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Gender Identity in the Digital Age: Understanding the Interplay Between Social Media  
Communities and Gender Expression for the Gender Non-Conforming

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## Abstract

### Gender Identity in the Digital Age: Understanding the Interplay Between Social Media Communities and Gender Expression for the Gender Non-Conforming By Kirsten Oglesby

Social media has emerged as a powerful space for self-exploration, identity formation, and community engagement. This study examines the role of online communities and personalities in shaping gender identity and expression for the gender nonconforming, focusing on how individuals navigate, construct, and negotiate their gender identity within these virtual spaces. Expanding on Darwin's concept of "doing genderqueer," this research utilizes a mixed-methods approach to recognize the role of social media communities and personalities alongside how social media communities and personalities shape one's understanding of gender nonconformity. Findings suggest that social media communities and personalities play educational and affirming roles for gender-nonconforming individuals, with communities playing a larger role compared to personalities. Similarly, such interactions from the gender nonconforming community act as a potential reminder of earlier gender questioning, contributing to their identity formation. However, findings also suggest that social media platforms act as reinforcers of societal norms, often limiting the reach of gender-nonconforming content and communities. This research contributes to ongoing discussions regarding gender, identity, and technology, highlighting the constantly evolving relationship between self-exploration and digital communities within contemporary society.

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## INTRODUCTION

The rise of digital technology has dramatically influenced society, increasing connectivity and communication between individuals and organizations that would otherwise have never crossed paths. Digital technology, as it continued to evolve, gave rise to digital media and platforms, creating influential spaces for exploring interests and building community. From embracing certain music genres to sharing cooking tips and tricks, these communities flourished, connecting individuals globally to different phenomena and perspectives. With the rise of interest-based online communities, communities embracing and discussing their gender and sexual orientations began to rise. Through algorithm-driven content exposure and digital activism, gender-non-conforming individuals—individuals who do not adhere to the gender expectations correlated to the sex they were assigned at birth—began to interact on a large scale, sharing their experiences and interests with a global audience while constructing their identities (Colosi, Cowen, and Todd 2023:2). The concepts of non-cisgender identities and their expressions emerged and began evolving the discourse of gender identity. Once confined to rigid binary structures, the concepts of gender identity and expression began to challenge the traditional conceptions of Western gender norms through social media posts and communities.

West and Zimmerman's "Doing Gender" (1987) coins the idea of doing gender, recognizing gender as extrinsic and constantly performed through everyday interactions. Here, they emphasize that gender is embedded in institutional structures and maintained through accountability to societal norms, reinforcing the traditional binary distinctions between masculinity and femininity. However, their framework largely assumes gender as a stable, dichotomous category while disregarding the idea of gender ever falling outside of the strict

binary of masculine or feminine. This gap—West and Zimmerman’s lack of attention to the fluidity and multiplicity of gender identities—underscores the need for research on how individuals who identify outside of this strict gender binary navigate the concept of “doing gender” outside of the masculine/feminine binary.

In contemporary society, social media platforms—Instagram, TikTok, and Reddit, to name a few—have allowed gender discourse to flourish, allowing users to engage with their identities through hashtags, discussion forums, and algorithm-based content. While these platforms have provided unmatched visibility for non-normative gender expression, such platforms have also been sites of contention for scholars. Current scholarship discussing social media has explored aspects of online identity formation, digital activism, and the role of social media influencers in shaping public perceptions. However, existing research has seldom addressed how gender-non-conforming individuals—individuals who are non-cisgender or do not identify with the gender corresponding to their sex and gender assigned at birth—interact with social media. Sociological research focusing on gender studies, particularly the idea of gender as a social construct, tends to assess the idea of “doing gender” in terms of a binary. In assessing gender identity and gender roles from a “doing gender” framework, existing sociological research rarely considers non-binary individuals and their understanding of gender identity and gender roles.

This study aims to address this gap by bridging these concepts and expanding upon Helana Darwin’s “doing transgender” and “doing genderqueer” frameworks branching from the “doing gender” framework from West and Zimmerman. This study seeks to examine the lived experiences of gender-non-conforming social media users and their interactions with social

media, especially regarding gender-related content. By analyzing how users navigate these discussions and what they gain from exposure to and interaction with gendered discourses, this research aims to provide insight into the complex relationship between social media and gender identity and expression for the gender non-conforming. Understanding the significance of such interactions is crucial for understanding broader sociological trends regarding identity formation and social media influence, as well as the potential implications for policy, education, and advocacy related to gender inclusivity.

Such research is also important, as President Trump of the United States of America signed executive orders on his first day in office targeting the lives of gender-non-conforming individuals. The primary order, entitled “DEFENDING WOMEN FROM GENDER IDEOLOGY EXTREMISM AND RESTORING BIOLOGICAL TRUTH TO THE FEDERAL GOVERNMENT,” signifies a binary approach to gender and sex, neither of which is accurate. The executive order established federal policies defining sex strictly as male or female and basing such distinctions on biological characteristics determined at birth. This order also requires all federal agencies to adhere to such definitions, repealing previous policies recognizing gender identity. Further in the executive order, Trump requires federal agencies to address individuals by their sex rather than their gender, requiring government-issued documents to reflect the holder’s sex rather than their gender (The White House 2025a). A second executive order, entitled “Ending Radical And Wasteful Government DEI Programs And Preferencing,” calls for the removal of any DEI programs—Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion—within federal positions “to the maximum extent allowed by law” (The White House 2025b). Although not explicitly mentioned, individuals identifying within the LGBTQIA+ community often fall under the guise

of DEI. As Trump signed both executive orders on his first day in office and has continued to write executive orders harming LGBTQIA+ individuals and spreading harmful rhetoric regarding the community, this public heightened stigma toward gender nonconformity would potentially fuel the flight toward social media for gender nonconforming individuals to explore their identities and build community.

To investigate this phenomenon, the research poses the following questions: How do digital platforms and social media interactions influence one's understanding and interpretation of gender identity and expression? What role do online personalities and communities play in this process, especially for gender non-conforming individuals? These questions guide the study's objectives, including exploring assessments of digital engagement patterns and evaluating the impact of social media on personal gender expression. To address these questions, I conducted 10 interviews and administered 43 surveys to gender-nonconforming individuals.

The thesis is structured as follows: the literature review contextualizes gender identity within digital spaces, highlighting key theories and prior research. The methodology section outlines the qualitative and quantitative approaches used to analyze social media interactions, discussing both approaches in their respective sections. The results section interprets the findings via analysis within a broader sociological framework, including unexpected findings and their significance. In conclusion, the discussion session assesses potential flaws in the research design and discusses implications for future research and society.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

Tackling gender identity, specifically as it relates to the digital age and social media, requires an interdisciplinary approach, particularly with the limited literature covering the

specific relationship between gender identity and social media. The literature focusing either on gender identity or social media influence on identity formation highlights the complexities of both topics and their potential overlap. This literature review explores three key themes: (1) the evolution of gender discourse; (2) the negotiation of gender identity and expression in a binarily gendered world; and (3) the role of social media in identity formation and gender expression.

### *The Evolution of Gender Discourse*

Historically, cultural societies and sociopolitical frameworks have influenced how individuals address and identify gender. As earlier mentioned in Goldie's (2014) piece, sex and gender were originally tackled within the field of sexology. The study of sexology evolved significantly over time, originally having a negative connotation in the 1860s to its rather current and neutral connotation from the early 1900s (Goldie 2014:9). Connectedly, sexology originally had a medical emphasis while later emphasizing psychology and psychiatry; rather, individuals with some sense of psychology, such as social workers or educators, typically embraced the term sexologist, including early sexologists who were typically physicians (Goldie 2014:9). As the study of human sexuality and sexual development has evolved, so have the concepts they aim to study.

With sexology covering human sexuality alongside sexual development, John Money aided in recognizing intersex as a way to understand all aspects of gender and sexuality (Goldie 2014:39). For this study, intersex is defined as an individual who has reproductive or sexual anatomies that do not fit into the traditional male/female sex binary (Cleveland Clinic 2023). In John Money's case, he utilized intersex as a way to highlight the naturalness of the lack of strict binaries and how this naturalness can influence conversations regarding the traditional binary

lenses of gender and sexuality. Although history has always recognized intersex individuals, historical portrayals of intersex individuals emphasized negativity, often placing intersex individuals in freak shows or viewing intersex individuals as mistakes from nature. John Money challenged this notion in his 1955 article, “An Examination of Some Basic Sexual Concepts: The Evidence of Human Hermaphroditism” (Goldie 2014:39). This article sparked conversations about intersex individuals, particularly the idea that gender identity and sexual orientation are connected more to life experiences than chromosomal or gonadal sex (Goldie 2014:39; Money 1995:20). Here, Money enforced the concept of gender as “an assumption [organized by society] according to a ‘presumed binary ‘nature’ of male and female,’” pointing to a human desire to recognize everything in binaries and explaining how such assumptions are susceptible to flaws behind such a concept (Goldie 2014:44-45).

Furthering such work, Money created the concepts of love maps and gender maps, representing the different components of gender identity and the sequences they follow (Goldie 2014:69; Money 1995:97). He emphasizes the important overlap between the lovemap and gender map, with the lovemap lacking gender codes and the gender map reinforcing gender codes (Money 1995:96). This advanced view of gender identity showcased that gender did not stem solely from chromosomal development, as many who view sex and gender interchangeably do, but rather gender identity may stem from other areas of development, such as the concept of brain sex. (Goldie 2014:69-70; Money 1995:100). Here, Money starts his chapter on gender maps, exclaiming that nothing forms solely from nature in the same way that nothing forms solely from nurture (Money 1995:95). Money, leaning into feminist ideals, points to gender bias originating in society’s attempt to enforce the gender binary, recognizing the stereotype of males

being superior and females being intellectually inferior to the male (Money 1995:48; Goldie 2014:71). Such conversations from John Money opened the door to studying gender identity in different ways, introducing the concept of gender non-conformity by challenging the gender binary and coining the idea of gender identity stemming from multiple areas of development. The combination of John Money's ideals concerning gender identity and its overlap with gender roles led the study team to create the following definition for gender non-conforming individuals: Gender nonconforming (GNC) is an adjective describing an individual whose gender identity or expression does not conform to the cultural and social expectations about what is appropriate to the gender and sex they were assigned at birth; non-cisgender. The abbreviation will be used interchangeably throughout this literature. This study will also use the following definitions of gender identity and gender expression: Gender identity is a personal and internalized sense of one's gender based on behavioral, cultural, and psychological understandings of gender, and gender expression is the expression of one's gender identity. Both definitions are necessary for the remainder of this literature and its analysis.

West and Zimmerman's (1987) influential article "Doing Gender" integrates the concepts of Money. In this piece, West and Zimmerman (1987) explore the distinction between sex and gender by developing a sociological framework for understanding gender. They note that the complexities of sex and gender have become increasingly difficult to separate over time, particularly with new insights suggesting that biological and cultural processes are interconnected and mutually influential (West and Zimmerman 1987:126). The researchers describe gender as an achievement and a component of an accomplishment system, where individuals must "do" gender to fit into societal categories. West and Zimmerman (1987:129-

130) elaborate on this by explaining that individuals construct gender through socialization, especially in their choices to engage in activities and behaviors linked to socialized gender roles. These choices to engage in socially gendered activities and behaviors become subconscious, leading to the continuous act of “doing” gender by navigating society's expectations for who does what certain behaviors and when to engage in such behaviors. To explain this idea, West and Zimmerman (1987:132) point to the inability of individuals to identify someone's sex in public, as individuals hide their genitalia from everyday public view; if individuals cannot identify someone by their sex by seeing their genitalia, they must identify someone through their perceived gender, which typically stems from clothing choices and social behaviors.

West and Zimmerman (1987:144-145) mention issues raised by Money—the binary regarding sexuality—to further explore the concept of gender as an accomplishment, labeling society's expectations for sexual orientations as “obligatory heterosexuality.” Here, West and Zimmerman (1987:145) utilize this binary understanding of sexuality to further the concept of doing gender, focusing on the idea of homosexuals' decisions to pass as heterosexual or embrace ambiguity. For someone to want to dress ambiguously, an individual would first have to define the styles they are trying to avoid—feminine and masculine—by certain behaviors, such as how individuals who are seen as feminine or masculine dress (West and Zimmerman (1987:145). West and Zimmerman (1987:145-146) also point to Money's earlier-mentioned gender biases and expectations as to why it is impossible for individuals not to do gender, claiming that an individual's gender status can be relevant in any aspect of society at any time, requiring constant enforcement and legitimization. In changing how individuals recognize gender from innate to

social constructs, researchers are advancing how to discuss gender identities and their influences within society properly.

With these advances forward, however, government policies continue to impact gender discourse and rights, returning to harsh binaries. The White House (2025a) has issued directives aimed at restricting gender diversity policies and reinforcing biological determinism. These policies contrast with the academic literature and history of sex and gender studies that emphasize the fluidity of gender and the lived experiences of the GNC community. This intersection of political ideology and gender discourse highlights the ongoing struggle for recognition and legitimacy for GNC individuals within institutional frameworks. These political institutions play a significant role in shaping public discourse on gender, reversing the previously progressive steps in normalizing gender discourse. With such policies challenging the lived and living realities of gender-diverse individuals, gender discourse is constantly evolving—regardless of its direction—and should be addressed and recognized as such.

### *Negotiating Gender Identity in a Binarily Gendered World*

Negotiating gender identity within a world structured around a rigid binary framework presents unique challenges and strategies for those who exist outside of these norms. Gender identity, traditionally confined to male and female categories, is increasingly being questioned and expanded by nonbinary and gender-nonconforming individuals. Research demonstrates that these individuals must constantly navigate societal pressures, employing various tactics to assert their identities while mitigating potential risks (Barbee and Schrock 2019; Stone et al. 2019).

A central theme in this negotiation is the delicate balance between authenticity and safety. Many nonbinary individuals find empowerment in expressing their identities through

name changes, pronoun usage, and androgynous presentation, as these acts affirm their existence beyond the binary (Barbee and Schrock 2019:582). However, these same expressions can invite social stigma, discrimination, or even violence, leading some individuals to selectively conceal their identities in certain contexts (Barbee and Schrock 2019:585). The emotional labor of navigating this binary system—whether by choosing when to assert identity or when to conform to expectations—demonstrates the persistent tension between self-expression and societal constraints.

Community-building emerges as another crucial aspect of negotiating gender identity. In both physical and digital spaces, gender non-conforming individuals seek validation, support, and solidarity. Historically, alternative family networks and queer communities have provided refuge for those excluded from mainstream society (Stone et al. 2019:228). Today, digital platforms, such as Reddit and Facebook, serve as vital spaces where nonbinary and transgender individuals can share experiences, seek advice, and construct affirming identities (Stone et al. 2019:236-238). These networks play a key role in resisting the isolated effects of binary gender norms and fostering collective empowerment.

The struggle for recognition within LGBTQIA+ spaces further complicates this negotiation. While such spaces are often seen as inclusive, they do not always fully embrace nonbinary identities, reflecting the pervasiveness of binary gender norms even within marginalized communities (Barbee and Schrock 2019:583). As a result, nonbinary individuals must assert their identities in not only broader society but also within spaces that are meant to be accepting, reinforcing the ongoing challenge of finding true affirmation and belonging.

Ultimately, negotiating gender identity in a binarily gendered world is a process of constant adaptation and resistance. Whether through personal expression, strategic concealment, or community engagement, gender nonconforming individuals continuously redefine the boundaries imposed by binary gender norms. These acts of negotiation highlight both the resilience of nonbinary individuals and the need for systemic change to accommodate the full spectrum of gender diversity.

#### *The Role of Social Media in Gender Expression and Identity Formation*

The rise of social media has transformed gender expression and identity formation, providing digital spaces where individuals can explore, affirm, and present their gender identities. These platforms function as both mirrors and megaphones, allowing users to reflect on their gender expressions while simultaneously broadcasting them to others. Through social media, nonbinary and gender-nonconforming individuals navigate personal identity work, community-building, and systemic limitations that both enable and constrain their self-presentation (Darwin 2017; Lucero 2017; Noon et al. 2024; Colosi et al. 2023; Saha et al. 2019).

A fundamental aspect of social media's role in gender identity formation is the ability to experiment with and redefine gender categories. Traditional understandings of gender, rooted in binary notions, are challenged in online spaces where individuals can "redo" gender in ways that feel authentic to them (Darwin 2017:2-3). Nonbinary users, for instance, often utilize platforms such as Reddit to discuss, explore, and refine their gender identities, engaging in discourse that questions rigid gender labels and norms (Darwin 2017:9). This fluidity in identity work allows

users to construct nuanced self-definitions, ranging from a simple three-part gender model (man, woman, or other) to more complex spectrums of gender expression (Darwin 2017:7-8).

Social media also acts as a rehearsal space for gender expression, where individuals test different ways of presenting their gender before engaging in offline interactions. Digital platforms enable users to share selfies, discuss clothing choices, and receive peer feedback, helping them refine their presentation to align with their self-concept (Darwin 2017:10-11). Instagram, in particular, fosters a reciprocal relationship between identity clarity and self-presentation, as users with strong sexual identity clarity tend to engage in more authentic and positive self-representation when their online networks provide moderate levels of support (Noon et al. 2024:7-8).

Beyond personal exploration, social media serves as a crucial site for community-building. LGBTQIA+ individuals, especially youth, turn to platforms like Facebook, YouTube, and Twitter to connect with others who share similar experiences (Lucero 2017:122; Colosi et al. 2023:5-6). The accessibility of digital communities offers validation and affirmation, reducing the isolation that often accompanies non-normative gender identities. For many, these spaces provide safer alternatives to face-to-face interactions, reinforcing the importance of online networks in fostering gender identity development (Lucero 2017:123).

Despite the many benefits, digital spaces also present barriers and challenges to gender identity expression. Users frequently encounter scrutiny, stigma, and limitations imposed by platform structures—such as restrictive gender dropdown options that fail to account for nonbinary identities (Colosi et al. 2023:7). To navigate these risks, individuals often manage

multiple accounts, curating their digital presence to maintain control over who has access to their gender identity (Colosi et al. 2023:8). Additionally, negative language and discrimination in online spaces mirror real-world prejudices, as seen in hostile interactions within LGBTQIA+ Reddit threads (Saha et al. 2019:12). These experiences highlight the ongoing tension between digital empowerment and societal constraints on gender identity expression.

Overall, social media plays a critical role in negotiating gender identity. It provides a space for exploration, self-affirmation, and community support while also reflecting broader societal challenges. The complexities of these digital interactions underscore the evolving nature of gender expression and the importance of inclusive online environments that fully accommodate diverse gender identities.

In utilizing previous literature, the study team created hypotheses to tackle the research questions regarding how digital platforms influence one's understanding of gender identity and expression and the role online personalities and communities play regarding gender identity and expression. Regarding how digital platforms and social media interactions influence one's understanding and interpretation of gender identity and expression, the study team created the following hypotheses:

**H1a.** Digital platforms and social media interactions shape an individual's understanding and interpretation of gender identity and expression by offering insights into gender (labels, roles, identities, expressions, etc.) for the GNC community.

**H1b.** Digital platforms and social media interactions shape an individual's understanding and interpretation of gender identity and expression by connecting the GNC public to resources (advice, gender practice, advocacy group contacts, etc.).

Regarding the role of online personalities and communities in influencing one's understanding and interpretation of gender identity and expression, the study team created the following hypotheses:

**H2a.** Online personalities and communities play an educational role in gender identity and expression for GNC individuals.

**H2b.** Online personalities and communities play an affirming role in gender identity and expression for GNC individuals.

In sum, existing research highlights the impact of social media on gender identity and expression, acting as access to important information and resources alongside ways of reaffirming one's identity. This access to digital spaces facilitates identity exploration and challenges traditional gender binaries while also censoring themselves out of fear of stigmatization. Scholars have focused on online interactions and their ability to shape self-perception, offer validation, and create new avenues for community-building. The following sections will build upon these foundations by exploring the lived experiences of GNC individuals navigating gender through social media.

## METHODS

This research examines the relationship between social media engagement and comfort with gender expression. It concentrates on how access to social media personalities and online communities impacts one's expression and understanding of gender identity. This study

employed a combination of quantitative and qualitative data collection methods to address the research question.

### *Research Design*

This study utilized a mixed-methods research design to investigate the influence of social media communities and personalities on the understanding and interpretation of gender identity expression. In employing a mixed-methods approach, this research emphasized triangulation to increase the validity and reliability of these findings while yielding results that focus on objectivity to answer the research questions while emphasizing the importance of social contexts and interpretations regarding gender expression and identity. Data triangulation also enhanced the study's robustness and credibility by employing multiple perspectives and resources to facilitate a more nuanced understanding of how individuals engage with and interpret gender identity and expression online. This integration of quantitative and qualitative data occurred through an explanatory-sequential approach, in which participants who completed the survey and volunteered for further interviews influenced the selection of interview participants. This approach ensured statistical trends identified within the quantitative findings were granted additional context from qualitative insights.

After receiving IRB approval to conduct the study, all recruitment efforts occurred from January to March 2025. The study recruited individuals using a non-probability sampling method, specifically purposive and snowball sampling. The target population included individuals aged 18 and older who actively engage with social media, particularly engaging with gender-related discourse. As the study requires participants to identify as gender non-conforming

and utilize social media in some capacity, the study team could not utilize random sampling. Additionally, the study team contacted LGBTQ+ student organizations to share information regarding the study, such as the survey link or contact information from the research team. These efforts resulted in 43 completed surveys and 10 completed interviews.

### *Quantitative research—survey*

The quantitative portion of the research was self-administered online. The survey, constructed of 27 questions, consists of question types ranging from multiple-choice Likert-scale questions to open-ended optional questions (See Appendix A). Such questions covered the topics of participants' experiences with social media in the context of gender identity and expression, the role of social media in shaping participants' understanding of gender identity and expression, and the potential influence of social media personalities and communities in understanding general and personal gender identity and expression. The study team divided the questions into the following sections:

1. **Demographics** include age, gender identity, sexual orientation, and expression of gender identity. For example, a multi-select question such as "What is your gender identity?" includes an "other" option allowing participants to specify identities not previously mentioned.
2. **Social Media Usage:** frequency and duration of engagement with gender-related content, platforms used, and types of communities followed. An example of this includes "How often do you engage with social media platforms (e.g., Instagram, TikTok, Twitter)

where gender identity is discussed,” a rating scale question with options ranging from yearly to daily.

3. **Influence of Online Communities & Personalities:** A mixture of question types concerning the significance of online communities and personalities in shaping one’s perception and understanding of gender identity and expression. An example of this includes “To what extent do you agree with the following statement: ‘The representation of gender identities in digital spaces has influenced how I express my gender,’” a Likert-scale question.
4. **Online vs. Offline Comparison:** Comparison of levels of support, comfort, freedom, and expression in online and offline spaces. An example of this includes “How different is your gender expression online compared to offline?” a single-answer, multiple-choice question ranging from no difference to significant difference.
5. **Overall Impact of Social Media on Gender Expression:** Likert-scale questions questioning the extent to which participants believe social media influences societal views of gender identity and expression. An example of this includes “To what extent do you agree with the statement: ‘Digital platforms have positively challenged traditional gender roles,’” with answers ranging from strongly disagree to strongly agree. The full list of survey questions along with possible answers can be found in Appendix A.

To ensure data integrity, participation was voluntary, and each respondent provided informed consent before beginning the survey. Responses were anonymized to protect participant confidentiality. The survey was designed to take approximately 10-15 minutes to complete to minimize respondent fatigue. The study team analyzed the quantitative data using

Qualtrics and Stata. The research team utilized Qualtrics for the data collection alongside the creation of frequency tables to cover social media engagement patterns. The study, then, utilized Stata to test the reliability and consistency of the Likert-scale questions by calculating Cronbach's alpha.

### *Qualitative research—interviews*

In-depth interviews help better explain the relationship between social media engagement and one's understanding and personal interpretation of gender identity and expression. With this, I designed the interview questions for students based on questions from the survey questions. Here, the questions allow respondents to expand on their responses to earlier mentioned questions, providing much-needed context for a complex relationship. Most of the recruitment for the interviews occurred through word-of-mouth, in which respondents referred friends either to the provided Qualtrics survey link inviting individuals to provide their email for me to reach out to them or sent me their friends' emails after asking their friends if they would be interested in the study. Before the interviews, participants received an email entitled "Gender Identity in the Digital Age Interview," which provided a brief description of the study and an informed consent document regarding the interview process. The researcher sent these emails to participants upon recognizing a submitted email address, typically within 24 hours of the participant submitting their email. The consent document outlined the purpose of the research alongside expected procedures, potential risks and benefits, and confidentiality protections.

Before proceeding with the interview, the researcher required a response to the brief description and informed consent document, confirming that the respondent consented to the

process. The interviewer and respondent then agreed on a date and time for the interview. Once a consensus was reached, the interviewer sent a confirmation email containing a Zoom link for the interview and details on how to ask additional questions regarding the study or the interview process before starting the actual interview. On the day of the interview, the interviewer reviewed the consent form with the respondent to ensure they understood the purpose of the study and their rights concerning consent. During this time, I emphasized that participants could skip questions they did not wish to answer, pause the interview, or terminate it at any time without any consequences. After confirming their consent, the interviews commenced, averaging 32 minutes.

The study utilized 10 interviews. The researcher conducted these interviews virtually through Zoom for convenience for the participants, with all interviews taking place in private areas to encourage transparency and reinforce confidentiality regarding a potentially sensitive topic. All respondents created a pseudonym for the interviews, with only the interviewer and the respondent knowing the code names to ensure confidentiality. The full list of interview questions can be found in Appendix B. Zoom generated a transcription of each interview, in which the researcher revised and confirmed the transcriptions' quality before deleting the interviews' audio recordings. Once checked for quality, the researcher analyzed the individual interviews for similar themes and concepts for cross-comparison.

### *Ethical Considerations*

This study addressed ethical concerns by obtaining informed consent, prioritizing anonymity and confidentiality measures, and obtaining Institutional Review Board (IRB)

approval. Survey participants are completely anonymous, and respondents are addressed only by curated pseudonyms known only to the interviewer and the respondent. This study prioritized minimizing harm and ensuring the respectful representation of diverse experiences and gender identities.

## RESULTS

In this section, we explore the key findings from the project, categorized by the method used. First, the study discusses quantitative research, highlighting how gender non-conforming individuals utilize and perceive social media, with an emphasis on their presence in online communities and emotions toward social media communities and influencers. The research team demonstrates how digital platforms serve as spaces for comfort, support, and freedom of expression for the GNC, as well as social media's influence on societal discussions about gender. Second, the study examines qualitative research to underscore and acknowledge the nuances in these perspectives. Here, the research focuses more on the direct experiences of individuals within online communities as they navigate their gender identity.

### *Quantitative Research—Survey*

The quantitative portion of this research aimed to recognize the role social media platforms, communities, and influencers played regarding gender identity and expression for the gender nonconforming. The participants ( $n = 43$ ) answered a series of questions tackling the potential roles of social media in shaping their understanding and interpretation of gender nonconformity. This study did not distinguish between different age groups, gender identities within the gender nonconforming, or sexual orientation for the analysis, as 70% of participants

within the study fell within the 18-24 age range, and as this study allowed multiselection for gender identity and sexual orientation, generating more inputs than total participants.

This study first tackled the prevalence of social media usage and engagement, asking participants how often they engage with social media platforms and their community presence. When asked how often individuals engage with social media platforms where gender identity is discussed, only one participant was unsure of their level of engagement. From the remaining 42, however, 98% claimed they engage with such platforms on a weekly or more frequent basis, showcasing that the participants engage with social media on a relatively frequent basis. In covering their interactions with online communities or personalities, the participants answered two separate questions regarding activeness in online communities and following online personalities; both survey questions yielded the same number of frequent responses. Although they are two separate survey questions, Table I showcases the frequency of the responses to these questions as one table, indicating that most participants engage in online communities discussing gender identity and following online personalities.

Table I: Yes/No Responses Covering One's Interaction and Engagement with Social Media Communities and Personalities		
Selection	Observed Data	Percentage of Responses (nearest hundredth)
Yes	33	76.74%
No	10	23.26%

Similarly, respondents faced a question covering the overall influence of the representation of gender identities within these digital spaces on personal gender expression. All participants answered this question, with only one participant preferring not to answer the question. As a Likert-scale question questioning the extent to which one agrees with the

statement, the research team recoded the data to signify whether individuals disagreed, were neutral, or overall agreed with the question. Table II showcases the recoded data for this question alongside its percentage from the data. Furthering this, data from a different question questioning if an individual changed how they expressed their gender post-interaction with online communities echoed the significance of gender identities in digital spaces, with 74% of participants saying yes. Here, the data showcased that the representation of gender identities within digital spaces plays a significant role in personal gender expression, supporting the hypothesis that online communities and personalities play some role in gender expression.

Recoded Selection	Observed Data	Percentage of Data (nearest hundredth)
Disagree	4	9.30%
Neutral	10	23.26%
Agree	28	65.12%
Prefer Not To Answer	1	2.33%

Focusing more on online communities' and personalities' influence, the participants responded to two separate questions asking about how either online communities/forums or online personalities/influencers influenced how they think about or express their gender identities. These questions also included a follow-up optional open-ended question, inviting the participants to expand on their choice of how social media personalities or communities influenced how they viewed gender identity. Analyzing the influence of online communities and forums, 95% of participants expressed at least minimal influence from online communities and forums regarding their gender identity, with only two respondents claiming no influence. Of the 41 participants who suggested online communities had, at least, minimal influence on their

understanding and interpretation of gender identity, nearly half (49%) suggested a moderate influence, as reflected in Table III. As no participants indicated a preference not to answer, the Prefer Not to Answer row was not included in the table.

Selection	Observed Data	Percentage of Data (nearest hundredth)
No Influence	2	4.65%
Minimal Influence	9	20.93%
Moderate Influence	20	46.51%
Significant Influence	12	27.91%

The optional question, answered by 74% of participants, provided more insight into these numbers, with participants explaining that online communities helped provide a sense of normality in gender nonconformity by educating them on what gender nonconformity is and the expansive and alternative ways to express one's gender. Some participants, as content creators, pointed to the reciprocity of online communities as they engage with the broader GNC community through their posts; as content creators, they interact with the posts of other GNC content creators and respond to and interact with the various comments and DMs they receive. On the other end of the spectrum, casual GNC social media users emphasized the idea of communities allowing them to feel more comfortable in knowing some individuals feel the same while also appreciating the offered resources these communities provide, such as information regarding medical transitioning and safe mental health hotlines for GNC people.

For the influence of online personalities, however, these percentages change. Regarding the question about online personalities and influencers, 20% of all participants claimed that online personalities and influencers did not influence how they think about or express their gender identity. Excluding one participant's choice not to answer this question in this percentage calculation, only 81% signaled at least minimal influence directly from online personalities and influencers. Most participants (32.6%) claimed moderate influence, a two-participant difference from minimal influence (27.9%). These results are more interesting when analyzing the difference between no influence and significant influence—an equal number of participants reported being significantly influenced by online personalities as those who reported no influence at all.

To gain more insight into this discrepancy, a similar question covered the extent of online personalities influencing one's understanding of their gender identity. Table IV showcases the frequency of such responses alongside their percentages for the total data. This showcases that there is some potential form of difference regarding the influence of online personalities compared to online communities. Nonetheless, this data still showcases that online personalities do influence one's understanding of personal gender identity and, thus, support the hypothesis of online personalities playing an educational and affirming role in gender identity and expression.

Table IV: Responses to Agreement Statement Regarding Extent of Online Personalities Influencing Understanding of Personal Gender Identity		
Selection	Observed Data	Percentage of Data (nearest hundredth)
Strongly Disagree	2	4.65%
Disagree	3	6.98%

Table IV: Responses to Agreement Statement Regarding Extent of Online Personalities Influencing Understanding of Personal Gender Identity		
Neutral	10	23.26%
Agree	17	39.53%
Strongly Agree	11	25.58%

With this sharp contrast compared to the influence of online communities, the open-ended optional question provided necessary insight. The research team relied on 24 of the 26 optional submissions to this question, as two respondents claimed not applicable, to understand this discrepancy. The 24 submissions similarly emphasized the informational exposure to different gender expressions as influences and how influencers provided them the confidence to challenge their previous understanding of gender, alongside providing examples of influencers who directly impacted their gender journey—Jory (@alluringskulls on TikTok), Calvin Garrah, Thomas Sanders, Shahem (@5hahem across different platforms), Odilakachi Hezekiah-Onwukwe (@professor.odi on TikTok), and Hawk (@hawkhatesyou on TikTok) as some examples. However, these submissions also provided a potential reason behind this discrepancy between influencers and communities influencing their understanding of gender identity: GNC individuals do not look at the specific influencers and personalities for inspiration, but rather they listen to their stories amongst others to create their understanding of gender identity and expression. Reinforcing this, a common theme from the optional submissions was the idea of not following specific influencers and looking at online personalities for ways to express their gender rather than understand it. One participant went as far as calling them “video vision

boards,” echoing them as someone to look at for external inspiration or a goal, as another participant expressed.

Within the quantitative results from the study, the research team discovered some unexpected findings about GNC individuals’ experiences online versus offline, specifically regarding levels of comfort, support, and freedom. Originally, the research team assumed these levels would be similar across the questions, expecting similar frequencies in responses labeling online communities as more comfortable, supportive, and expressive; however, this was not the case. When asked how individuals compare their levels of comfort in expressing their gender identity online versus offline, 36% of participants suggested they feel equally comfortable online and offline, and 43% of participants suggested they feel more comfortable in online communities, a shockingly close percentage as seen in Table V. This is a good sign in showing that individuals utilize social media to find more comfort, but with only three responses separating the two, this difference lacks significance.

Selection	Observed Data	Percentage of Data (nearest hundredth)
I feel more comfortable in online communities	18	41.86%
I feel more comfortable in offline communities	7	16.28%
I feel equally comfortable in both communities	16	37.21%
I do not feel comfortable in either communities	1	2.33%
Prefer Not to Answer	1	2.33%

This result, however, contrasts significantly with the responses concerning the level of support and freedom to express their identities, as seen in Tables VI and VII. When asked how individuals compare their levels of support in expressing their gender online versus offline, 69% of participants suggested that they view online communities as more supportive, compared to 17% of participants suggesting that both communities are equally supportive.

Table VI: Responses Concerning One's Level of Support When Expressing Gender Nonconformity Online Versus Offline		
Selection	Observed Data	Percentage of Data (nearest hundredth)
Online communities are more supportive	30	69.77%
Offline communities are more supportive	3	6.98%
Both are equally supportive	7	16.28%
Neither are supportive	1	2.33%
Prefer Not to Answer	2	4.65%

This gap in response rate acts as a significant difference regarding levels of support, as over two-thirds of participants hinted at online communities being more supportive. This difference became more significant when addressing the freedom to express, with 79% of participants suggesting that online spaces offer more freedom of expression compared to offline spaces. With only 9 individuals voting against this idea regarding the freedom to express one's gender identity with this statement compared to the majority of respondents disagreeing with online communities feeling more comfortable, there is something to unpack regarding the difference between levels of support, freedom, and comfort.

Table VII: Responses Concerning The Freedom to Express Gender Nonconformity Online Versus Offline		
Selection	Observed Data	Percentage of Data (nearest hundredth)
Online spaces offer more freedom	34	79.07%
Offline spaces offer more freedom	3	6.98%
Both spaces offer similar levels of freedom	3	6.98%
Neither spaces offer much freedom	2	4.65%
Prefer Not to Answer	1	2.33%

The research team partially attributed this discrepancy to the rising fear of utilizing social media platforms under the current presidential administration, an idea echoed later within the unexpected findings from the qualitative results. As well-known CEOs and chairmen of such social media apps continue to showcase support for Donald Trump and his policies, this rise in fear could explain why individuals may not feel more comfortable on online platforms while still echoing the idea of support and freedom. Similarly, one may point to intersectional fears to explain this phenomenon. Individuals may not feel as comfortable in online communities, possibly avoiding direct interactions on social media posts or in discussion groups, while still maintaining the idea of social media as supportive and freeing. This, however, is only speculation. Without explanations from all participants behind their motivations for their answers, the research team cannot draw clear explanations behind this phenomenon.

#### *Qualitative Research—Interviews*

The qualitative part of this research aimed to explore how social media platforms and their communities influence individuals' general understanding and interpretation of gender identity and expression. Through ten interviews, the research team identified two common themes among participants regarding how social media affected their understanding of gender

identity: social media as an educational resource and social media as a means of connecting with individuals who share similar feelings. This results section separates the two themes for analysis.

*Social media as a resource*

The most prominent theme gathered from the interviews was the idea of social media as a resource, primarily concerning educational resources. Here, the interviewed participants significantly mentioned using social media as a tool for learning more about gender nonconformity and gaining access to important resources regarding how to navigate one's gender. Utilizing social media as an educational tool for learning about gender nonconformity also aided in shaping the understanding of gender nonconformity and, thus, the GNC identity. Rose, a trans woman, compares the knowledge she gained from a human sexuality course to that of social media, stating that social media was “extremely informative” in furthering the conversation of gender nonconformity. In navigating her identity, Rose spotlighted the fact that she “definitely got a lot more resources from the online communities” in trying to find someone to discuss gender nonconformity outside of her professor. Lemonade, a transfeminine nonbinary woman, shared similar sentiments about utilizing social media for education. “The biggest thing for me,” she started, “would just be, like, having access to more information. Like, you know, if I have a question, I’m able to find an answer to it pretty quickly.”

In examining social media as a resource for knowledge, numerous participants discussed how social media introduced them to concepts they had never heard about regarding gender nonconformity and queer history. Germ, a transmasculine individual, discussed their experience learning about gender nonconformity through the band Steam Powered Giraffe, in which the lead vocalist, Isabelle Bennett, came out as trans.

I was raised Catholic, so I didn't really know about the LGBT community in general, but more so gender specifically, so, like, I always felt different. But, it was around that time that I was reaching my teens that I had gotten into this band called Steam Powered Giraffe, and one of their band members, her name is Isabella, she came out as trans. At the time, I had no idea what that meant. I used to think that transgender was the same thing as intersex, so I thought that she was both. I had no idea what it meant... We had our little Tumblr group, and that was where we received most of our information about everything that we wanted to know regarding our identities. Because we had no idea, like I said, I used to think that being trans was the same thing as being intersex, and that is not the case at all. But, that was all I knew from, like, tidbits that I'd heard from my parents, so it was my-it was our biggest source of information. Honestly, it still is sometimes, and I'm [age] now. – Germ (transmasculine)

Similarly, Cousin, an agender nonbinary individual, highlighted how their upbringing also impacted what they knew about the LGBTQIA+ community and, thus, gender nonconformity. From an academic background, they utilized social media and its communities as a tool to gain more knowledge and insight on different perspectives regarding gender. “A lot of, like, the absorption [of important information and perspectives] wasn't really through select personalities or influencers or anything like that. It was simply the community and kind of, like, the marketplace of ideas,” they described. From a Catholic background, Cousin also mentioned the significance of such teaching on their lack of access to queer and GNC history.

I had never heard of it before, talking about queer theory and, like, about the history of queer people. Especially, like, I never learned about the AIDS crisis. Like, do you think my, like, Catholic family was going to tell me about the AIDS crisis and anything other than, like, a fear-mongering, like, “if you're gay, you get AIDS,” like, sort of thing? No... I had never heard about Judith Butler before I went online. – Cousin (agender nonbinary)

Goldfish, a nonbinary genderqueer individual, echoed similar rhetoric when learning about different gender identities and expressions from American social media platforms. “I think, like,” Goldfish explained, “I really started to learn about it when I got on American apps... I learned about different kinds of queer identities on Instagram and later Tumblr too.” They furthered this idea, pointing to how social media is responsible for a lot of their knowledge of the queer community. They also claimed such knowledge reflected the American queer community, as they recognized that Chinese queer people they interacted with often reflected the knowledge from the American queer community; whenever Chinese queer people would separate their

understanding of queerness from American influences, the information was limited, only highlighting Chinese queerness in the past tense. “It’s like, thousands of years ago, this emperor was gay. Like, I mean, I guess it is useful knowledge to have... I guess, like, queer history, yay. I guess that’s fun, but like, what about queer people right now,” they questioned, showcasing how their understanding of queerness and gender nonconformity stems primarily from an American lens of the concept.

In learning these new topics regarding gender nonconformity, participants expressed the significance of social media in influencing how they chose to identify. Digi, a transmasculine genderqueer individual, directly points to social media about giving them the words to describe themselves. “It gave me the necessary verbiage,” they explained. “I went from [recognizing myself as] a tomboy to recognizing it was more than that.” Swiftie, a transmasculine nonbinary individual, also directly points to social media in influencing their GNC identity, going as far as claiming they would identify differently if they had access to such information earlier.

If I had the access to the Internet that I had today back then, I don’t think I would be nonbinary. I think I would straight up be a man by now; I’m gonna be real [with you]. That’s how strong it was as a child. – Swiftie (transmasculine nonbinary)

Similarly, Yarn, a genderqueer individual, emphasized the significance of social media in helping them feel comfortable claiming the genderqueer identity. “Social media taught me that being nonbinary does not mean constantly being androgynous,” they started. “I can be whoever I want, dress however I want, [and] identify however I want. That’s how I ended up [identifying as genderqueer].” This correct correlation to social media exposure influencing one’s gender identification showcases the importance of social media in GNC identity formation.

Alongside introducing individuals to new concepts, social media also acted as a resource to understand what was okay and not okay regarding addressing gender nonconformity. Swiftie recognized some internal homophobia when navigating their gender identity and how social media explained how harmful such rhetoric can be.

I was one of those people who was like, “I don't like Justin Bieber, because he's gay,” you know, like I was using gay as an insult, like I was aware of my liking of women, and I was still using gay as an insult, you know, like that's like how trained I had been from where I grew up... [iFunny] was where I first started to realize that, hey, maybe using that word is not okay, you know, and calling someone gay like that is not okay. Especially, I used to rationalize it, being like, “well, I'm gay. I could say it. I can call you a little slur,” you know... – Swiftie (transmasculine nonbinary)

Digi shared similar experiences with Swiftie, highlighting how social media changed how they approached their internalized homophobia. “[Social media] actually made me take a step back and, like, look in the mirror,” he described. “[Social media] motivated me to address some inner things with myself, especially internalized homophobia and transphobia, which helped me, you know, understand myself and my self-hatred at the time.” These experiences showcase the importance of social media as an educational resource for gender-nonconforming individuals, exposing GNC individuals to important information regarding what gender nonconformity is and historical information regarding queer history. These exposures, thus, encourage individuals to recognize their contributions to harm toward the LGBTQIA+ communities by explaining what kind of language is not acceptable when addressing queer and GNC individuals.

#### *Social media as a connector*

Contributing to the research team's hypothesis about the affirming role of social media communities and personalities, interview participants also discussed social media as a connector to the GNC community. Here, respondents cited finding community and affirmation of their identities as key reasons they utilize social media. Aldi, an intersex trans woman, described her

unique experience of navigating her identity once she got out of prison. “The first thing I did,” she exclaimed, “when I got out and got a smartphone was to get on social media and start looking for queer spaces and transgender people, especially to follow and get a better idea of the community.” In searching for knowledge and information about the community, she also searched for a connection to the community. Lemonade, although primarily attributing her comfort to her childhood friend’s transition, referenced the connection social media brought in creating a community for her, particularly the positivity from the community. “I would say... the biggest thing is just exposure to other trans people, especially people that you know,” she explained, pointing out that those whom she saw transition noticed their lives changed significantly for the better.

Furthering this, Germ suggested that his appeal toward social media stemmed from social media’s ability to amplify marginalized voices and to share communities. “I have a massive love for social media when it comes to connecting people who feel like they might be alone because they’re not alone,” Germ explains. “None of us are ever truly alone, as long as we have these communities.” Cousin shared a very similar sentiment, embracing social media for the seemingly unlimited access to diverse perspectives and ideas within communities.

[What] the internet and social media can bring to the table is [...] amplifying voices and having us just meet and talk with people who we would never have the opportunity to do so if we were left to our own devices in our insular communities. – Cousin (agender nonbinary)

Respondents echoed these ideas specifically when discussing `egg_irl`, a popular Reddit thread jokingly covering the idea of transgender individuals not knowing that they are trans. Thus resembling an egg that has not hatched. The metaphor of being an egg represents the journey a trans person must take, such as breaking through their exterior wall via self-discovery and acceptance, before fully coming into their transness. Rose pointed specifically to the `egg_irl`

subreddit acting as her first exposure to gender nonconformity on social media during the 2020 COVID-19 pandemic. “I’m like, you know what? I’m going to subscribe to this subreddit and just lurk, see what it’s about,” she explained.

It took egg\_irl for me to realize that I wasn’t the only story that was out there, that there were a bunch of women in their 30s, like myself, late twenties, early thirties, or even older, that realized, “oh [redacted profanity], everything that I’ve known about my life is just wrong, particularly the gender bit,” and they still ended up transitioning. I think if I didn’t have those stories, I wouldn’t be where I am today. I’d be a hell of a lot more depressed, but I wouldn’t have an idea why. – Rose (trans woman)

Similarly, Lemonade, in sharing her journey with understanding her identity, cited egg communities as her primary social media interaction concerning gender nonconformity. “While I was kind of figuring out what my identity was before I did come out, I was on, like, a lot of egg Reddit spaces and that kind of thing,” Lemonade explained alongside the influence of seeing different experiences from trans perspectives.

Outside of finding these communities for community building, various respondents pointed out their connection to social media communities stemming from receiving direct or indirect gender affirmation. Finishing Lemonade’s quote, she highlighted seeing more things from the trans perspective alongside relating to such ideas and discussions was a big thing for her. In researching articles and papers covering different trans experiences, she emphasized that such research made her feel more confident in her identity. Similarly, Rose, recognizing egg spaces, points to the significance of these types of spaces, claiming that she “...really [credits] having a safe space and seeing all the discussions and stories that [she] could relate to [as] essential to beginning [her] transition.” Without the relatability of such spaces, Rose doubts she would have transitioned. Similarly, Aldi discussed her experience utilizing social media—specifically Discord—to understand her journey in recognizing her gender. “Social media helped me... to come out. Discord has been a very powerful tool, both for me coming out and becoming

myself and, now, in organizing opposition.” Alongside social media, Aldi points to the popular Netflix TV show, *Orange is the New Black*, as a realistic and relatable way for her to “process [her] own experiences and pull away from [them],” particularly after coming out of prison.

As a form of gender affirmation, Swiftie pointed to AlluringSkulls, a trans content creator on TikTok, as a step in their gender affirmation journey. “She gave me the confidence to [...] cut all of my hair off,” they started to explain. “[Her posts] really woke me up, like people taking the time to sit there, talk, and explain themselves. Really kinda woke me up, and I have social media to thank for that.” Pucca, a nonbinary individual, shares an indirect experience with gender affirmation through social media, pointing out how they could not stop engaging with nonbinary and androgynous fashion on TikTok.

I don't know how I got there, but I guess I just kept engaging with [nonbinary people's fashion], 'cause I was like, “Wow! They look so cool! I wish I could be like that!” And I was like, “Oh, why do I want to be like that?” – Pucca (nonbinary)

For some, social media creates indirect affirmation for gender nonconformity through its differences to offline interactions. Cousin points to this concept, labeling social media as one of the only places they could truly exist as an agender person and, thus, fully realize themselves. “One thing I appreciate about being online as an agender person is that truly, the default of existing online is agender,” they start. “There's nothing about yourself that you have to give up No physical or biological markets that can cause people to judge or identify you, or clock you, or anything like that.” Goldfish echoes this indirectly, appreciating their ability to limit public information regarding their identity by keeping their pages private. Rose, on the other hand, points to the endless possibilities of character customization in various video games, like *Cyberpunk* and *Baldur's Gate*, as affirming.

[VR Chat], as I understand, is rather popular for exploring one's gender identity, because you can pop on a VR headset and browse through a whole bunch of different avatars and pick one that you like. And I always picked little petite girls, because that's what I am. [I] didn't know it at the time, but that was definitely one way that I express gender identity online – Rose (trans woman)

Ultimately, such narratives underscore the important role of social media in shaping gender identity and fostering a sense of belonging. Regardless of platform, GNC individuals find community support and affirmation of their identities, allowing digital spaces to serve as vital sites for self-expression and self-exploration.

### *Unexpected Findings*

#### *Social media as a reminder*

An insightful analysis of the interview data recognized an interesting pattern of social media as a reminder of previous thoughts and feelings regarding one's gender. Here, individuals recognized that they had an instance of questioning their gender or self before joining gender-based online communities or interacting with gender-based social media posts and discussions. Social media, then, worked as a reminder of this earlier incident in life and fueled their desire to join such communities and online discussions to better understand themselves and their feelings. Swiftie, a transmasculine non-binary individual, referenced the 2024 horror film "*I Saw the TV Glow*," a film many view as an allegory to the gender dysphoria some GNC and transgender individuals experience through disassociation and depersonalization before transitioning, to explain their relationship to social media in understanding their identity.

If I had seen the TV glow and I hadn't ignored it, I feel like my life would be very different, you know? Like, I feel like I saw it as a child, and someone turned the TV off, and then, they were like, "You can't go back here for 20 years," you know. So, that was definitely a big deal for me. - Swiftie (transmasculine nonbinary).

They revisited this after citing the "*Am I a Lesbian?* "*Masterdoc*" as the tipping point for revisiting their understanding of gender and gender nonconformity. Swiftie recognized the

masterdoc's flaws and also learned that decentering men from their life helped them understand that they do not have to conform to society's gender and sexuality expectations.

It kind of, like, broke things for me, realizing I was a lesbian. And then, I kind of realized that my gender was lesbian, and then I was like, oh wait. Wait, wait, wait! I do remember. I do remember that the TV was glowing. – Swiftie (transmasculine nonbinary)

Goldfish, an agender genderqueer individual, shared this similar sentiment, highlighting a recollection of their process of gender starting when they were around 12 years old. They had a brief interaction with gender nonconformity through crossdressers on the Chinese equivalent of YouTube. They recognized that such a concept, although new to them, was quite interesting and cool, starting their GNC process. However, they emphasized that they had forgotten about this revelation regarding gender nonconformity until they were in high school, downloading a VPN alongside Instagram and Twitter. On these apps, various queer and queer-adjacent content brought Goldfish back to the idea of gender nonconformity, restarting their gender identity journey.

Although indirectly related to social media, Aldi, an intersex trans woman, experienced a similar sensation in discovering her intersex status through a friend codenamed Pigeon. Aldi discussed how social media and Pigeon helped her learn about what it meant to be intersex, hinting at how she had always questioned her sex throughout her life. In this context, Pigeon and social media served as crucial tools in navigating her sex and gender identity. Thanks to both Pigeon and social media, Aldi learned about intersex issues and got karyotyped last summer to confirm her intersex status. These stories demonstrate that, in addition to serving as a space for knowledge and community building, social media reminds individuals of their past inquiries about gender and identity.

*Social media as a reinforcer of norms*

As social media allows GNC individuals to share their experiences and ideas, interviews showcased the growing concern that social media is still limiting how freeing such communities and online discussions can be, particularly with the current presidency and the administration's attitudes towards the queer community. Aldi, as a content creator, discusses this regarding how gender-nonconforming creators are constantly shadowbanned when posting any content related to their gender identity or gender expression.

As a trans creator, our content is discriminated against by the algorithms. They block us, they take off our content. I've had content taken off simply because I talked about being trans or I talked about being intersex, and they would take it down. And, you know, regularly, I'll get about one post a week on TikTok that'll be taken down. [...] Instagram has me, pretty well, shadowbanned. My content gets very little exposure on Instagram. They put so many restrictions on me that, I mean, every couple [of] weeks I get knocked off of Instagram. They suspend me until I prove to them that I'm a real human being again. [...] They've got me very well shadowbanned, and I'm not the only one. I've talked to a lot of other trans and intersex, but mainly trans content makers, and we all have the same problem. All of us, even the bigger ones, like Laverne Cox and Indya Moore. – Aldi (intersex trans woman)

Other participants echo such rhetoric from the consumer perspective, emphasizing their growing fear of showcasing their gender identity online, particularly with Instagram, Facebook, and Twitter, three apps owned by individuals who are very supportive of the current anti-LGBTQIA+ presidential administration. Cousin cites this specifically, emphasizing that they utilize pronouns on their social media profiles unless they do not feel safe to do so before explaining that they recently removed their pronouns from their Instagram account because “[they] don't really quite know what to do with it because of what's going on with Meta and whatnot.” They took this a step further in pointing directly to the presidential administration, emphasizing that they are becoming more mindful of their digital footprint to avoid becoming a “direct target” under “today's administration.” Similarly, Cousin mentioned their original appeal to apps like Tumblr, claiming “there wasn't the same amount and kind of censorship” compared to other sites, explaining why Tumblr had the label of the social activism social media app.

Yarn took similar steps to protect themselves under Trump's second administration, explaining that they decided to delete their nearly decade-old Twitter account and swap over to BlueSky. "I mean, look at him," Yarn started, referencing Elon Musk, the current chairman of Twitter. "He doesn't care about [the LGBTQIA+ community], so why should I support him and his app? Look at what happened when he bought [Twitter]," they continued, explaining that their once favorite social media app turned into a cesspool of hatred towards all marginalized communities. Although not as extreme of a measure, Swiftie took a similar approach to their Instagram usage, claiming they are "definitely trying to stay away from Meta Apps these days," while emphasizing their usage of apps like Reddit, Discord, and BlueSky, the recently popularized alternative to Twitter. Nearly all respondents mentioned BlueSky as a social media app they frequent, showcasing the growing behavior in moving from potentially frightening mainstream social media apps to less mainstream apps. Furthering this, Swiftie pointed to the recently questionable TikTok ban and the recent alleged change in its algorithm as a point of concern regarding seeing their interests—whether it be related to gender identity or not—on the app. "When the app came back on," Swiftie exclaimed, "it was not the same."

These concerns cover the posting of such content and the responses to posts and GNC accounts from the public. Aldi points to this fact in her interview, claiming that more than 95% of the transphobia she has experienced comes from social media. Lemonade, a transfeminine nonbinary woman, echoes this, stating that her online versus offline experiences differ significantly in the polarized responses she receives.

...in my own experience, online spaces are much more, like, polarized in terms of, like, what the responses that you get to [expressing gender nonconformity], whereas, like, in person, even people that are, like, transphobes are gonna be, you know, [redacted profanity] about it a lot of the time. Like, they're not really gonna confront you because, like, what are they gonna do? I mean, what's this guy gonna do? 'Hey, are you a dude?' I don't know, I mean... – Lemonade (transfemme nonbinary woman)

This opposition comes from those opposing LGBTQIA+ individuals and LGBTQIA+ individuals alike, as Germ shared regarding his experience in posting a story on TikTok about how he had to come out to his mother. Meant to be a silly story, the post tripled in typical views for his posts at the time, receiving 1,000 views and hundreds of comments within one day. “A lot of the comments, unfortunately, were kind of negative. It was mostly other trans people, like, saying that it could have been avoided... It was a lot of, just aggression, that I wasn’t prepared for,” he explained. Although not within the interview, Germ, as a trans content creator, made a TikTok discussing his experience going through TikTok’s filtered comments through a pre-existing popular sound on TikTok; this sound, sounding nice originally, quickly shifts towards negativity as it turns into a death threat, highlighting the constant negativity he experiences and receives as a trans content creator on a popular social media app. This attitude echoes the unexpected findings from the quantitative data, in which individuals believe that social media platforms and communities are not, in their opinion, as comfortable as they are free to express themselves.

While this study focuses on social media, participants also highlighted similar opposition occurring in other online spaces, such as video games. Pucca, a nonbinary individual, pointed this out when they first navigated their gender while playing games. When choosing a name for gaming, Pucca initially debated adding "girl" to part of their username. However, they later realized that they should not have included "girl" in their name, primarily because they feel more comfortable with people not knowing their identity through such identifiers. Swiftie, a competitive video gamer, along with their friends, discussed the differing treatment they receive

when perceived as a man versus when perceived as a woman, even though they do not identify with either.

I play a lot of competitive video games. I play a lot of competitive first-person shooter video games, and stuff like that, and I get “him”ed a lot more than everything. And, you know, I do try to masculinize my voice when I’m playing these video games, because when I do speak with my normal speaking voice, I have heard a lot of really disgusting things, I’m gonna be real. Lots of threats, lots of “go back to the kitchen,” “make me a sandwich,” you know, a lot of that [redacted profanity]. But like, even on, like, if I masculinize my voice a little bit, like if I drop it—just like even a little bit—I get “he/him”ed, and dudes are so nice to me all of a sudden. It’s really weird. – Swiftie (transmasculine nonbinary)

Such experiences also led to hints of misandry, if not self-proclaimed misandrist arcs.

Here, the research defines misandry and misandrist as a hatred of men and an individual who expresses a hatred for and towards men, respectively. Pucca explicitly stated they had a misandrist arc in the midst of navigating their gender, trying to highlight how they did not want to be judged while falling victim to judging others, specifically men. “I went through, like, a misandrous arc,” they proclaimed. “Even with figuring out the gender stuff, [...] I wanted, like, I didn’t want to be a man. I wanted... what men had, you know.” Swiftie had a harsher arc, encompassing their arc before identifying as transmasculine nonbinary and while identifying as nonbinary.

And you know, honestly, if I’m being really honest here, I feel like one of the reasons that I mostly identify with nonbinary and haven’t taken up, like, the trans man label, you know, is that, like, I don’t want to be associated with men. Like, I don’t want to be associated with men. I don’t want to have to be, like—I hate men so much that it, like, has stopped me. Like, it’s, like, a barrier on that wall right there because I don’t... want to be associated with me. I don’t want someone to look at me, and think man, and then think those associations about me. Right? Like, I don’t want to be associated with all the negativity that comes with being a man and masculinity like that. – Swiftie (transmasculine nonbinary)

By constantly silencing the diverse voices of GNC content creators and allowing negative comments towards those in the GNC community to thrive, social media platforms serve as spaces for sharing thoughts while suppressing those that stray too far from the mainstream. This aligns with the video game experience, as environments designed for fun, creativity, and freedom of expression often end up reinforcing traditional gender norms by enabling individuals to

demean gender non-conforming people and cis women through both oral and digital comments. Consequently, this fortifies the mainstream norms regarding gender and sexuality, restricting the overall visibility of GNC creators to their audiences and diminishing their impact on social media platforms.

## DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

### *Discussion*

This study explored the role of social media communities and personalities in shaping gender identity and expression. The findings indicate that online platforms served as major places of empowerment, where individuals navigate and affirm their gender identities while challenging gender norms. Social media provides GNC users with a sense of community, facilitating identity exploration and validation through interaction with like-minded individuals. The ability to engage with curated content, participate in discourse, and share personal narratives has proven instrumental in shaping how individuals understand and express their gender. These findings also indicate that outside of resources and knowledge, individuals also utilize social media platforms and communities as a reminder of who they are and as a community itself.

Likewise, this study highlights the use of online platforms and their communities for comfort, with both sides of the data showcasing more comfort in online spaces than offline spaces. This also appears in the significant portion of participants suggesting that online communities are more supportive than offline spaces, agreeing with previous research that individuals go to online communities due to peer feedback and a sense of community. These newfound and easily accessible places of empowerment allow GNC individuals to feel safe expressing themselves and sharing personal stories.

Equally important, the findings highlight the role of visibility in shaping gender discourse. Social media algorithms amplify certain narratives over others, influencing which expressions of gender gain traction. As algorithms prioritize certain narratives, intervention can enforce mainstream versions of gender identity, contributing to the constant marginalization of the experiences and expressions of gender non-conforming individuals. As stated in interviews, some GNC content creators emphasize their suppression in releasing content, highlighting how even in spaces meant to make interacting with similar individuals easier comes at the cost of being shadowbanned for discussing their identity. This complexity suggests that while social media fosters inclusivity, it does not entirely eliminate offline power dynamics.

Although these are overall positive results, this study has limitations. Firstly, the research relies partially on qualitative data and its analysis, which is limited in its generalizability. Future researchers can take this into account by increasing the sample sizes for both the qualitative and quantitative data. Secondly, the outreach for participants relied on snowball sampling, meaning that it is likely that participants, if from the same friend group or community, are likely to share similar thoughts regarding gender identity and expression. To combat this, future researchers can utilize more time and resources to promote the study outside of snowball sampling to prevent similar responses from the response pool. Lastly, the digital landscape is constantly evolving, and social media landscapes are shifting in response. Future research can, hopefully, expand upon the evolving landscape through changes over time in gender identity formation online, particularly as platforms evolve, phase out, and change.

*Conclusion*

In the digital age, social media platforms shape how individuals understand and express their gender identities. These platforms provide spaces for exploration, affirmation, and discourse, while also providing comfort in engaging in such discussions. Alongside these reasons, GNC individuals also utilize social media as a community rather than searching for community, sometimes utilizing social media as a reminder of previous curiosity regarding their identities. This study's findings contribute to the growing literature covering LGBTQIA+ individuals—specifically gender non-conforming individuals—interacting with social media and the complex interplay between online communities and personalities and gender expression.

While social media offers unmatched opportunities for individuals to construct and communicate their gender identities, social media platforms still have their faults, as they are still greatly influenced by constantly reinforced broader social structures. With the current political climate in the United States calling for the harsh stigmatization of all LGBTQIA+ individuals, this research highlights the importance of understanding social media as a tool for self-expression and as an active participant in the construction and negotiation of gender in contemporary society. Such spaces are needed now more than ever, and these spaces must remain inclusive and representative of diverse gender experiences to allow individuals from these communities to flourish in hard times. Amid such isolation and persecution, gender non-conforming individuals are utilizing social media more than ever to advocate for their rights and form stronger community bonds. Hopefully, the future will accept gender non-conforming individuals' right to exist in peace and the right to express themselves in mainstream media. For now, they are taking it one social media post at a time.

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## APPENDIX A: SURVEY QUESTIONS

### Demographic/Baseline Questions

#### *Demographic*

- What is your age?
  - 18-24
  - 25-34
  - 35-44
  - 45-54
  - 55+
- What is your gender identity? (select all that apply)
  - Man/Woman/Non-binary/"Genderqueer/Genderfluid"/Agender/Prefer Not to Answer (PNtA)/Other (please specify)
- How do you currently describe your sexual orientation? (select all that apply)
  - Lesbian/Gay/Bisexual/Queer/Pansexual/Asexual/Heterosexual/PNtA/Other (please specify)
- How do you primarily express your gender identity? (select all that apply)
  - Clothing/Makeup/Social media profiles/Pronoun usage/Name change/Speech/behaviors/Prefer Not to Answer/Other (please specify)

#### *Social Media Usage Baseline*

- How often do you engage with social media platforms (e.g., Instagram, TikTok, Twitter) where gender identity is discussed?
  - Never/Yearly/Monthly/Weekly/Daily/Unsure/PNtA
  - If your answer reflected at least some usage of social media in the previous answer, if you would like, please list the social media platforms you engage with.
- Do you follow any online influencers or personalities who openly discuss gender identity or gender expression? This study defines an online influencer or personality as an individual who has developed a significant following through the Internet, typically having credibility toward a niche topic (makeup, cooking, fashion, etc.).
  - Yes/No/PNtA

### **Influence of Online Communities + Personalities**

## APPENDIX A: SURVEY QUESTIONS

- Are you active in online communities that discuss gender identity or expression? This study defines active as interacting with online communities via engagement (viewing posts, liking/commenting, chatting with individuals within the community, etc.) at least once a month.
  - Yes/No/PNtA
  - If yes to the previous question, how often do you participate in online communities or forums (e.g., Instagram group chats, Reddit, Discord) that focus on gender identity or expression?
    - Yearly/Monthly/Weekly/Daily/PNtA
- When discovering your gender identity, how many times can you recall online communities encouraging you to explore new aspects of your gender identity?
  - “Never/0 times”/1-3 times/4-6 times/6-9 times/10+ times/Unsure/PNtA
- Have you ever changed how you express your gender identity as a result of interacting with online communities?
  - Yes/No/PNtA
- To what extent have online communities or forums influenced how you think about or express your gender identity?
  - No Influence/Minimal Influence/Moderate Influence/Significant Influence/PNtA
  - If your answer reflected at least minimal influence in the previous answer, if you would like, please expand on this in the text box below. []
- To what extent do you agree with the following statement: "The representation of gender identities in digital spaces has influenced how I express my gender."
  - Strongly Disagree/Disagree/Neutral/Agree/Strongly Agree/PNtA
- To what extent have online personalities or influencers influenced how you think about or express your gender identity?
  - No Influence/Minimal Influence/Moderate Influence/Significant Influence/PNtA
  - If your answer reflected at least minimal influence in the previous answer, if you would like, please expand on this in the text box below. []
- How often do you follow or interact (like, comment, share, etc) with influencers or personalities who discuss gender or gender expression online?

## APPENDIX A: SURVEY QUESTIONS

- Never/Rarely (few times a year)/Sometimes (few times a month)/Often (few times a week)/Very Often (few times a day)/PNtA
- To what extent do you agree with the following statement: "Online influencers have helped me better understand my own gender identity."
  - Strongly Disagree/Disagree/Neutral/Agree/Strongly Agree/PNtA

### **Online vs Offline Comparison**

- How different is your gender expression online compared to offline?
  - No Difference/Minimal Difference/Moderate Difference/Significant Difference/PNtA
  - If your answer reflected at least minimal difference to the previous question, if you would like, please expand on your choice in the text box below. []
- How would you compare your levels of comfort in expressing your gender identity in online communities to offline communities?
  - I feel more comfortable in online communities/I feel more comfortable in offline communities/I feel equally comfortable in both communities/I do not feel comfortable in either communities/PNtA
- How would you compare the levels of support for gender non-conforming individuals in online communities to offline communities?
  - Online communities are more supportive/Offline communities are more supportive/Both are equally supportive/Neither are supportive/PNtA
- How would you describe the freedom to express non-traditional gender identities in online spaces compared to offline spaces?
  - Online spaces offer more freedom/Offline spaces offer more freedom/Both spaces offer similar levels of freedom/Neither spaces offer much freedom/PNtA

### **Overall Impact of Social Media on Gender Expression**

- To what extent do you think digital platforms affect societal views on gender identity
  - No Influence/Slight Influence/Minimal Influence/Moderate Influence/Significant Influence/PNtA
- To what extent do you agree with the statement: "Digital platforms have positively challenged traditional gender roles."
  - Strongly Disagree/Disagree/Neutral/Agree/Strongly Agree/PNtA

## APPENDIX A: SURVEY QUESTIONS

- To what extent do you agree with the following statement: "The digital age has made it easier for people to explore and express diverse gender identities."
  - Strongly Disagree/Disagree/Neutral/Agree/Strongly Agree/PNtA

### **Potential Interview Outreach**

- Would you like to participate in an interview covering these ideas in more depth? If so, please follow [this link](#) to open a secondary tab to provide your email. [Hyperlink goes to a second page with the following question: If you would like to participate in an interview covering this topic in more depth, please provide your email below so that Kirsten Oglesby, the co-investigator, can reach out to you. The subject line will be "Gender Identity in the Digital Age Interview."]

## APPENDIX B: FULL INTERVIEW GUIDE

### **Demographic/Baseline Questions**

#### *Demographic*

- Is there a name you would prefer to be addressed by?\*
- How would you/do you currently describe your gender identity?
- How would you/do you currently describe your sexual orientation?
- How would you/do you currently define your gender expression? (By gender expression, I mean XYZ).

#### *Social Media Usage*

- What is your current level of engagement with social media?\*
- Do you currently utilize social media to participate in certain online communities or follow online personalities?
  - Have you ever used social media to explore different aspects of your gender identity or expression?

### **Influence of Online Communities + Personalities**

- How has social media affected you regarding your gender identity or expression?
  - In what ways, if any, do online communities or personalities influence your understanding of gender expression?
    - Have such online communities or personalities influenced your understanding of your gender identity?
  - With online communities, can you describe any specific communities that have shaped your views on gender expression?
    - If so, can you explain how such communities shaped your views on gender expression, both in general and for yourself?
  - With online personalities, can you describe any specific individuals or pages that have shaped your views on gender expression?
    - If so, can you explain how they shaped your views on gender expression both in general and for yourself?
  - Have you ever changed how you present your gender online after engaging with certain communities or influencers? If so, why?
  - Have online platforms provided you with more resources or role models for exploring your gender identity? If so, how?

## APPENDIX B: FULL INTERVIEW GUIDE

### **Online vs Offline Comparison**

- Have online platforms provided you with more resources or role models for exploring your gender identity than offline spaces? Why or why not?
- Is there a discrepancy between how comfortable you feel expressing your gender online versus offline?
  - If so, which atmosphere do you feel more comfortable expressing yourself in, and why?

### **Overall Impact of Social Media on Gender Expression**

- Overall, how has the digital age influenced your perception of gender/gender roles?
- What improvements, if any, would you like to see in how gender identity and expression are discussed or represented online?

### **Intersectionality with Other Identities**

- Do you believe that other aspects of your identity (race, socioeconomic status, sexuality) impact how you approach gender expression? If so, how?
- How do other aspects of your identity intersect with your gender identity and expression on and offline?
- Do you believe that online communities adequately represent the intersectionality of gender with other identities? Why or why not? How about offline communities?

### **Closing Thoughts**

- Is there anything else you would like to share that you feel you could not express through the provided questions?
- Is there anything else you would like to share about your experiences with gender expression in digital spaces?
- Do you know anyone who may be interested in participating in this interview for my research? If so, please tell them to reach out to me via email.