounds lovely. Can you remember what emotions you were experiencing?
>
> Dagon (They/Them): First time I felt like "home" was a concept i could understand

These transformations were also a form of self-affirmation, and they facilitated social perceptions of participants' gender/sexes that coincided with their senses of self. They also facilitated social perceptions of their queer sexualities, especially for gender majority participants. For example, Maya (South Asian, queer, cis woman, 25) said that her piercings and tattoos helped her feel happy about her gender because they made her "feel more visibly queer." Importantly, transformations of the body were not always about moving away from participants' assigned gender/sexes. For example, Charlotte (white, gay, cis woman, 26) said, “I have found bras that make me look more flat chested and I find that giving myself that shape makes me more comfortable. I love having breasts, I just don't like them being so pronounced.” Thus, comfort in their bodies was often the goal of these transformations, whether that be within or away from their assigned gender/sexes.

Participants also enjoyed their gender/sexes through bodily actions. They recounted various acts of creation as ways of expressing their gender/sexes and feeling at home in their bodies: singing, dancing, building, making art, and gardening. On gardening, Riz (mixed, queer, nonbinary, 23) said, “gender is such a human constructed concept and there is something about connecting [to] nature that breaks free from that.” They also described how engaging in sports, various competitions, and exercising (e.g., lifting weights) also affirmed their gender and made them feel strong. Aubergine (mixed race/Middle Eastern, bisexual, cis allobinary woman, 30) also described how she finds joy from “just standing in front of a mirror and swaggering around… kinda like ‘tough guy swagger’ looks.” Other bodily actions included playing video games and having sex.

Adorning the body to manage appearance was perhaps the most salient kind of intrapersonal experience participants recounted. This was accomplished through objects such as clothing, shoes, accessories, and cosmetics. Sometimes clothing choices were made as an intentional way of outwardly expressing an internal sense of gender/sex. For example, Luna (Black, lesbian, cis woman, 24) said, “When I wear alternative clothing or generally dark makeup, I feel like me. I feel like what I am on the inside can finally be free.” This was true both for special events (e.g., weddings) and more quotidian contexts (e.g., workplaces). Other times, participants used clothing and other items to experiment with their appearance—to try on various expressions and see what felt right. As Beyoncé (Black, gay, cis man, 25) said, “I've just started experimenting with clothing, makeup, underwear, and footwear that I wouldn't typically wear and it's been liberating.” It could also be a playful process, reminiscent of “playing dress up” as children. Some participants expressed that whether certain items would make them feel good or not changed across time or context. For example, Lee Alexander (white, queer, nonbinary, 19) said:

> I would love to wear glittery makeup and skirts once in awhile, not all the time though… Depending on the day, it would make me feel cute and glad I was able to wear something feminine (on other days it might make me v dysphoric)

One interesting way some participants phrased the relationship between clothing and their gender was that the clothing helped *induce* gendered feelings (i.e., the external affecting the internal), rather than being an outward expression of an internal self (i.e., the internal affecting the external). For example, WildSweetnCool (white and Hispanic, bisexual, cis woman, 58) said, “i like to wear pretty bras. they *make me feel feminine*” (emphasis added). In other words, she was not saying that she wears bras because she felt feminine but that wearing bras helped *facilitate* feelings of femininity.

Finally, sometimes clothing and other objects were distinctly related to sexuality in addition to gender/sex. For example, Bruce (white, gay, cis man, 40) said, “…in exploring my sexuality, the first time I wore 'sexy underwear' or a jockstrap, I felt like I'd discovered something about myself I had NO idea was there.” This connection also came through in participants’ descriptions of how their appearance management strategies affected their feelings of attractiveness.

Some participants articulated how their clothing choices were often *not* made in relation to their gender, yet sometimes others would make their appearance about gender. This seemed especially true of the cisgender men, who generally had less to say about pleasurable gender expression experiences than other participants. They often expressed a sense of what I call "gender neutrality." As Finn (white, gay, cis man, 29) said, "It's like I was born with a pair of shoes that fit and I never thought to try any others." And, sometimes people used clothes to *de-gender* themselves, as with Arcticdomme (white, bi, cis woman, 54) who said, "I didn't dress to feel good, impress others or appoint a certain way. I just dressed to cover up my parts. I think it helps contribute to a lack of gender identity."

Freedom seemed to be an essential or enhancing component to many of these intrapersonal experiences related to authenticity. Some of the participants' most positive experiences occurred when they felt completely free to express themselves and manage their appearance in whatever way they wanted. For example, Ro (Black-mixed, demisexual, nonbinary, 27) said, "Euphoria for me is not having any spaces where I have to dress in accordance with what others dictate is 'appropriate.'" Participants often stated enjoying dressing "for themselves" and feeling a deep comfort when they could just "be themselves." As Vanessa Violet (Black African/half Nigerian half Ghanian, questioning, nonbinary, 20) put it, "There is a healing dynamic when you just allow yourself to be." This was further evidenced by some participants saying they felt better about their gender/sex when they were alone, away from social surveillance. Interestingly, the COVID-19 pandemic facilitated this solitary exploration and expression as people followed stay-at-home orders and greatly reduced their social interactions. T (Asian American, lesbian, nonbinary, 32) made this point poignantly:

> I think COVID has made me reflect on how soon life can end and now I am all about living on MY expectations instead of others. I am more comfortable in my skin and the urgency of saving humanity makes me realize that accepting yourself can help others accept themselves.

In this quote, I see a shift towards self-determination, and that this shift also can lead to more positive interpersonal experiences, which brings me to the next theme.

Theme 2: Interpersonal Gendered Experiences are Enjoyable When They Provide Feelings of Acceptance, Validation, and Belonging

Participants also reported experiencing many interpersonal kinds of gender pleasure from actions, experiences, and contexts generated by people in their social environments (Figure 3-1b). In Theme 1, experiences were primarily generated from within participants—from how they viewed themselves and how they lived their lives. Theme 2 refers to experiences that occurred because of how others in their social contexts treated participants and/or how others created opportunities for community experiences. In this theme, I see these pleasures as involving two subthemes: validating social perceptions and interactions as well as being in community. They occurred at three social levels (from closest to furthest away) (Figure 3-1b): close circle (e.g., romantic partners, friends, family), broader community (e.g., LGBTQ+ community, racial/ethnic community, sex work community), and strangers.

Validating Social Perceptions and Interactions

Participants experienced considerable interpersonal pleasure when their gender identities and expressions were actively recognized and affirmed by others. This is because the intrapersonal experiences described in Theme 1, though quite important to participants, were often not enough for people to feel fully comfortable in their gender/sexes. Moe (nonbinary, queer, white, 35) exemplified this sentiment:

> I think most of the time I can affirm my identity internally. However, when I am in new environments or in new situations, my anxiety sometimes creeps up and I have a harder time. Even though I know who I am, it still matters how people see me and that affects my sense of self.

These experiences occurred at all three interpersonal levels (close circle, broader community, and strangers; Figure 3-1b), but I note when experiences seemed to occur more often at one level than others.

Many participants made clear that they were quite attuned to whether they were being read or treated as their gender/sex. Gender minorities sometimes referred to this as "passing," and they knew they were being read as their gender/sex through correct pronoun and name usage, gendered titles (e.g., "bro"), and other actions, like not having the door held open for them (for transmasculine participants). Some gender/sex minorities noted that wearing masks because of the COVID-19 pandemic facilitated these experiences by covering certain facial features (e.g., facial hair) that otherwise caused them to be misgendered. Participants who mentioned these kinds of passing experiences often referenced strangers, and this kind of passing was meaningful in that it meant they were successfully conveying their gender/sexes externally. People in participants' broader communities did sometimes affirm their gender/sexes in these ways, but the resulting feeling was less that their gender presentation was "successful" and more a sense of belonging and shared identity. Then, people in participants' close circles provided what I call "deep affirmation," wherein their gender/sexes were understood and affirmed beyond surface-level appearances. Tristan Jude Rowntree (multiracial, queer/polysexual/gay, genderfluid, 38) put this quite beautifully when they said:

> I was able to express myself a bit more the last few years but last year when I met my partner, all of the stars aligned and she saw all of me. Every identity, every part of presentation, every energy shift and she stood by me while I was able to step out whole.

Nonbinary participants' experiences of interpersonal validation were somewhat unique in that they did not often involve "passing" as a particular gender/sex. Rather, these participants found affirmation when people recognized that there are more than two gender/sexes, or at least had difficulty categorizing them as women or men. This was often articulated as finding joy in "confusing others," as exemplified by the following exchange:

> Moderator (Jane Mao, they/them): …so I'm seeing that people like to keep others guessing and that confusion could be fun. Is that correct?
>
> Seb (They/Them): yes! I love being hard to pin down
>
> Thomas (He/They/Il): yes! Transition goals are "optimal cis confusion"
>
> Otter (They/Them): @Jane yeah, kind of making more people aware that you don't have to be gender conforming
>
> Jay (They/Them) 2: it's definitely fun to challenge people about their notions of gender just by existing in front of them lol
>
> Tygr (They/She): Now I like when people wonder if I'm a boy or a girl . Because I'm both and neither
>
> Moderator: What emotions come up for you folks when you "confuse" people?
>
> Otter (They/Them): saying this as sarcastically as possible, but that's the non-binary agenda

Tygr (They/She): I like the challenge. Perhaps that's the rebel in me

Tygr (They/She): It's freeing

Thomas (He/They/Il): joy and amusement

Tygr (They/She): It's knowing I can't be so easily defined

Spanish-speaking nonbinary participants also noted that gender-inclusive/gender-neutral Spanish words like Latinx and elle were gender-affirming.

Other socially validating experiences were expressed by both gender/sex minorities and majorities. Many participants identified gendered compliments as a source of validation, like being called pretty or handsome. Although these compliments and other forms of social validation were gendered, they were also sometimes related to participants' sexualities as well, especially for the gender/sex majority participants. For example, Stevie (cis woman, lesbian white, 25) said, "I look like a walking stereotype and really like when I see other queerfolk recognize me for being gay, it's a fun connection to the community." And, while "passing" as women or men was not a concern for gender/sex majority participants, they still sometimes recognized that they had positive experiences from being read as women or men. For example, Eric (Southeast Asian/Filipino, gay, cis man, 18) said, "I'd say that I do get some satisfaction in being perceived as a man at work since I get taken more seriously." Finally, although positive attention from others was often a source of people's gender pleasure, some participants found *avoiding* people's attention to be their ideal. These participants wanted others to not emphasize their gender/sexes, but rather see them as people first.

Being in Community

Beyond social perception, participants expressed that various aspects of being in community with others (at the levels of both "close circle" and "broader community", see Figure

3-1b) were sources of positive feelings of belonging and shared identity. I distinguish these experiences from the previous section on "Validating Social Perceptions and Interactions" because they have less to do with other people actively affirming participants' gender/sexes (i.e., in an "others → self" direction) and more to do with the interplay between individuals and their communities (i.e., community ↔ self). Participants often talked about LGBTQ+ communities as especially important because people in these communities were usually more likely to see them for who they were and understand their experiences. Other community members mentioned included: community Elders, therapists and doctors, barbers, ravers (people who go to raves), sports teams, BDSM communities, and sex work communities. Participants also often referenced online communities like "Discord channels" and "lesbian TikTok," which were made even more important by the COVID-19 pandemic.

One way participants found pleasure from being in community was in community members providing the freedom and space for participants to be who they were and/or to explore their gender/sexes. As Thomas (Merina, asexual, transmasculine/gender nonconforming, 28) noted:

> I spent a lot of time thinking I was really terrible at being a girl and hating how I looked/thinking I was ugly, until after repeatedly talking to a friend of mine about wanting to wear boys' clothes she was like "You can wear whatever you want. There are gender nonconforming women." And feeling like I had the permission to break free from the rules of femininity was really freeing.

As in the "Living in Authenticity and Freedom" subtheme, participants enjoyed being able to be and express themselves in whatever way they wanted; their communities provided them considerable pleasure when they facilitated this freedom.

Another common way communities provided opportunities for gender pleasure was through what I call “gender role models.” These role models showed participants that certain gendered ways of being were possible and could be positively received by the world. This could be as simple as seeing a stranger express their gender in a way that was seen as delightful, unique, and/or challenging the status quo in a positive way. Historical, fictional, or celebrity figures could also be these role models (from a distance). For example, the pop star Lizzo was a role model for both Jake (Filipino/Asian, gay, cis man, 22) and Alex (Black, lesbian, cis woman, 35):

> Jake (He/Him): Black queer women, friends and celebrities, have done more for me than I could ever thank them for in my life.
>
> Moderator (Jane Mao, they/them): @Jake what have these communities of people done? What emotions have you experienced?
>
> Jake (He/Him): Lizzo. That’s all I can say. Period.
>
> Alex (She/Her/They/Them): Lizzo PERIOD
>
> Moderator: LOVE LIZZO!!!
>
> Moderator: Does Lizzo’s positivity relate to your gender Jake and Alex?
>
> Alex (She/Her/They/Them): Oh absolutely! Lizzo looks like me. It makes me feel affirmed
>
> Jake (He/Him): Absofuckinglutely haha. Unfortunately, I’ve had weird experiences of other people shitting on Lizzo’s body image advocacy, but it’s only ended up reaffirming my current body neutrality stance. Just let people do what makes them feel good about their body without enforcing your standards on them! “Juice” was my turning point

Participants related to these cultural and historical figures because of the similarities between themselves and the figures, as Alex's comment above articulates. Participants also looked up to these figures as examples of how people can live their lives in authentic and/or nonnormative ways. And, they found that they learned about themselves through their encounters with or knowledge of these figures and other community members, and that this learning was a pleasurable experience.

Participants also found pleasure in *being* gender role models to people in their communities. They enjoyed giving people the confidence and space to be themselves, showing them that there are other gendered possibilities, having people look up to them, and raising their children in gender expansive ways. For example, Montana (white/Native, gay, trans man/2 spirit, 18) said, "I've had quite a few friends lightheartedly say that their goal is to present/sound/be like me wrt [with regards to] Gender and that always makes me smile."

Coming out to one's community and/or close circle, both in terms of sexuality and gender/sex, was sometimes seen as a pleasurable experience despite the difficulties it could bring. Sometimes just the act of coming out was seen as pleasurable due to the relief in revealing who they were after a period of concealing. Not surprisingly, coming out was even more pleasurable when received with acceptance and celebration. Coming out was not a linear process for some participants. Instead, they found pleasure in learning about, testing out, and becoming comfortable with new pronouns, identities, and more within their communities in dynamic and evolving ways. This was often facilitated by online communities, especially because of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Evidencing the power of community, many participants mentioned the focus group as a site of interpersonal gender pleasure even though it was brief and anonymous. Some conveyed that they did not have many spaces in which to discuss these kinds of experiences, so they enjoyed hearing from others and expressing their own experiences. As YB (East Asian/Chinese, pansexual panromantic, questioning, 20) said, “to be honest, just being here makes me happy. Hearing about adults older than me thriving & finding peace and support gives me a lot of hope.” And Dagon (white, pansexual, agender, 33) said, “the fact that this is a focus group centered on joy is and of itself a mildly euphoric thing, tbh.” One participant even asked other group members to direct message them their email addresses so they could stay in touch.

Theme 3: Gender Norms and Intersecting Social Locations and Systems of Power Shape Experiences of Gender Pleasure

Throughout participants’ descriptions of their intrapersonal and interpersonal experiences of gender pleasure, I see societal-level norms and systems of power as crucial to understanding the context of these experiences. I call this level “institutional” to highlight the ways that systemic features of society structure gender pleasure (Figure 3-1c). In this theme, participants expressed various relations to societal gender norms, both challenging and being within the norm. These norms were often (but not always) tied to the gender/sexes participants were perceived as, regardless of how they identified. And, participants sometimes specified that the norms they were beholden to were specific to particular intersections they occupied, such as gay men or Asian women. Relatedly, I see intersecting social locations and systems of power as providing the context for all the preceding levels (see Figure 3-1c).

Challenging Gender Norms

Participants expressed that sometimes it feels good to challenge gender norms. Some participants found this challenge pleasurable in and of itself. As Tia (white, bisexual/genderfluid, demi-woman/genderfluid, 33) said, “I feel like the world still has social expectations about what

I should look like - friends included. And I like being able to kick out the box." Sometimes this was because there was a "daring" or "forbidden" aspect to this kind of challenge. Other times, it was pleasurable because it made space for others to be more expansive in their gender/sexes, as with the "gender role models" above. Many said that they felt the best when they released their worry over what other people think about them and whether they were "fitting in" to the norm or not. And Riz (mixed, queer, nonbinary, 23) recognized that simply having positive emotions about their gender/sex challenges norms: "queer as in my identity is radical and goes against the status quo and queer as in my joy is revolutionary because i was never supposed to exist in our current social construct." Lastly, some cisgender women found pleasure in positive comparisons to men. They liked knowing or showing that they can be just as (or more) successful or strong as men.

Being Within Gender Norms

Participants also sometimes found being *within* gender norms pleasurable. Some participants were quite comfortable "in the box." That is, gender norms allowed them the space and safety to engage in certain behaviors and have certain experiences if the norms happened to coincide with what they like to do. For example, Sally (Taiwanese-Canadian, gay, cis woman, 24) said, "Oh another positive for being cisgender female is that I can dress neutral and masculine and people will just assume i'm sporty whereas a male dressing female may face more judgement than me." Some cis women also observed that they liked being able to be more expressive, affectionate, and communal without fear of social backlash. Finally, some cis men observed that they did enjoy the power and status afforded to men, though they usually qualified this with saying that society should not be this way. As Hoboken (multiracial, gay, cis man, 34) said, “On the positive note, (I feel guilty about this, tho) being the male child always gave me favorable status amongst my asian and latino family members.”

Intersecting Social Locations and Systems of Power

Participants often discussed how their experiences of gender/sex intersected with their other identities and social locations (beyond gender/sex), sometimes explicitly recognizing how power is embedded in these social locations and other times not. Many intersectional experiences people discussed were quite negative. In fact, it was often difficult for us as moderators to get participants to describe how their intersecting identities, especially the ones that were subjugated, interacted with their *positive* experiences. As Forrest (Southeast Asian/Filipinx, queer, nonbinary/bakla, 24) said, “this makes me sound like such a downer but the intersections my gender has with other identities aren't usuallyyyy positive - just like extra barriers lol. i mean positive in terms of like creating a more unique and wonderful life for myself but it's usually like 👀”. Despite this, we were able to elicit some ways that their intersections provided positive experiences, or at least contributed to a “more unique and wonderful life,” and I focus on these experiences in this theme.

I organized responses into three subthemes: intersectional communities, coming into self, and privilege.

Intersectional Communities

Intersecting identities and systems of power often provided uniquely enriching and important community experiences for participants. The participants of color frequently identified that LGBTQ+ racial/ethnic minority communities were especially safe and affirming spaces, usually in contrast to majority-white LGBTQ+ spaces, which participants identified as sites of racism. The appreciation of racial/ethnic minority communities was often due to a level of shared experiences and views of gender/sex in these spaces that participants did not feel in other spaces. For example, Jake (Filipino/Asian, gay, cis man, 22) said that he appreciated "being friends with more queer people of color who checked [his] multiple internalized unrealistic beauty standards." Participants also specifically mentioned Elders in these communities as particularly accepting.

Sometimes positive experiences were specific to participants' individual race/ethnicities (beyond communities of color more generally). As Forrest (Southeast Asian/Filipinx, queer, nonbinary/bakla, 24) said, "meeting other trans filipinos or watching media with us" was especially positive. Sally (Taiwanese-Canadian, gay, cis woman, 24) also described how "a positive is I get to be part of the expansive community of Asian aunties that cook together and go on walks." She went on to explain that she felt quite supported by the Asian women in her life in ways she does not see her male relatives doing for each other. And, Montana (white/Native, gay, trans man/2 spirit, 18) described how his Indigenous culture provides important context for his gender:

> My mom and the ndn side of my family and friends affirming and appreciating my gender and the way I express myself holds special weight to me because I feel a kind of responsibility to them as my community by identifying as two-spirit.

Another intersecting identity that was closely related to experiences of community-based gender pleasure was sexuality, especially for the gender/sex majority participants. For example, the gender role models cis participants identified often shared both their gender/sex and their sexuality. That is, these participants often specified that their role models were *lesbian* women, *queer* men, etc. Similarly, their experiences of validation were often filtered through their sexualities. For example, their gender expressions could cause others to validate their queerness:

e.g., “I look like a walking stereotype and really like when I see other queerfolk recognize me for being gay, it's a fun connection to the community” (Stevie, white, lesbian, cis woman, 25). Lastly, the communities that were important to them were often centered around sexuality in addition to or instead of gender/sex. For example, Arcticdomme (white, bi, cis woman, 54) said, “i am more myself with others in the BDSM community. It is a more true relationship because you are much more honest.”

A few participants also mentioned additional forms of intersectional community. This included neurodivergent LGBTQ+ communities, as well as communities organized around body shape or fatness. For example, people found community among fat queer femmes or bears (usually larger, hairy gay men). Some also found spiritual and/or religious communities to be sites of validation. As Ro (Black-mixed, demisexual, nonbinary, 27) said, “I do a lot of ‘witchcraft’ and work with energy workers of various backgrounds and its super queer and affirming to just have a host of trans or racialized healers reclaiming our magic together.” Lastly, young participants mentioned that their generation was especially likely to be affirming of their identities as they were more likely to understand gender/sex diversity (and even be more gender nonconforming themselves).

Coming Into Selves

Intersecting identities and systems of power also provided opportunities for participants to come into themselves—to engage in self-discovery and make connections across various aspects of themselves. These intersections could sometimes be cause even for celebration (albeit celebration necessitated by oppression):

> It’s not that i *want* to be radical, but as queer nonbinary person of color, i know that my existence is radical. and I want to celebrate that and relish in it and take up so much

> space. I want people to perceive me. Perceive me SO hard haha (Riz, mixed, queer, nonbinary, 23)

As with “Intersectional Communities” above, sexuality was a salient aspect of participants’ lives that intersected with their gender/sexes in positive ways. For one, developments in participants’ understandings of their sexualities sometimes seemed to clarify their gender/sexes. For example, Luna (Black, lesbian, cis woman, 24) said, “For me, reading books on lesbian history and related to gender has been very helpful. Like I feel a lot less confused about who I am.” Sexual roles, fetishes, and kinks were also important to some people’s gender/sexes. For example, Riz (mixed, queer, nonbinary, 23) said, “young baby kinkster me felt that being submissive was femme and being dominant was more masculine. but as I developed both gender and kink wise, i realized there is so much gender fucker in bdsm that i really find awesome.”

Some participants also mentioned other aspects of themselves that facilitated enjoyment of their gender/sex (or vice versa). Older participants discussed how aging can mean less scrutiny from others and a changing relationship to one’s gender/sex. As Juniper (white, queer, nonbinary, 45) said, “Getting older means caring less about people's opinions. It also means listening to yourself more. I honestly didn't think I would ever be this old.” Juniper also mentioned their fatness as important to their enjoyment of their gender/sex:

> I'm fat, like human mountain shaped. It took me a long time to be neutral about my body. But now I love it. And I love that I have cartoon-like secondary sex characteristics. It gives me ways to play with femme and what sexy is to me.

Some participants mentioned that their lower socioeconomic status was a barrier to affording gender-affirming items (e.g., clothing), but also that this meant they learned to be “scrappy” and improvise with what they had in ways they appreciated.

Privilege

Lastly, some participants described how their various privileges facilitated their experiences of gender pleasure. Often, participants described guilt or wishing society did not give them privilege at the expense of others. Nevertheless, they recognized that the privilege they did receive offered positive experiences. Several white and multiracial participants acknowledged their white privilege (or white-proximal privilege) as conferring an easier life and offering them resilience against other forms of oppression. Tia (white, bisexual/genderfluid, demi-woman/genderfluid, 33) described how they used this privilege to support others and how that in turn has informed their own identity:

> I try pretty hard to use my privilege to raise other folks up/give them a voice/support their voice, and I find a lot of my experience and learning about my identity has come from learning from a lot of the folks that I'm supporting/working with/helping.

Similarly, some men reported being able to use their male privilege for social change. Finally, some recognized their class privilege as conferring respect from others or granting them the ability to be educated on gender diversity, which helped them work out their own and others’ identities. As Priscilla (Biracial, bisexual, cis woman, 24) said in a discussion about class, “People pay attention to you more and you get more opportunities when you're an educated female POC.”

Theme 4: Gender Pleasure Involves Purely Positive Experiences, Relief from Negative Experiences, and Increased Positive Affect

Finally, I analyzed the valence of participants' experiences and found that sometimes experiences of gender/sex were pleasurable in that they involved only positive affect, and other times they were pleasurable in that they moved in the positive direction from phenomena that were negative or neutral (Figure 3-2). In other words, participants' experiences sometimes seemed positive in and of themselves, but other times they expressed that the reason they found certain experiences enjoyable was in their contrast to related negative or neutral experiences and that they moved in a more positive direction even if they were still negative or only neutral.

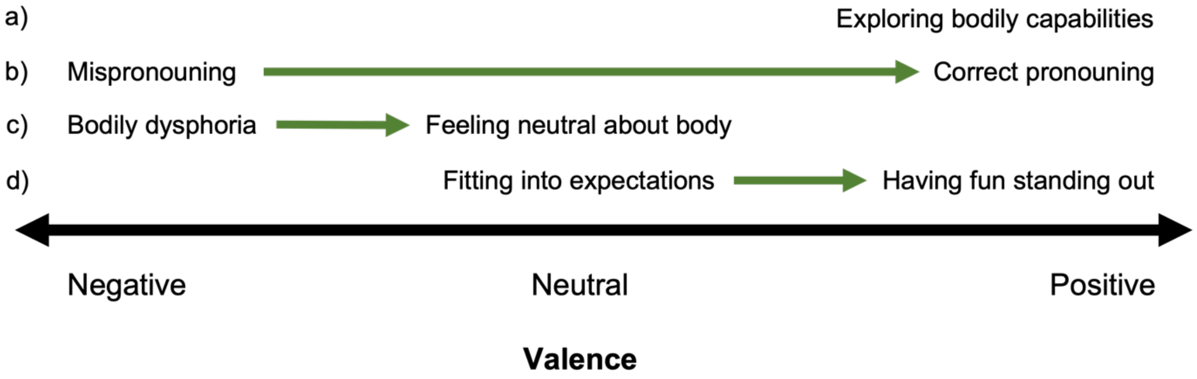

a)
Exploring bodily capabilities
b)
Mispronouning
Correct pronouning
c)
Bodily dysphoria
Feeling neutral about body
d)
Fitting into expectations
Having fun standing out
Negative
Neutral
Positive
Valence

Figure 3-2. *Valences of gender pleasure. Experiences could be pleasurable because they were a) purely positive, b) positive in their contrast to related negative experiences, c) neutral in contrast to negative experiences, or d) positive in contrast to neutral experiences*

Some experiences did seem to be positive in and of themselves (Figure 3-2a). For example, Rose said (white, queer, cis nonbinary woman, 24), "I really love all the different kinds of orgasms my body can have, and figuring those out with time and exploration." This seemed to be purely positive and was not in reaction to or contrasted with any kind of negative experience. However, it is difficult to know whether participants who did not relate their positive experiences to negative ones did so because they were indeed not related or because they did not find it relevant to state them.

It did seem that, more commonly in comparison to purely positive experiences, participants experienced pleasure as *relief* from negative experiences and/or in *contrast* to contexts or times when they had negative experiences (Figure 3-2b-c). These were experienced as pleasurable, or at least *more* pleasurable, because they originated in negative experiences and moved in the positive direction to be neutral or positive. For example, Ethan (Black, pansexual, trans man, 24) said, “literally just being in spaces where people dont assume gender and actually ask my pronouns is so refreshing.” The use of the terms “refreshing” and “actually” makes clear that being in these spaces felt good at least in part because of misgendering in other spaces. This was quite common across gender/sex minority participants, i.e., appreciating correct gendering and pronouning against a backdrop of the reverse.

Participants also expressed growing to appreciate or love aspects of themselves that had previously brought them pain. For example, Aubergine (mixed race/Middle Eastern, bisexual, cis allobinary woman, 30) recounted that an experience of sexual violence when she was 13 contributed to feelings of dissociation from her body. She then said the following about how she restored her connection to her gender/sex: “when i felt like my body wasn't mine i couldn't feel like i was a girl. now that i know and accept my body as being mine i am happier to recognize that i'm a woman.”

Participants also noted pleasure from times when their gender//sex experiences moved from neutral to positive (Figure 3-2d). For example, Finn (white, gay, cis man, 29) discussed how he mostly felt neutral about his gender expression because it fit cultural norms for men. However, he then said, “I do love some bright colours that can stand out a lot, and that's sort of my wild side, I suppose.” Thus, at least on occasion, Finn enjoyed moving from gender neutrality to a space of bolder gender expression.

Another related aspect of the affect of participants' experiences was that they were sometimes dual in nature: a mix of positive and negative. That is, sometimes positive experiences also brought up negative feelings or participants experienced a push and pull of the negative and positive. One poignant example is when participants discussed how they often had to balance authenticity and safety in social contexts. Lee Alexander (white, queer, nonbinary, 19) eloquently explained how these can be in tension:

> I think there are 3 categories to it for me: When I do something for myself and I'm with people I'm comfortable with - I feel more authentic. When I do something for myself and I'm in public - I feel anxious. When I do things for others and I'm in public - I feel disingenuous and uncomfortable, but also safe.

Another type of response in which this duality was apparent was when participants recognized the "ickyness" of their positive feelings when they upheld norms and systems of power. This includes the guilt for various privileges referenced above, like male or white privilege. This also includes times when participants found pleasure in being normatively gendered. Some participants liked embodying gender norms but at the same time recognized that these norms can be damaging. The following interaction with Wyatt (East Asian, gay, cis man, 30) exemplifies this ambivalence:

> Wyatt (He/Him): i know it's a problematic way of thinking that's been ingrained in me because of society but it feels nice when i'm complimented by people for my skills in traditionally masculine things (eg. being handy with a tool, knowing how to fix things) as it makes me feel more "male".
>
> Moderator (Jane Mao, they/them): @Wyatt I mean we feel what we feel! When people compliment you on these things, are there other emotions that are brought up as well?

> Wyatt (He/Him): it makes me feel ambivalent; happy because it confirms my gender presentation but then also a bit sad because i feel guilty gendering things like that (eg. I know fixing something shouldn't be inherently "male")

Discussion

In this study, I conducted online focus groups with gender/sex/ual minorities to further explore gender pleasure and how it manifests in people’s lives. Participants provided rich, concrete descriptions of the enjoyment, comfort, relief, and affirmation they derived from their gender identities, gender expressions, social roles, and sexed bodies. Their responses supported Risman’s (2004) theory of gender as a social structure: their experiences occurred at intrapersonal, interpersonal, and institutional levels. The intrapersonal level consisted of participants’ minds, bodily compositions, bodily actions, and bodily adornments. The interpersonal level consisted of participants’ close social circles, broader communities, and strangers. Finally, the institutional level consisted of gender norms and intersecting social locations and systems of power.

Informed by the three levels from Risman’s theory, I was also able to develop an analytical continuum from the most internal to external (Figure 3-1). This model draws inspiration from Bronfenbrenner’s (1989) ecological systems theory, which recognizes that people’s development and experience of the world are affected by micro-, meso-, and macrosystem processes. Fausto-Sterling (2000) describes this idea as a “Russian nesting doll,” wherein each level’s contours are necessarily affected by the dynamics of the other levels. This might also be the case for gender pleasure, wherein each level could affect the kinds of experiences people have and how those experiences feel. This model, then, can provide a basis for future research on the multifaceted nature of gender pleasure.

In the remainder of this discussion, I consider each of the themes that arose from participants' responses in-depth. I conclude with limitations and implications for research and clinical practice.

Self-Acceptance and Authenticity

In the first theme, participants recounted that they experienced gender pleasure from accepting themselves and living authentically and freely. These findings were similar to findings from Study 1 that people find joy in both internal/psychological and external/physical aspects of their gender/sexes (Beischel, Gauvin, et al., 2021). In our cisheteronormative and binaristic society, gender/sex/ual minorities are often taught that their identities, bodies, attractions, and more are wrong, unnatural, immoral, and/or imaginary (Bettcher, 2007; Dietert & Dentice, 2013; Pollitt et al., 2019). In this context, coming to accept one's self can be quite a powerful experience. Indeed, self-acceptance has long been considered a key part of positive sexual identity development (Cass, 1979), and quantitative studies have established its link to positive mental health and reductions in minority stress for gender/sex/ual minorities (Camp et al., 2020; Su et al., 2016). My findings support this link. Gendered self-acceptance seemed quite related to positive self-regard through feelings of attractiveness, strength, and peace.

Participants also identified authenticity as a central component of their gender pleasure, whether through gender expression, bodily transformations, or bodily actions. Several studies, including Study 1, have found authenticity to be an important goal and experience for gender/sex/ual minorities (Beischel, Gauvin, et al., 2021; Gamarel et al., 2014; Llewellyn & Reynolds, 2021; Wang & Feinstein, 2022). Indeed, in Levitt's (2019) model of LGBTQ+ gender, authenticity is one of the central functions of gender for gender/sex/ual minorities. It seems that living authentically is pleasurable in and of itself, despite the costs that can come from going against people's expectations for some people's authenticity. That is, authenticity is often in conflict with expecting and/or receiving negative attention from others, but the pain of not living authentically often outweighs these expected or actual negative social experiences. It is also possible that what feels good is a signal to what is authentic. In other words, pleasurable experiences may be a cue for some in identifying what aspects of gender/sex feel authentic. This was evidenced by some participants finding pleasure in exploring new gender expressions.

Interpersonal Affirmation and Community

In the second theme, I found that participants felt positive feelings of validation when their gender/sexes were affirmed by others. These findings are in line with past research demonstrating the positive benefits of interpersonal gender affirmation. For example, quantitative studies with gender minority youth have found positive links between parental acceptance, warmth, and support and mental health (Bouris & Hill, 2017; Grossman et al., 2021; Wilson et al., 2016). Budge and colleagues (2015) also found that trans men experienced many positive emotions, like confidence, connection, and happiness, from positive interpersonal interactions.

Why might these interpersonal experiences be so meaningful? Although internal self-concepts are important aspects of gender/sex, many theorists have argued that gender/sex is fundamentally a socially negotiated identity and experience (Butler, 2004; Ridgeway & Correll, 2004; West & Zimermman, 1987). The social nature of gender/sex was reflected in participants' experiences of gender pleasure. As some noted, sometimes internal affirmation is just *not enough*. It can be scary to be nonnormative, to stand out, to craft new appearances or modes of being. Social affirmation seems to be one way people find comfort with these difficult or new experiences (Budge et al., 2015). Experiences like compliments or correct pronoun usage convey that someone is accomplishing their gender/sex "successfully," that people are "picking up" what they are "putting down." Research on the positive role of friendships between Black women supports the idea that affirming experiences help people be comfortable in and feel empowered by their identities (Leath et al., 2022), where friendships with other Black women bolster self-image (e.g., through supportive comments about their hair) and honor intersectional experiences. "Gender affirmation" is often associated with trans and nonbinary contexts (e.g., "gender affirming surgeries"). However, Leath and colleagues' findings highlight that gender affirmation can be an important component to many minoritized people's identity development and positive self-concept regardless of gender trajectory.

Affirming experiences also likely signal a sense of safety amidst social environments that otherwise may be quite hostile towards minoritized gender/sexes. Recent experimental work has demonstrated that people generally perceive gender/sex as fundamental to being human (Martin & Mason, 2022). Across eight studies with primarily gender/sex majorities, this work supports ideas forwarded by gender theorists (e.g., Butler, 1990, 2004; Stryker, 2006) that gender/sex is a prerequisite to perceptions of people's humanity. That is, to be human is to be gendered in our cultural understandings. Thus, people's very humanity is at stake in social perceptions of gender/sex. Presumably then, dehumanization from violating gender norms is one reason for the vitriol aimed at gender/sex/ual minorities (Bettcher, 2007). Conversely, interpersonal affirmation may signal that social actors see the targets of their affirmation as fully human, and the targets' resulting sense of safety facilitates their gender pleasure.

Aspects of being in community were also quite tied to participants' gender pleasure. Feeling a sense of belonging is often considered a primary human need (Maslow, 1954) and is associated with positive (or less negative) psychosocial outcomes across diverse social contexts

(Broos et al., 2022; Fisher et al., 2015; Turner & McLaren, 2011). However, many gender/sex/ual minorities report a diminished sense of belonging within cisheteronormative spaces (Hatchel et al., 2019; Rostosky et al., 2003), and their belonging or connectedness to LGBTQ communities is associated with many positive outcomes, including reduced suicidality, involvement in sociopolitical actions, and psychosocial well-being (Frost & Meyer, 2012; Harris et al., 2015; Kaniuka et al., 2019; Lin & Israel, 2012). Thus, forming community around gender/sex/ual minoritization is often necessary and valued; the current study's findings show that these communities provide positive affective experiences. Past work with trans men has also found community connection as a source of positive emotion (Budge et al., 2015). This raises the possibility that community-related gender pleasure experiences are one reason for the link between community connectedness and well-being.

Gender role models were also important for participants' positive community experiences. This suggests that to embody a certain gendered form, it is helpful and pleasurable to see that it exists elsewhere in the world, at least for some. I see these role models as populating a kind of "gender/sex imaginary," wherein people can more easily mentally represent diverse forms of gender/sex when they see or know about them through media, education, communities, and more. This is not to imply that it is *necessary* to encounter a form of gender/sex outside of one's self to embody it, but rather that these encounters or knowledge seem to act as a type of affirmation and facilitation for authentic embodiment. Participants also described pleasure in being gender role models for others, which has been found in past work with trans men (Budge et al., 2015). This suggests that reciprocal relationships of gender/sex mentorship is important for people's positive experiences within minoritized communities.

Gender Norms

The third theme highlighted participants' varied and ongoing relationships to societal-level gender norms. Past research has demonstrated the harmful effects of prescriptive and proscriptive gender norms for many people and especially gender/sex/ual minorities (Armstrong et al., 2014; Balsam et al., 2013; Bauer et al., 2009; Pollitt et al., 2019). Despite these harmful effects, participants' responses demonstrate how minoritized people can find pleasure in norms as well: both being within and challenging them.

I saw an interesting tension in participants' relationship to being within gender norms. On one hand, participants generally enjoyed when people used gender schemas or stereotypes to make correct judgments of their gender/sexes. This is exemplified in participants' positive experiences of "passing," or having their gender/sexes read correctly by strangers, and other socially affirming experiences. On the other hand, participants expressed chafing against gender norms and wanting to deconstruct them. This is likely due to how often people made *incorrect* judgements about their gender/sexes in a painful way and/or their experiences with compulsory cisheterosexuality (i.e., assumptions from birth that one is cisgender and heterosexual [Dietert & Dentice, 2013; Rich, 1980]). Sometimes participants recognized this tension and expressed their views of gender roles as oppressive, but also the pleasure they felt embodying them or being recognized for them.

As gender scholars have argued, gender/sex is always subject to evaluation, such that people use gender norms to assess each other (Butler, 2004; Ridgeway & Correll, 2004; West & Zimermman, 1987). Gender/sex is done within a set of cultural constraints—there is no truly being "outside" of gender norms. My data contribute concrete examples of the ways in which it can feel good to do gender/sex "correctly," or in line with norms, including for gender/sex/ual minorities. These results resonate with research on gender development, wherein developing children receive positive and negative feedback on their gendered behavior from both their social environment and from themselves (Bussey & Bandura, 1999). Research with adults also has documented the various rewards people receive for behaving and/or appearing within prescriptive gender norms. For example, Armstrong and colleagues (2006) have demonstrated that undergraduate sorority members who fit within white, heteronormative norms for femininity gain social capital. This research and my data support the idea that gender pleasure may be one mechanism for the social maintenance of gender norms. That is, norms might in part derive their power from their ability to elicit pleasure from their embodiment and social evaluation.

In contrast to pleasure from being within norms, some participants derived considerable pleasure from going against gender norms, either through intentionally challenging people's perceptions or simply living authentically in ways that happened to go against the grain. Though it was not always clear *why* challenging norms was pleasurable, it seemed related to working towards gender liberation, the thrill of being rebellious, being queer gender role models for others, and simply being one's authentic self. These findings echo past work with various forms of minoritized gender/sex. For example, as discussed in the Introduction of this chapter, research with drag performers demonstrates their intentional and often gleeful disruption of cisheteronormative gendered expectations of their audiences (Egner & Maloney, 2016; Levitt et al., 2018; Shapiro, 2007).

Systems of Power and Intersectionality

Intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1989, 1991) was a major theoretical framework for this study's design. Intersecting identities and systems of power were both explicitly brought up by participants and can be implicitly seen throughout the focus group data. As I have noted throughout this discussion, cisheteronormativity set the stage for many of the gender pleasure experiences participants noted. That is, many of their gender pleasure experiences seemed to be pleasurable or important because their experiences as gender/sex/ual minorities were so often invisibilized, pathologized, and/or devalued. I have argued that gender/sex/ual minorities expressing themselves authentically, being in community with one another, and receiving social validation are powerful at least in part because these experiences resist or challenge aspects of cisheteronormativity. So, it seems that gender pleasure cannot be extricated from its context within participants' social environments that oppress them through their gender/sexes and/or sexualities.

Participants themselves also recognized the tight linkage of gender/sex with sexuality, particularly in the formation of their communities, how other people read them, and how these aspects informed one another within themselves. Past work has shown the oppressive ways sexuality is interpersonally regulated through gender/sex and vice versa (Baams et al., 2013; Martin-Storey, 2016; Pascoe, 2005; Renold, 2002). The current study's data add a positive aspect to this picture. People can enrich their social and psychological lives through this interplay and strategically use gender expression to convey their sexualities to others. These findings also highlight how diversity-informed knowledge of gender/sex can bolster comprehensive understandings of sexuality and vice versa (van Anders, 2015a).

Participants also noted the ways that identities other than their gender/sexes or sexualities intersected with their gender pleasure experiences. Sometimes participants brought these up unprompted, and we also explicitly asked about the intersections they deemed relevant to the conversation. As described in the Results, participants sometimes found it difficult to identify the positives of these intersections. They seemed to more easily think of the ways that their multiple marginalizations were related to negative experiences, particularly for the participants of color.

This is unsurprising as research has shown the many harms that can come with being marginalized on multiple axes. For example, Boone and Bowleg (2020) have argued that Black sexual minority men face racist stigma from providers who may see them as “hypersexual” and therefore be less willing to prescribe them preexposure prophylaxis for HIV compared to sexual minority white men. This creates inequities across race/ethnicity in possibilities for sexual pleasure. Thus, there may be inequities in *gender* pleasure such that some participants of color may indeed not have had many experiences to bring up.

Cultural discourses about intersectionality (which many participants seemed well-aware of) also tend to focus on the ways that intersecting systems of power create unique disadvantages, violence, and invisibility, and thus these negative experiences may have been more readily available in participants’ minds. This makes sense as intersectionality was developed for this very purpose (Crenshaw, 1991). However, with some prompting from moderators and from the other group members, many participants were able to share how their intersections contributed to positive gender/sex experiences. Some participants even noted that they had never thought of their intersections in this way before and they appreciated doing so. Past research has also found that multiply marginalized participants experience their identities in many positive ways (Elderton et al., 2014; Miller, 2017; Singh, 2013). Nevertheless, these promptings should be done with care so as not to force a positive lens onto oppressive experiences or engage in “toxic positivity,” i.e., the exaggeration of positive outlooks and pathologizing of negative experiences (Bosveld, 2021).

One way I attempted to avoid toxic positivity was through giving space for participants to discuss negative aspects and barriers to pleasure in addition to positive experiences. However, I could find no methodological guides for discussing these kinds of experiences in focus groups.

This leaves me with many questions for how to explore positive intersectional experiences in culturally sensitive ways. How should researchers acknowledge the pain of oppressive systems while allowing for the discussion of pleasures despite these systems? How might focusing on positive experiences silence participants' discussion of their complexities? How might discussing positive experiences reproduce the stigma that can often occur in interview settings (Cook, 2012)? As there is a small but growing body of work that attends to positive experiences and thriving of multiply marginalized groups (e.g., Kelly et al., 2017; Leath et al., 2022; Singh, 2013), I imagine the answers to these questions will continue to be developed.

Despite challenges in identifying the ways in which gender pleasure showed up in distinctly intersectional ways, participants were able to articulate this. It seems that even through ongoing colonization and white supremacy, racialized gender/sex/ual minorities can and do experience gender pleasure in relation to their race/ethnicities. One of the most consistent findings was the importance of LGBTQ+-centered racial/ethnic minority communities, particularly in contrast to racist white-dominant LGBTQ+ communities elsewhere. Past work with gender/sex/ual minorities of color has demonstrated their marginalization both in communities of color and LGBTQ+ spaces (Abreu et al., 2021; Nadal et al., 2015). So, it is unsurprising that in the current study and others, participants emphasized the importance of spaces that center and uplift both minoritized gender/sex/ualities and people of color (Hwahng et al., 2021; Stone et al., 2020). Some researchers call these "microidentity" communities because they share multiple social locations, such as immigrant Latinx trans communities (Abreu et al., 2021; Stone et al., 2020). The current study's findings point to experiences of gender pleasure in microidentity communities as one possible component to their importance.

Participants of color also sometimes described the pleasure they found in coming into themselves and simply existing at their intersections. In the context of a racist and cisheteronormative culture, they reveled in the ways their racialized gender/sexes unsettled majoritarian culture. Racialized gender/sexes as sites of pleasure has also been seen in the usage of "Black boy joy" and "Black girl magic" on social media and increasingly within academic research (Brinkhurst-Cuff, 2016; Crumb et al., 2021; Lu & Steele, 2019; Morton & Parsons, 2018; Quattlebaum, 2021). These terms celebrate Black lives, facilitate supportive communities, and counter the negativity prevalent in media representations of Black women and men (Brinkhurst-Cuff, 2016). The current study's findings demonstrate similar celebration amongst gender/sex minority people of color.

Some participants also recognized how their gender pleasure experiences intersected with their privileged positions, particularly whiteness, manhood, and higher socioeconomic status. And beyond this explicit recognition, privilege ran throughout many experiences of gender pleasure. That is, some people can obtain access to gender-affirming healthcare, clothing, community, and more with greater ease than others (James et al., 2016; Snow et al., 2019). For example, gender role models in media were important to many, yet whose experiences and identities are portrayed in media is structured by white supremacy, ableism, and more (Giaccardi et al., 2019; McInroy & Craig, 2017; Shaw et al., 2019).

The balance between authenticity and safety that many participants described is also structured by privilege. That is, people in dominant social positions are more likely to feel safe to be authentically themselves and/or outwardly challenge norms in public spaces like bathrooms or when obtaining social services (Davis, 2018; Kattari et al., 2017). White-centric beauty standards also likely structure who receives gender-affirming compliments (Chin Evans & McConnell, 2003). Thus, while there was some limited discussion of privilege within the focus groups, many (if not all) gender pleasure experiences are shaped by privilege and disadvantage.

Purely Positive Versus Positive in Contrast

In the fourth and final theme, gender pleasure experiences seemed sometimes purely positive but, more often, participants related them to negative experiences (Figure 3-2). The tendency for positive experiences to exist in contradistinction to negative ones may point to gender pleasure as often or even primarily a form of relief from oppressive experiences for at least some gender/sex/ual minorities. This finding may also be due more to salience of these experiences in the focus group context. That is, it may be easier to remember or recognize positive experiences that contrast with negative ones. In any case, it is unsurprising that gender/sex/ual minorities would report experiencing gender pleasure as a contrasting experience to negative ones. Gender/sex/ual minorities live in a social system that devalues their gender/sexes, polices their gender expressions, and invisibilizes their identities (Bettcher, 2007; Butler, 2004; Dietert & Dentice, 2013). Affirming or otherwise positive experiences, then, are likely to be noticed, appreciated, and remembered. At the same time, the fact that some experiences seemed to be purely positive suggests that gender/sex *can* be a source of joy outside of oppressive contexts.

Comparing Gender Pleasure between Gender/Sex Majorities and Minorities

The focus groups in this study revealed many similarities and differences between people with majoritized and minoritized gender trajectories. Perhaps most striking was how similar their experiences were. For example, both majorities and minorities experienced pleasure at all levels of the gender pleasure model (Figure 3-1). Even experiences that might be assumed to be specific to minorities, like changing the appearance of sex characteristics (e.g., breasts), were shared by some majorities. These findings support calls for attention to shared phenomena across groups in general and specifically across gender trajectory (Cole, 2009; Tate et al., 2014; van Anders, 2015a).

Despite these shared experiences, there were some discernible differences between groups. There were many experiences specific to gender/sex minorities, including: hormones and surgeries, "passing," others using their correct names and pronouns, gendered titles (e.g., bro), gender-inclusive language (e.g., Latinx), and confusion from others about their gender/sexes. For gender/sex majorities, I found that their experiences of gender pleasure were often focused on their gender expressions and/or sexualities in unique ways. For example, when the majorities discussed being "seen" or being authentic, it was often in reference to being masculine/feminine and/or their sexual minority status. But, unlike the minorities, these experiences were not often related to being women or men *per se*. This is likely because being seen as men or women is often a given for cisgender people (though not always, such as with some butch women's experiences of harassment in women's bathrooms [Andersson, 2021]). However, being seen (by others and yourself) as a *queer* woman or a *feminine* man was important and brought pleasure to the gender/sex majority participants.

Gender expression and sexuality were often intertwined such that majorities used gender expression to convey sexuality and/or to appear attractive, and other people would read their sexualities through their gender expressions. This contrasts with many of the gender/sex minorities' experiences, who would often recount affirming experiences related to their gender/sex identities of man, nonbinary, and so on. For the gender/sex minority participants, gender expression was often in service of being read as their gender/sex, not necessarily as their sexualities.

A final difference between gender/sex minorities and majorities was that “gender neutrality” seemed more common amongst gender/sex majorities. Some majorities described experiences that were not particularly valenced and expressed that gender/sex and/or gender expression did not matter that much to them. This neutrality was not often experienced as pleasure as it did not exist in contradistinction to negative experiences. A few gender/sex minorities described neutral experiences, but even being neutral was pleasurable compared to being invalidated or harassed. Thus, both the frequency of neutral experiences and their felt quality seemed to vary across groups.

These differences between gender/sex majorities and minorities, however, should be interpreted with caution. In analyzing the data, I paid attention to apparent differences, but the reflexive analytical method was not designed to test group differences in a positivist sense (e.g., counting codes and comparing statistically across groups). The differences found may be specific to these particular focus groups, and future research may provide different insights into similarities and differences across gender trajectories.

COVID-19 as Context

As described in the Methods, I conducted this study in July 2021, which was a little over a year into the COVID-19 pandemic in North America. This may have affected the results in several ways. First, we explicitly asked how COVID may have affected their gender pleasure experiences and I noted throughout the results where participants saw the pandemic as relevant. They mentioned that social distancing sometimes allowed them the time and space to explore their gender/sexes in ways they had not before. This included being away from public scrutiny and focusing more on their private experiences of their gender/sexes. Some participants also mentioned that pandemic-related masks helped hide facial features that otherwise may have led others to misgender them. Participants also emphasized the greater importance of online communities, especially LGBTQ+ communities, due to fewer in-person community events (e.g., gay bars, pride parades). These insights demonstrate that gender pleasure experiences are contextual and responsive to shifts in people's social and physical environments.

COVID may also have affected the focus group method in other ways. Online interaction had become much more common during the pandemic, and this may have facilitated participants' willingness and ability to participate in an online focus group. That is, they may have become more acclimated to describing their experiences through online media. Though, they also may have been tired of doing so. Several participants mentioned experiencing "Zoom fatigue" because of the pandemic, and though that was a reason they were grateful for having a chat-based online platform, other participants may have not participated as actively due to general fatigue of living their lives online. Lastly, as people generally had fewer in-person interactions with others than they did pre-pandemic, it may have been harder for participants to think of concrete examples of interactions. This may have limited insights into interpersonal forms of gender pleasure.

Limitations

The diversity of the sample by race/ethnicity, gender/sex, and sexuality was a strength of this study, but there are numerous other axes and intersections relevant to gender pleasure experiences that I did not address and/or did not arise from participants' responses. Of particular note, out of the 32 gender/sex minorities, there were only three trans binary participants and no trans women. This means that nonbinary experiences of gender/sex were over-represented. Although this helps address a general erasure of nonbinary experiences in psychological research (Cameron & Stinson, 2019; Scandurra et al., 2019), it would be fruitful to understand gender pleasure experiences in trans women as they are uniquely impacted by transmisogyny (Serano, 2007, 2013). This may color their gender pleasure experiences in ways not discussed in this sample. Additionally, some of the participants' responses made clear that the ways they explored and learned about their gender/sexes were related to their formal education. As is standard for social media samples, the sample was relatively highly educated. But this makes for overrepresentation of highly formally educated accounts of gender pleasure. Accordingly, future research would benefit from intentionally targeting participants from more diverse educational backgrounds and/or recruiting via different venues (e.g., community centers) to more comprehensively understand how people find pleasure in their gender/sexes despite socioeconomic barriers.

Some features of the data collection method also may have limited the range and depth of responses. First, the online text-based format has inherent limitations, including not being able to judge tone or facial expressions and being limited to people who can and want to type out their responses. As mentioned in the Methods in this chapter, almost all participants reported enjoying this format, especially compared to teleconferencing via Zoom. But these were people who signed up for this kind of group, making for participants who would be likely to find few flaws and many strengths in the format. Future work might explore gender pleasure via focus groups or interviews in person to include those who would rather articulate their experiences aloud. This may also facilitate more group rapport, which was present in the current study but limited, limiting insights that might develop out of this synergy.

Furthermore, questions centered on intrapersonal and interpersonal experiences. I was able to identify institutional aspects of participants' experiences in analyses, but it would be beneficial to more directly ask participants how institutions like healthcare, government, and education impact their gender pleasure experiences. Lastly, the groups for people of color consisted of people of diverse race/ethnicities, which did not facilitate in-depth understandings of the ways gender pleasure intersects with specific forms of racialization.

Implications for Research and Clinical Practice

The focus group results provide a rich basis for further qualitative and quantitative work on gender pleasure. For one, these results could inform the development of a gender pleasure scale. Items could draw from participants' responses across intrapersonal, interpersonal, and institutional levels. With a quantitative scale, gender pleasure's relationship to well-being could be further fleshed out. As positive affect in general is strongly related to well-being (Ryan & Deci, 2001), positively-valenced experiences, especially around stigmatized identities, are likely to contribute to well-being.

Generally, this study provides a basis for more research on gender/sex as a personal and social process. Though psychological research often treats gender/sex as a categorical demographic variable, gender/sex can also be thought of as an ongoing development, or what Stachowiak (2017) calls a "social felt sense of becoming" in their sociological study of genderqueer individuals. Morgenroth and Ryan (2018, 2021) draw from queer theory to also call for more attention to gender/sex as a process in psychology. They build on Butler (1990) and Goffman's (1959) ideas of gender as performance to argue that gender/sex can be thought of as the interplay between a "character" (gender/sex categorization as woman, nonbinary, etc.), their "script" (gendered behavior), their "costume" (sexed body and gender expression), the "stage" (physical and social environment), and an "audience" (social perceivers and the self). The current study's findings demonstrate that this interplay can produce pleasure. And more generally, thinking of gender/sex in this way allows for more focused investigation of the dynamics of gender/sex at psychological and societal levels.

The current study may also generate creative ways of thinking about gender/sex categories themselves. Although psychological research often compares people of various gender/sex categories, such as women and men or transgender and cisgender people, moments of gender pleasure may be an in-road to thinking about gender/sex diversity beyond these categories. This creativity could follow the sexual diversity lens from sexual configurations theory (SCT), which provides a framework for thinking about groupings of people that are contingent and fluid rather than essentialized or fixed (van Anders, 2015a). Past work with SCT has demonstrated the complexities within and similarities across gender/sex categories for gender/sex orientations and statuses (Abed et al., 2019; Beischel, Schudson, et al., 2021b; Schudson et al., 2017), and the current studies' results demonstrate the same for experiences of gender pleasure. In fact, there is nothing inherent in the construct of gender pleasure that relies on gender/sex categories at all. Though there are likely differences across gender/sex groups, as there were across minority and majority groups in this study, individuals' experiences of gender pleasure may be related to their categorical group membership while others may not. Using gender pleasure as a touchpoint thus might open new avenues for understanding gender/sex unconstrained by traditional categorizations, potentially revealing novel ways of building affinities across groups.

I was able to get a broad overview of the ways gender pleasure intersects with sexuality, race/ethnicity, and more, but future work could dive deeper into particular intersections. For example, the Indigenous participants mentioned their culture as providing unique contexts for their gender/sex experiences outside of Western systems of gender/sex/uality, and thus working with an Indigenous sample may help add to the landscape of gender pleasure and how colonization affects these experiences. Neurodiversity, body size/fatness, spirituality, and age were all also briefly mentioned by participants as important to their experiences and likely would provide important areas for further exploration of how they intersect with positive experiences and systems of power.

Participants' gender pleasure experiences also have implications for clinical practice with gender/sex/ual minorities. Participants emphasized just how important these positive experiences were for their ongoing relationship to their gender/sexes, including aspects that require clinicians (e.g., biomedical transition). These experiences were quite diverse, in line with past work showing how gender/sex is a highly individualized and multifaceted experience (Beischel, Gauvin, et al., 2021; Diamond & Butterworth, 2008; Erickson-Schroth, 2014). In fact, the exact same experience can be pleasurable for one person and quite painful for another. For example, eliciting confusion from others about one's gender/sex was positive for some participants but might be dysphoric for others. These findings go against a "one-size-fits-all" approach for gender affirming healthcare and therapy, and they support calls for an "informed consent model" of care led by the client and their needs and desires for their gender/sex (Ashley et al., 2021; Schulz, 2018). These findings are also in line with an experience that Ashley and Ells (2018) termed "creative transfiguration," or the capacity for trans and nonbinary people to agentically transform their bodies with creativity and artistic aesthetics. This idea is reminiscent of Stryker's (2006) foundational work that asserted the value and power of trans people's agentic constitution of their bodies. Ashley and Ells argue that both gender euphoria and creative transfiguration should be considered compelling reasons to provide transition-related healthcare under insurance coverage. Creative transfiguration could be seen throughout the current study's focus groups, supporting Ashley and Ells' claims that this kind of creativity provides pleasure, meaning, and value in gender/sex minorities' lives.

The recognition of intrapersonal experiences of gender pleasure may also inform clinical practices. It seems therapeutically useful to know that some gender pleasure experiences do not rely on other people, like self-affirmation, living authentically, and releasing worry over norms. As interpersonal and institutional experiences are less under one's own control, it may be beneficial to foster these intrapersonal experiences and explore what feels authentic and affirming within one's self.

Conclusion

Gender/sex/ual minorities experience diverse and impactful pleasures from their gender/sexes. Far from the "gloom and doom" picture painted by much of the research on minoritized gender/sex/uality, participants in this focus group study described joyful, affirming, connecting, and playful aspects of their gender/sex experiences. This study adds to the affective landscape of gender/sex and demonstrates the value of understanding gender/sex as a process. With a better understanding of the positives of gender/sex, we can not only more comprehensively mitigate the oppressive features of cisheteronormativity, but also support the flourishing of gender/sex/ual minorities.

Chapter 4

General Discussion

In this dissertation, I explored gender/sex/ual minorities' positive gender/sex experiences, or what I call gender pleasure. In Chapter 1, I made the case for studying pleasure in the context of gender/sex and situated this project within the broader landscape of gender/sex research in psychology. I then presented evidence in the literature for what kinds of gender/sex experiences seem to be pleasurable.

In Chapter 2, I described my qualitative survey study that aimed to understand "gender euphoria," a related term already circulating within gender/sex minority communities, especially trans and/or nonbinary ones. I found that indeed this term seems to have originated within gender/sex minority communities, often facilitated by social media. People generally described gender euphoria as a joyful feeling of rightness within their gender/sexes, and their gender euphoric experiences contained a mix of internal, external, and/or social aspects. Participants described gender *dysphoria* as a distressing conflict between various aspects of their gender/sexes, and I found that the relationship between gender euphoria and dysphoria was complex and varied greatly between people.

In Chapter 3, I described a focus group study that aimed to explore gender pleasure more broadly with an LGBTQ+ sample that was more diverse by race/ethnicity and gender trajectory than in Chapter 2. I found that participants described gender pleasure experiences at a multitude of intrapersonal, interpersonal, and institutional levels. Important in these experiences were aspects like self-acceptance, authenticity, freedom, social validation, belonging, relationships to gender norms, and intersecting social locations and systems of power. I also found that gender pleasure experiences can be purely positive and/or can derive their pleasure in contradistinction to negative experiences.

In offering the construct of gender pleasure, I do not mean to codify it as a single kind of experience. Indeed, my data show just how complex, individualized, and multi-faceted these kinds of experiences can be. Rather, I offer the term "gender pleasure" as an invitation for noticing, exploring, and valuing positive gender/sex experiences in research and beyond. Thus, in the rest of this chapter I reflect on how this construct and the data in Chapters 2 and 3 can contribute to understandings of gender/sex in psychology and elsewhere, and I provide some ideas for how future research can address the limitations of these studies and build upon what I have learned about this construct thus far.

Contributions to Field

Gender Pleasure as Resonance between Gender/Sex Orientations, Identities, and/or Statuses

In this section, I propose a way of thinking about gender pleasure that I hope will be generative in understanding the affective components of diverse aspects of gender/sex. I propose that gender pleasure can be conceptualized as the positive affect that results from the resonance between people's gender/sex orientations, identities, and/or statuses. Physical objects resonate when they are attuned to the same or similar vibrational frequencies. For example, striking a tuning fork will cause an adjacent tuning fork of the same note to vibrate at a much higher amplitude than a tuning fork of a different note. This also occurs between tuning forks of various harmonies, such as the same note in different octaves. Applying this concept to gender/sex, individuals' minds and/or bodies may be "attuned" to various aspects of gender/sex (Jenkins, 2018). For example, someone may be attuned to femininity, gender fluidity, or maleness, or specific aspects of these. As described in Chapter 1, in sexual configurations theory (SCT, 2015), van Anders calls this construct a person's gender/sex "orientation." According to SCT, gender/sex orientations involve the aspects of gender/sex people are drawn to, and they can be enduring, contextual, fluid, and/or multiple across a person's life. Thus, orientations are not necessarily static or immutable. For example, someone may be "attuned" to femininity in general, in specific contexts, at specific times in their lives, and/or in specific ways but not others.

SCT also separates orientation from identity, in that identity involves how people label their gender/sexes and/or related communities. Identities may coincide with orientations or branch from them. Lastly, SCT delineates gender/sex status, which refers to the gender/sexed ways people move through the world. Status in the original SCT paper was mainly articulated for sexuality (e.g., the status of being a man who has sex with men; van Anders, 2015) but also intended to apply to gender/sex. Applying this more fully, gender/sex status involves a person's gender/sexed behaviors, experiences, and existences within their social and physical environments. Gender/sex statuses may coincide with or branch from people's orientations and/or identities. For example, the study in Chapter 2 and other studies have shown that gender dysphoria can arise from being treated in ways that are in conflict with how people view themselves (Galupo, Pulice-Farrow, & Lindley, 2020; Galupo, Pulice-Farrow, & Pehl, 2020). This can be seen as a *dissonance* between a person's gender/sex status and their orientation and/or identity.

In contrast to dissonance or dysphoria, I propose that when a person's gender/sex statuses, orientations, and/or identities *resonate*, they may enjoy this experience and/or feel positive emotions like rightness, comfort, or joy. In this formulation, social validation through correct pronouns or deep affirmation from partners creates gender/sex statuses that resonate with people's orientations and/or identities. Resonances may also be intrapersonal. For example, Dino Rex in Chapter 3 recounted that, after top surgery, he experienced an immense feeling of peace. I see this pleasurable feeling as resulting from a resonance between an aspect of his material bodily composition (status) and his internal sense of how his body should be shaped (orientation). People may create their own statuses for the purposes of resonating with their orientations and/or identities, such as expressing their gender in feminine ways because it resonates with their orientation towards femininity. People may feel great pleasure from coming into an identity or community that fits them (i.e., resonance between identity and orientation). People may also experience resonance between a status and an orientation they did not know they had. Research with gender/sex/ual minorities, as well as the "gender role models" finding in Chapter 3, has demonstrated that some people's gender/sexes come into being through interactions with community members who provide gender/sex experiences previously unknown to them (Hiestand & Levitt, 2005; Levitt & Ippolito, 2014). For example, hearing someone use they/them pronouns for the first time may resonate even for people who did not know they liked they/them pronouns. Thus, people do not have to label their gender/sex in certain ways to experience resonance.

Resonance may also occur between aspects that on the surface may seem conflicting, but internally resonate for people. For example, some participants found pleasure in going *against* gender norms. Although this may seem indicative of a "conflict" with their social environments, their internal orientations resonated with the status of being nonconforming or challenging norms. The data in Chapter 3 also demonstrated that what people find pleasurable can change across time or context (e.g., on some days or in some locations, feminine clothing felt good but in others it did not). Taking the above examples together, the specific gender/sex features that resonate with people can vary greatly. Yet, what these experiences share is the positive feeling associated with this resonance. Just as a particularly beautiful or powerful musical harmony may evoke pleasure in a listener, so too might the resonance between a person's gender/sex orientations, identities, and/or statuses evoke gender pleasure. And, just as one person may enjoy punk rock music and another classical, and each find the other music dissonant, orientations, identities, and/or statuses can vary in their resonance across people. Finally, just as a person might enjoy acoustic guitar in a coffeeshop and pop music in a nightclub, resonances can be contextual. In these ways, gender pleasure as resonance can account for the vast diversity of gender/sex experiences that can lead to gender pleasure while still providing a common framework for understanding the affective tenor of these experiences.

Relationships Between Gender Euphoria and Gender Pleasure

The data in Chapters 2 and 3 also allow for the beginnings of a framework that attends to gender euphoria and gender pleasure. Arguably, gender euphoric experiences can be thought of as gender pleasure experiences, but that not all gender pleasure experiences might be classified as gender euphoria. That is, I would also consider all the gender euphoria experiences described by participants in Chapter 2 to be gender pleasure experiences because they involved positive affect and relationships to gender/sexes. But, not all experiences described by participants in Chapter 3 about gender pleasure could be categorized as gender euphoria for a number of reasons.

What might fall into gender pleasure and *not* gender euphoria? Many of the experiences in the gender euphoria study (Chapter 2) were related to transition or other aspects of gender/sex minority experiences. So, it may be the case that gender pleasure is more appropriate for describing majority experiences than gender euphoria (in line with my arguments in Chapter 1). However, as I argued in the discussion of Chapter 2, some gender euphoria experiences seemed relevant to people of both majority and minority gender/sex locations. The data in Chapter 3 bore this out—gender pleasure experiences across groups seemed more similar than they were distinct. So, similar experiences may be labeled as gender euphoria by some but not by others.

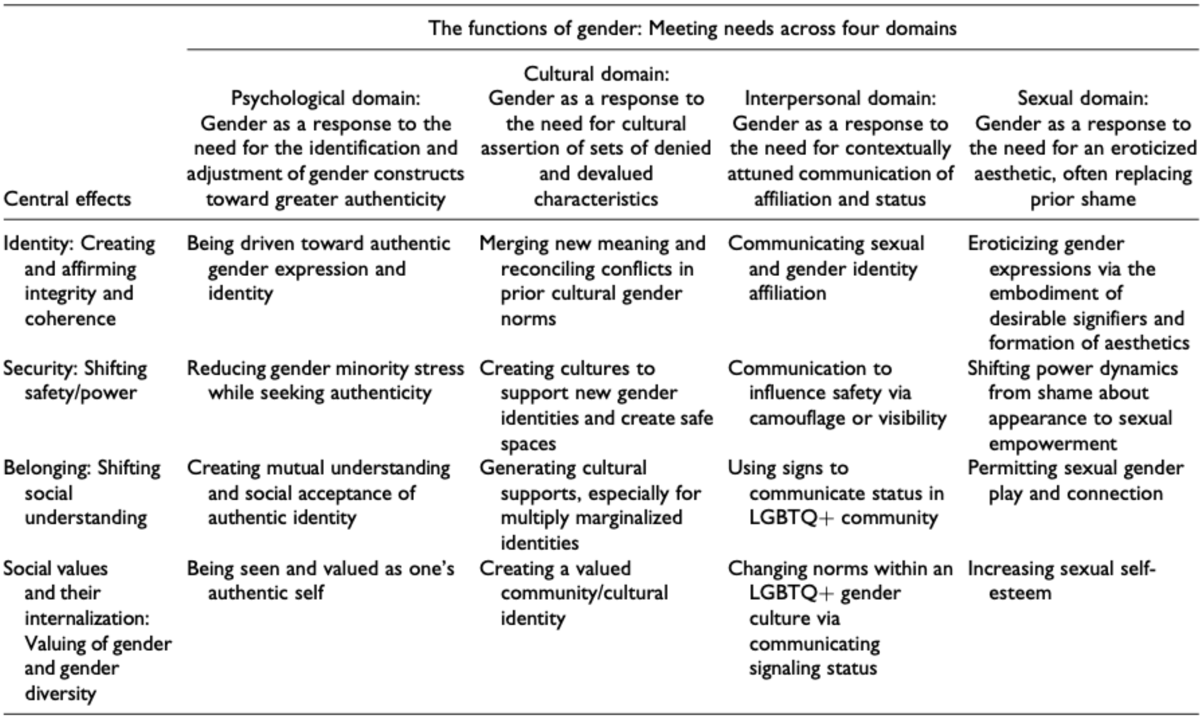
Another potentially useful distinction is that the term "euphoria" may convey an extremely high intensity of positive affect whereas "pleasure" does not. Many participants in Chapter 2 did describe gender euphoria as extremely positive, related to elation, crying with joy, and personally transformative experiences. However, in contrast with this, some did describe gender euphoria in less intense terms, like contentment or "slightly above neutral."

Taken together, these insights suggest that gender euphoria might be most appropriate for gender/sex minority experiences of high intensity, but also that the distinction between euphoria and pleasure is highly contingent upon an individual and how they conceptualize their experiences. It may also be that the language of gender euphoria is known and understood by gender/sex minority individuals to refer to any pleasure tied to gender/sex and/or transition, and so used for pleasure at any intensity; the availability of other language (like gender pleasure) might add to the affective lexicon. However, I certainly do not claim the authority to determine for any person which gender pleasure experiences would qualify as gender euphoria or not. But, having the construct of gender pleasure opens up space for this to even be a question. Moreover, having a term like gender pleasure avoids foreclosing on the recognition and exploration of positive gender/sex experiences for gender/sex majorities and at lower intensities than gender euphoria may convey. In any case, I would caution against the transport of gender euphoria outside of the contexts and communities in which it was created.

Gender/Sex Diversity Research

This dissertation contributes community-grounded evidence of positive affective experiences to gender/sex diversity research in psychology. As I described in Chapter 1, gender/sex diversity research goes against psychology's history of pathologizing minoritized gender/sex by holding that there is no "correct" or "natural" way for aspects of people's gender/sexes to branch or coincide (to use language from SCT; van Anders, 2015). Indeed, some participants reported finding others' perceptions of their branchedness as a source of gender pleasure! And, the results of both current studies highlight that *individuals* can experience particular forms of branchedness and/or coincidence as resonant for themselves, and that this resonance is often experienced quite positively. Thinking of gender pleasure as resonance can thus highlight notions of authentically felt gender/sex without relying on gender/sex essentialism, or the idea that gender/sex categories are natural "kinds" that all share some underlying essence (Bastian & Haslam, 2006). In other words, while there is no one "right" way of doing womanhood, femininity, nonbinaryness, people can still have orientations towards gender/sex that mean some ways of being and doing can feel more right *for them*. This idea is in line with work in transgender studies that argues for the recognition both of people's deeply felt senses of gender/sex and of the fluidity and capaciousness of gender/sex categories at a societal level (Elliot, 2010; Nagoshi & Brzuzy, 2010).

Some gender/sex diversity research is concerned with what gender/sex *is* or *does*, and gender pleasure as a construct contributes to these by highlighting how gender/sex *feels*. Returning to Levitt's (2019) theory of "LGBTQ+ gender," the current studies' results add a pleasure component to many of the functions of gender for gender/sex/ual minorities. Levitt's theory posits that gender has functional aspects related to identity, security, belonging, and social values (see Table X). Results in Chapters 2 and 3 corroborate many of these functions and highlight how the fulfillment of these functions can result in pleasure. For example, for identity within the interpersonal domain, gender functions as a way to communicate “sexual and gender identity affiliation.” In my work, participants in Chapter 3 recounted how it felt good to communicate their identities through gender expression. They liked when other LGBTQ+ people saw them as part of their community due to gender expression cues. As another example, for identity in the psychological domain, people are “driven toward authentic gender expression and identity.” In both of my studies, authenticity was a major component of participants’ accounts of gender euphoria and pleasure. It seems that people are indeed driven toward authentic gender/sex and that pleasure plays a role, potentially both as an internal reward for achieving authenticity and as a cue as to what feels authentic. Thus, attention to pleasure can enrich gender/sex diversity theories like Levitt’s through the acknowledgment of affective components.



	The functions of gender: Meeting needs across four domains			
Central effects	Psychological domain: Gender as a response to the need for the identification and adjustment of gender constructs toward greater authenticity	Cultural domain: Gender as a response to the need for cultural assertion of sets of denied and devalued characteristics	Interpersonal domain: Gender as a response to the need for contextually attuned communication of affiliation and status	Sexual domain: Gender as a response to the need for an eroticized aesthetic, often replacing prior shame
Identity: Creating and affirming integrity and coherence	Being driven toward authentic gender expression and identity	Merging new meaning and reconciling conflicts in prior cultural gender norms	Communicating sexual and gender identity affiliation	Eroticizing gender expressions via the embodiment of desirable signifiers and formation of aesthetics
Security: Shifting safety/power	Reducing gender minority stress while seeking authenticity	Creating cultures to support new gender identities and create safe spaces	Communication to influence safety via camouflage or visibility	Shifting power dynamics from shame about appearance to sexual empowerment
Belonging: Shifting social understanding	Creating mutual understanding and social acceptance of authentic identity	Generating cultural supports, especially for multiply marginalized identities	Using signs to communicate status in LGBTQ+ community	Permitting sexual gender play and connection
Social values and their internalization: Valuing of gender and gender diversity	Being seen and valued as one’s authentic self	Creating a valued community/cultural identity	Changing norms within an LGBTQ+ gender culture via communicating signaling status	Increasing sexual self-esteem

Figure 4-1. *The functions of gender and their central effects, reprinted from Levitt (2019)*

This dissertation also contributes to understandings of interactions between gender and sex. In Chapter 2, an early coding scheme attempted to delineate between experiences related to sexed bodies and experiences related to social gender roles and gender expression. However, we found that these distinctions quickly broke down. For example, participants discussed experiences like chest binding that seemed to be about secondary sex characteristics, because it was a technique for changing body shape, but also about gender expression, because it was accomplished through clothing. Participants in both studies also discussed "passing" or being read as their gender/sex. It was often unclear whether this was accomplished through sexed features, gender expression, or a combination. Indeed, past research has demonstrated that both gender and sex are important in the gender/sex attributions that others make (Dozier, 2005; Kessler & McKenna, 1978; Schilt & Westbrook, 2009). Experiences of gender pleasure, then, provide further evidence for the entanglement of gender and sex for many individuals, supporting my use of "gender/sex" throughout this dissertation and the value of gender/sex for psychology (Fausto-Sterling, 2019; van Anders, 2015a).

Intersectionality and Pleasure Activism

I used intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1989, 1991; McCormick-Huhn et al., 2019) as a framework for Chapter 3, and this framework helped me gain a broader understanding of gender pleasure and the role power plays in its construction. Cole (2009) has suggested that to incorporate intersectionality within psychology, researchers should consider three main questions: "First, who is included within this category? Second, what role does inequality play? Third, where are there similarities?" (p. 171). Asking myself each of these questions substantially contributed to this dissertation. One way I considered the first question was by assessing the demographic makeup of the samples in each study. I highlighted the lack of racial/ethnic diversity in Chapter 2 and addressed this by devoting half the focus groups in Chapter 3 to people of color, while noting the limitations of this and other features of my samples. To address the second question, I maintained the view that cisheteronormativity shapes gender pleasure throughout this dissertation and, in Chapter 3, how cisheteronormativity and gender pleasure experiences may be shaped by disadvantage and privilege based on other axes and intersections of oppression (e.g., racism, ableism). And, to address the third question, in Chapter 3 I noted the many similarities in gender pleasure across gender/sex majorities and minorities.

These three intersectional questions led me to broader understandings of gender pleasure particularly for people of color. Chapter 3 highlighted that gender pleasure, much like gender/sex in general, is often already racialized (Snorton, 2017). Participants of color found gender pleasure within their racial/ethnic identities and communities despite ongoing racism and colonization. One participant's appreciation of "being friends with more queer people of color who checked [his] multiple internalized unrealistic beauty standards" was particularly revealing as one mechanism by which communities of color may provide gender pleasure. Hegemonic beauty standards center white appearance norms and thus may impinge upon experiences of gender pleasure for people of color (Robinson-Moore, 2008; Silvestrini, 2020). As this participant noted and as past research has shown, communities of color can disrupt these beauty standards, providing avenues for the deconstruction of their internalization (Lindsey, 2013). Insights like these make clear the value of an intersectional frame for understanding gender pleasure experiences and the contexts in which they occur.

The findings in Chapters 2 and 3 also led me to wonder if a fourth intersectional question might be added: where are the positives? As I noted in Chapter 3, research with multiply marginalized people often focuses on the negatives. This makes sense as there are many points of harm generated by the intersections of oppressions. However, my studies and others' point to the utility of also understanding the ways in which multiply marginalized people playfully resist harmful norms, find pleasure in their communities, and experience joy from their bodies (e.g., Leath et al., 2022; Singh, 2013). What else might we find if we look for pleasure across intersections and despite systems of power? As adrienne marie brown says in *Pleasure Activism: The Politics of Feeling Good* (2019):

> …I experience a lot of pleasure in being Black. I love Black girl magic, Black joy, Black love, and work toward Black liberation. I feel unapologetic glee at the ways in which we subvert white supremacy, dominate culture, and "coolness," often inviting people to the pleasures we have constructed from dreams and thin air. (p. 2)

Brown goes on to argue that pleasure can be a central organizing feature of activism and that "we must prioritize the pleasure of those most impacted by oppression" (p. 13). Access to and experiences of pleasure are issues of oppression and privilege that need to be addressed through social change. I believe that psychological research could play a role in this kind of social change by providing accounts of the pleasure people do experience, even in potentially unexpected places. With this knowledge, we might better build a society that provides more equitable access to living pleasurable and fulfilling lives. For example, findings in Chapter 3 and others highlight the racism prevalent within white-dominant LGBTQ+ spaces, something well-documented (Abreu et al., 2021; Nadal et al., 2015), but additionally demonstrate how this constrains the possibilities for people of color to experience gender pleasure within and related to these spaces. This raises the possibility that anti-racism work in general and specifically within

LGBTQ+ spaces could work to create more equitable access to gender pleasure across race/ethnicity.

Limitations and Future Directions

In Chapters 2 and 3, I discussed the limitations of each individual study, including the social location characteristics of the samples and specific questions I asked of participants. Here, I provide a broader view of some of the limitations of the methods I chose and my theoretical perspectives in both studies, as well as promising avenues for future research.

The participants in Chapters 2 and 3 were all minoritized on the basis of their gender/sexes and/or sexualities. Both studies' results indicated that minoritization greatly shaped participants' gender pleasure experiences, but I conceptualize gender pleasure as potentially relevant to people of all gender/sexes So, what might gender pleasure look like in gender/sex/ual majorities? An undergraduate honors student in our lab ran focus groups similar to those in Chapter 3 with gender/sex/ual majorities to explore this question (Freshley et al., in prep). The results are currently being analyzed and are outside the scope of this dissertation, but the preliminary data support gender pleasure as a relevant and generative construct within majority contexts.

Studies in Chapters 2 and 3 used online surveys and focus groups (respectively), which are best suited for garnering a broad understanding of a certain topic (Braun et al., 2020; Braun & Clarke, 2013). I therefore used the data to map out rough landscapes of gender euphoria and gender pleasure. But, these methods are not as well-suited for achieving a depth of understanding because they do not often generate detailed personal narratives (Braun & Clarke, 2013). Findings in both studies, and perhaps especially the model built in Chapter 3 (Figure 3-1), could provide researchers and others a roadmap for achieving deeper knowledge of gender pleasure in future research. This could involve better understanding the contextual factors that might modulate the frequency, intensity, and quality of gender pleasure. For example, data in Chapter 3 suggested that there was a difference between gender pleasure in relation to affirming experiences from strangers versus from close circles. Does the source of affirmation have differing impacts on how pleasurable these experiences are? Are some people more likely to experience pleasure from one source over another? These kinds of questions could be answered with one-on-one interviews or other more immersive methods (e.g., ethnography) that allow for deeper understandings of people's "lifeworlds" (Neubauer et al., 2019).

The methods in Chapters 2 and 3 were also cross-sectional in that they asked participants to reflect on their experiences at only one time point and thus were not able to directly address changes over time (though some participants did mention changes over time). Gender pleasure could contribute to gender/sex development by shaping our gender/sexes and our social environments over time. That is, how we come to identify and construct our gender/sexes over a lifespan may be informed by what makes us feel good, and how we construct our environments may be shaped by what brings us pleasure. This is evidenced by participants in Chapter 2 sharing that gender euphoria has informed their decisions around gender/sex transition, which often involves changes to people's bodies, self-perceptions, and/or social environments (Budge et al., 2013; Diamond & Butterworth, 2008; Spielmann & Stern, 2019). Longitudinal research designs could more deeply explore gender pleasure's role in the unfolding of our gender/sexed lives.

Throughout this dissertation, I have focused on research from Western cultures, and all participants in Chapters 2 and 3 were from the US or Canada. This has certainly limited the scope of my understandings of gender pleasure. Given that gender/sex possibilities are often socially constructed and constrained, experiences of gender pleasure are likely to vary across cultures and be limited and/or expanded by state and cultural structures. For example, authenticity was a major feature of participants' experiences of gender euphoria and pleasure, but authenticity is a distinctly modern, Western construct and tied to individualism (Handler, 1986). Authenticity, then, may not be a central component of gender pleasure writ large, including for people outside Western cultures. Future work could uncover the ways gender pleasure looks and its impacts on people's lives in other cultural contexts.

This dissertation also provides avenues for thinking creatively about other gender/sex constructs. One example that follows from gender pleasure could be "gender pain" or "gender displeasure." As I argued in Chapter 1, there is a large body of research that looks at the negative aspects of gender/sex. Perhaps labeling these experiences as "gender displeasure" could generatively bring together experiences that are often researched separately, including gender dysphoria and some tied to sexism. For example, gender displeasure research may benefit from conceptualizing gender dysphoria as one kind of dissonance between gender/sex orientations and statuses, just as gender euphoria can be thought of as one kind of resonance between gender/sex orientations and statuses. This raises the possibility that gender dissonance might be relevant for people of many social locations, including those who do not experience gender dysphoria. For example, a masculine cisgender woman might experience dissonance if her womanhood is challenged (as can happen in women's restrooms; Andersson, 2021). Or, a cisgender heterosexual man who is oriented towards masculinity might experience dissonance if his masculinity or manhood is called into question (as suggested by research on "precarious manhood"; Vandello & Bosson, 2013). Future work could help flesh out the ways gender dissonances are shared or not across social locations.

Further gender/sex constructs beyond pleasure and displeasure also warrant investigation. "Gender envy," or wanting to look like how someone else embodies and/or expresses their gender/sex ("Gender Envy," n.d.), is another gender/sex construct that comes from gender/sex minority communities that is largely unrecognized in psychological research. Other constructs that were suggested by the results in Chapter 3 were "gender imaginary," "gender neutrality," and "gender role models." Thus, thinking expansively about gender/sex as a process that involves affect, cognition, social interaction, and more provides many opportunities for gaining a fuller understanding of gender/sex in psychology. This dissertation could be one model for mapping out these and other constructs.

Throughout this dissertation, I have adopted an affirming tone towards experiences of gender euphoria and pleasure which has shaped my methods, analyses, and conclusions. It has been my position that these experiences are important in their own right and generally are positive in the lives of people minoritized on the basis of their gender/sex/ualities. This is supported by participants in both studies emphasizing the "life-saving" power of gender pleasure and euphoria. This stance is also in line with trans politics that views gender/sex diversity as something to celebrate and foster (Stryker, 2006a).

This political approach came through in my methodological choices in many ways. As one example, my fellow moderator and I in Study 2 adopted an affirming, positive tone within the focus groups. The other group members also often affirmed each other's experiences, which was perhaps facilitated by our own affirming tone. While I believe this was an important methodological choice to enable participants to feel free to voice their positive experiences, it likely prevented other experiences from being voiced. For example, a few participants noted that their gender pleasure experiences came with a sense of guilt, whether because they were related to privilege or the reproduction of gender norms. However, we did not often pursue those feelings in-depth and did not actively encourage participants to engage with the complicated or "mixed" feelings around gender pleasure, though we did ask about barriers to gender pleasure. Future work could engage more deeply around feelings like guilt, shame, or sadness that coincide with experiences of gender pleasure.

Furthermore, as with all methods, the particular questions I asked in both studies necessarily limited potential insights into gender euphoria and pleasure. For example, in Study 1 almost all questions in the survey were directly about gender euphoria and/or dysphoria. This allowed me to understand the meanings of these terms and their related experiences. Another route I could have taken would have been to ask about positive gender/sex experiences and then ask whether participants would describe them as gender euphoria. This route may have elicited different experiences than described in Study 1. It also may have provided more insight into the relationship between gender pleasure and gender euphoria as participants may have had thoughts about what "counts" as gender euphoria or not.

In Study 2, I asked an intentionally broad question about how gender pleasure intersects with their other identities, which provided a wide range of potential foci for future research, such as age, fatness/body size, neurodivergence, race/ethnicity, and spirituality. However, this question did not facilitate extended discussion of particular intersections. Some participants of color voiced that they would have especially liked devoted time to talk about their race/ethnicities and cultures. This may have provided deeper insight into this intersection and how racism and/or colonization affect gender pleasure.

Finally, I did not explicitly ask about sexuality in either study. Though sexuality came up in both studies, a more directed discussion of how gender pleasure is related to people's sexual experiences would be beneficial, especially as sexuality is one of the four domains in Levitt's (2019) theory of LGBTQ+ gender. In Study 2, some participants voiced hesitancy about whether they were "allowed" to talk about their explicit sexual experiences, perhaps because these experiences are often seen as taboo in Western cultures (Halperin & Hoppe, 2017). We encouraged them to discuss these experiences when they were brought up, but questions from us as moderators about sexuality may have made participants more comfortable to share these potentially sensitive experiences. Future work could explore how gender pleasure functions in moments of sexual intimacy, how people's sexual identities inform their experiences of gender pleasure, and more.

Is Gender Pleasure Always "Good"?

Until this point, I have largely uncritically equated "gender pleasure" with "positive" or "good." In this dissertation, I focused on what participants described as positive experiences in their lives, but I did not explore the complexities of what counts as positive. In this section, I complicate the notion that gender pleasure is inherently "good."

Throughout this dissertation, I have been framing gender pleasure as positive experiences that are valuable for individuals to have. This is not unwarranted, as research has shown that experiencing positive emotions has many beneficial effects (Lyubomirsky et al., 2005). However, affect theorists have complicated the relationship between pleasure, emotion, and "goodness" (Leach, 2019; Solomon & Stone, 2002). For one, to "feel good" is not always "good" in a moral or functional sense. Leach (2019) argues that the experience of "schadenfreude," or taking pleasure in other people's misfortune, is one primary example of the moral dubiousness of pleasure. Similarly, "prosocial" constructs like trust and social bonds can bring with them exclusion and oppression of outgroup members (van Anders et al., 2013).

Solomon and Stone (2002) make the case for doing away with simplistic notions of "positive" and "negative" emotions. "Negative" emotions can involve pleasure, like with righteous anger, and "positive" emotions can involve pain, like with the tribulations of love. Furthermore, excessive consumption driven by seeking pleasure, for example of food, drugs, or clothing, often exploits others and the Earth's resources in unsustainable ways, and may be bad for our health (Ehrlich & Goulder, 2007). So, there is no straightforward relationship between what feels good, what makes emotions "positive," and what is good for ourselves, others, and the rest of nature. Just as gender/sex diversity frameworks encourage us to think beyond woman/man binaries, so does affective theory ask us to think beyond positive/negative or good/bad binaries.

What do these insights mean for gender pleasure? For one, they implicate ethical considerations into how gender pleasure is achieved. A narrow focus on gender pleasure could play into individualistic ideals at the expense of the collective. For example, in my dissertation, clothing was an important way many people experienced gender euphoria or pleasure. But, where do these clothes come from? "Fast fashion," or the mass production and consumption of cheaply-made clothing, often uses exploited labor in the Global South and is among the world's leading polluting industries (Niinimäki et al., 2020). So, if fast fashion is how someone affirms their gender/sex, the resulting gender pleasure may not be purely "good" in an ethical sense. Moreover, clothing can raise new norms and imperatives for others in general (thus having the harm of creating norms some but not others may meet) and that instantiate personhood in appearance (thus having the harm of creating norms that how/who we are should be readable in how we look). In raising this consideration, I do not mean to blame people seeking gender/sex affirmation through clothing, as of course people of many social locations consume fast fashion and contribute to appearance norms. And, fast fashion may be the only available or affordable option for minoritized people who experience socioeconomic oppression. Rather, I use this example to demonstrate the ethical complexity of behaviors related to gender pleasure to complicate the simple association of “pleasure” with “goodness.”

Beyond ethical considerations, the “good/bad” binary is challenged by results from my dissertation research in other ways. I found that gender pleasure experiences can involve a mix of positive and negative feelings or derive their pleasure in contrast to oppressive experiences. These findings complicate gender pleasure experiences as simply “good” or “positive” in and of themselves. If an experience is positive because it exists in contradistinction to oppression, this calls into question its inherent positivity (because it relies on something quite negative). So, instead of an inherent positivity, I relied on phenomenological positivity. Figure 3-2 uses a positive/negative spectrum, but I do not mean to imply that positive and negative are universal, but rather contextual phenomenological experiences. These insights work to bolster my use of “pleasure” in “gender pleasure,” as it centers the subjective experience of pleasure, which other terms like “gender positivity” may not.

I would argue that a recognition of gender pleasure is a net gain to our understanding of gender/sex and the possibilities for marginalized people to thrive. But, this does not mean gender pleasure is uncomplicatedly “good,” or that it should always be pursued at the expense of others, community goals, health, or the environment. Future research, then, is needed to dig into the contextual and multifaceted effects of gender pleasure. In what ways or contexts does it facilitate growth, well-being, or community wholeness? In what ways or contexts might it reinscribe harmful power structures or come at the cost of others’ well-being? The answers are likely far from simple.

Conclusion

In this dissertation, I proposed the construct of gender pleasure to describe positive affective experiences related to people's gender/sexes. In two qualitative studies, I found that gender/sex/ual minorities experience gender pleasure, including gender euphoria, from many aspects of their gender/sex identities, gender/sex communities, gender expressions, and sexed bodies. I also demonstrated the ways in which cisheteronormativity and other intersecting systems of power shape experiences of gender pleasure. Though gender/sex can bring with it harms, pain, and oppression both individually and societally, my hope is that this dissertation provides avenues for recognizing and uplifting what people can enjoy about gender/sex. As Audre Lorde (1984) said of sexual pleasure, "once we know the extent to which we are capable of feeling that sense of satisfaction and completion, we can then observe which of our various life endeavors brings us closest to that fullness" (pp. 54-55). Gender pleasure, then, may also be one engine in the drive toward a full life.

Appendices

Appendix 1

Introduction (5 mins)

[Before the focus group starts, have on the screen the following instructions: "Welcome! We will get started soon. If you would like to change your pronouns or pseudonym before we start, you can do so by clicking the three dots next to "Attendees" and clicking "Edit My Info." If you do change your pseudonym, please let us know so we can keep track. And, it will probably be best if you maximize the chat window by clicking the Fullscreen button next to the three dots in the chat window. You can also change the font size and font color by clicking on those three dots."]

Hi everyone! We're just going to wait a couple of minutes before we begin in case some folks are a bit late. Thanks for your patience!

Okay let's begin! Thanks so much for taking the time to participate in this focus group. I really appreciate it :)

I'm going to first give you a lot of information for you to read, and plenty of time to read through it, before asking you any questions. Also as a note, if you get disconnected, just click the same link and you'll be brought right back here and you'll be able to see the full chat.

The purpose of this focus group session is to gather data on positive experiences people have in relation to their gender. But we also recognize that a lot of our experiences can be a mix of good and bad, and we want to know about that as well! If you find that what we discuss is too painful for you, please take care of yourselves in whatever way you need, including exiting the group.

We are interested in the varied experiences and perspectives that each of you can share. Please feel free to discuss your actual experiences and opinions, however specific to yourself they may be—we are interested in *your* unique experiences and do not expect you to represent everyone in any group (e.g., gender, age, ethnicity, sexual identity) that you may identify with.

This is a focus group for **[gender majority LGBQ+ people of color, gender majority LGBQ+ people, gender minority people of color, gender minority people]** which is a broad group, so it's likely that not everyone self-identifies the same way you do or has similar experiences. Feel free to talk about any of your experiences relevant to the discussion topics, regardless of how you identify.

Before we start our discussion, I'd like to go over a few suggestions. Feel free to present an opinion that differs from someone else's. So if you think "that's not how I feel," then I encourage you to speak up! We are interested in both similarities and variations in your experiences. So it's helpful for us to know how and when people's experiences are different from one another. But, please be respectful and avoid put-downs of people who might have different experiences. We are not here to debate other people's experiences.

I encourage you to discuss amongst yourselves. My role as moderator will be to stimulate conversation with discussion questions and ask follow-up questions. But, also please feel free to react to what others are saying. For example, if you've had a similar experience as someone, you can say so! Or, if your experiences are quite different, you can say that as well. And, you don't need to respond to every question if you don't have much to add or if you just want to read through and react to what others are saying.

This focus group is anonymous—everyone has provided a pseudonym so they don't have to reveal any personal information. But, there may be times when identifying information is relevant to someone's experience and they choose to share that. In this case, we ask that you not share the information discussed here outside of the group.

You may tell others that you were in a focus group and the general topic of the discussion, but please do not repeat any identifying information of others. Obviously we can't guarantee this, but can we all agree that we will keep what is shared here confidential so this can be an open space for discussion? Please type "yes" if you agree :) **[wait for assent from the group]**.

Thank you! But please do keep in mind that we can't guarantee this, so please use your best judgement as to what you are willing to share.

Just a note: my colleague **[name]** is also in this group as a technical assistant and to take notes.

Does anyone have any questions for me at this point?

Opening question (1 question; 3 mins)

To help us get to know each other a little better: **[moderator: pick one]**

- What's something fun or boring you did in the past week?
- If you had to describe yourself in three words, what would they be?

Introductory question (1 question; 5 mins)

If someone asked about your gender, what labels or terms might you use? Feel free to list any words that describe your gender. For example, some labels I use are **femme, AMAB, genderfluid, queer, drag queen. [moderator: change to: futch, genderqueer, lesbian]**

- Thank you! Can you pick one of those labels and talk about what it means to you?
- Just a note, you can all respond to questions at the same time. And if you want to expand on a question and we've already moved on, I still would love to hear your original thoughts!
- I also understand that different identities (e.g., race/ethnicity) that you might possess could impact how you experience your gender. So you are more than welcome to answer questions about your gender as it relates to your other identities! You are also welcome to discuss sexuality and sexual

activities—that's all fair game. Though we ask that you be respectful if people voice discomfort with anything you bring up.

Transition question (1 question; 5 mins)

Ok so now we're going to turn to the focus of today's discussion: the positive experiences we might have related to our gender. When I use the term "gender" throughout this discussion, I'm referring to the labels you listed, how you express your gender, your body and/or physical appearance if they are related to your gender, how you interact with other people, the ways that societal structures (like government documents and healthcare systems) label your gender, and so on. Basically any kind of behavior or experience you might have that is related to your gender identity, expression, and/or experience. Does that make sense? Does anybody have questions about my use of the term "gender"? **[wait for responses]**

Great, thank you! I'm going to start with a story of the kind of thing I'm thinking about. So I was watching a documentary recently about a woman who identified as masculine-of-center, and she recounted a story of putting boxer shorts on for the first time and it changing everything. She felt *so good* in these shorts, especially compared to the clothes she had been wearing, which she considered to be more feminine.

What do people think of this story? Does it resonate with you? Why or why not?

Key questions (8-10 questions; 80 mins)

Are there things you put on or take off your body that give you satisfaction or even joy? These could be things like clothes, accessories, cosmetics, shoes, etc.

Why do you think these things make you feel this way?

Follow-up if relation to gender is unclear: Are these related to your gender? If so, how?

Is there anything about your body that has brought you happiness in relation to your gender? This could be how your body is shaped, ways you've modified your body, things you do with your body, etc.

Can you think of other things you do that help you feel joy, satisfaction, or happiness from your gender? Like, I love dancing and it's one of my favorite ways to express myself and my gender.

Are there things you wish you could do or have that might make you feel good about your gender?

Can you think of ways that interacting with other people has made you feel good about your gender or gender expression? This could be interactions with friends, family, strangers, co-workers, or just society in general.

Are there interactions you wish you could have with other people that would make you feel good about your gender?

Are there any negative or unhappy feelings that have popped up while thinking about these good experiences?

[IF participants barely bring up barriers earlier: What do you feel are some barriers to you experiencing enjoyment from your gender?]

Can you give an example of how another aspect of your identity that hasn't been brought up has affected your positive gender experiences?

Has the COVID-19 pandemic affected the way you experience your gender? If so, how?

Ending questions (2-3 questions; 10 mins)

What other topics do you wish I had asked about or think are important for me to know?

What do you think is the most important thing people should understand about these kinds of positive experiences and behaviors? And when I say “people” I mean general society, the culture in which you live.

How much had you thought about these kinds of positive experiences before today’s discussion?

[**IF THERE’S TIME**:] What did you think about this chat-based focus group? Especially compared to a Zoom room discussion?

Some general probes to clarify/get more information:

- It looks like people are talking about X, Y, and Z. Does that seem accurate? Do you have anything to add?
- If anyone has anything they’ve been thinking or typing out I’ll wait a bit for those responses before moving on.
- Please tell me (more) about that…
- Could you explain what you mean by…
- Can you tell me something else about…
- Can you give me an example?
- Are there specific contexts or environments that you tend to experience this in?
- Why do you think it felt that way?
- What is it about x that made you feel good?
- What do the rest of you think about that statement?
- Has anyone else had that experience?
- Has that changed over time?
- Would you say that experience was positive? Negative? Neutral?

Closing remarks (3 mins)

That’s it for today! Thank you all so much for your time and effort during this discussion. I really learned a lot so thank you for your wonderful contributions!

For participating, you will be receiving a $40 USD/$50 CAD payment by email within the next 30 days. We will also email you a debriefing form summarizing the study and its purpose.

Thank you! And, if there’s something you think of that we didn’t get to talk about today, please feel free to email me! Or if you have any questions about anything related to the study you’re also welcome to email me.

Thanks again and have a great day! ☺

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